
Opening Extract from...

The Girl You Left Behind

Written by Jojo Moyes

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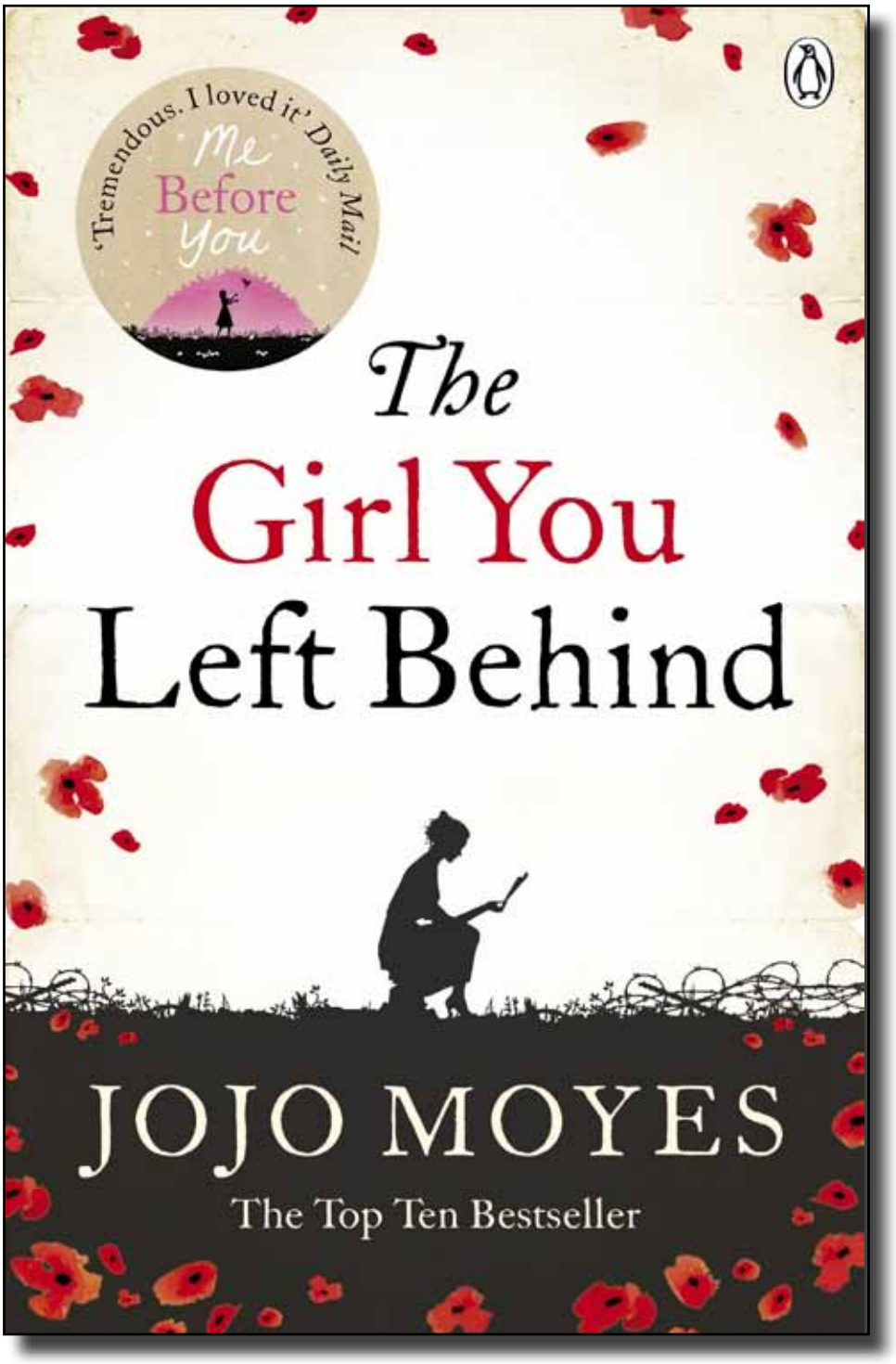

An extract from The Girl You Left Behind bu Jojo Moyes
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Part One

I

St Péronne
October 1916

I was dreaming of food. Crisp baguettes, the flesh of the bread a virginal white, still steaming from the oven, and ripe cheese, its borders creeping towards the edge of the plate. Grapes and plums, stacked high in bowls, dusky and fragrant, their scent filling the air. I was about to reach out and take one, when my sister stopped me. 'Get off,' I murmured. 'I'm hungry.'

'Sophie. Wake up.'

I could taste that cheese. I was going to have a mouthful of Reblochon, smear it on a hunk of that warm bread, then pop a grape into my mouth. I could already taste the intense sweetness, smell the rich aroma.

But there it was, my sister's hand on my wrist, stopping me. The plates were disappearing, the scents fading. I reached out to them but they began to pop, like soap bubbles.

'Sophie.'

'*What?*'

'They have Aurélien!'

I turned on to my side and blinked. My sister was wearing a cotton bonnet, as I was, to keep warm. Her face, even in the feeble light of her candle, was leached

of colour, her eyes wide with shock. 'They have Aurélien. Downstairs.'

My mind began to clear. From below us came the sound of men shouting, their voices bouncing off the stone courtyard, the hens squawking in their coop. In the thick dark, the air vibrated with some terrible purpose. I sat upright in bed, dragging my gown around me, struggling to light the candle on my bedside table.

I stumbled past her to the window and stared down into the courtyard at the soldiers, illuminated by the headlights of their vehicle, and my younger brother, his arms around his head, trying to avoid the rifle butts that landed blows on him.

'What's happening?'

'They know about the pig.'

'What?'

'Monsieur Suel must have informed on us. I heard them shouting from my room. They say they'll take Aurélien if he doesn't tell them where it is.'

'He will say nothing,' I said.

We flinched as we heard our brother cry out. I hardly recognized my sister then: she looked twenty years older than her twenty-four years. I knew her fear was mirrored in my own face. This was what we had dreaded.

'They have a *Kommandant* with them. If they find it,' Hélène whispered, her voice cracking with panic, 'they'll arrest us all. You know what took place in Arras. They'll make an example of us. What will happen to the children?'

My mind raced, fear that my brother might speak out making me stupid. I wrapped a shawl around my shoul-

ders and tiptoed to the window, peering out at the courtyard. The presence of a *Kommandant* suggested these were not just drunken soldiers looking to take out their frustrations with a few threats and knocks: we were in trouble. His presence meant we had committed a crime that should be taken seriously.

'They will find it, Sophie. It will take them minutes. And then . . .' Hélène's voice rose, lifted by panic.

My thoughts turned black. I closed my eyes. And then I opened them. 'Go downstairs,' I said. 'Plead ignorance. Ask him what Aurélien has done wrong. Talk to him, distract him. Just give me some time before they come into the house.'

'What are you going to do?'

I gripped my sister's arm. 'Go. But tell them nothing, you understand? Deny *everything*.'

My sister hesitated, then ran towards the corridor, her nightgown billowing behind her. I'm not sure I had ever felt as alone as I did in those few seconds, fear gripping my throat and the weight of my family's fate upon me. I ran into Father's study and scrabbled in the drawers of the great desk, hurling its contents – old pens, scraps of paper, pieces from broken clocks and ancient bills – on to the floor, thanking God when I finally found what I was searching for. Then I ran downstairs, opened the cellar door and skipped down the cold stone stairs, so sure-footed now in the dark that I barely needed the fluttering glow of the candle. I lifted the heavy latch to the back cellar, which had once been stacked to the roof with beer kegs and good wine, slid one of the empty barrels aside and opened the door of the old cast-iron bread oven.

The piglet, still only half grown, blinked sleepily. It lifted itself to its feet, peered out at me from its bed of straw and grunted. Surely I've told you about the pig? We liberated it during the requisition of Monsieur Girard's farm. Like a gift from God, it had strayed in the chaos, meandering away from the piglets being loaded into the back of a German truck and was swiftly swallowed by the thick skirts of Grandma Poilâne. We've been fattening it on acorns and scraps for weeks, in the hope of raising it to a size great enough for us all to have some meat. The thought of that crisp skin, that moist pork, has kept the inhabitants of Le Coq Rouge going for the past month.

Outside I heard my brother yelp again, then my sister's voice, rapid and urgent, cut short by the harsh tones of a German officer. The pig looked at me with intelligent, understanding eyes, as if it already knew its fate.

'I'm so sorry, *mon petit*,' I whispered, 'but this really is the only way.' And I brought down my hand.

I was outside in a matter of moments. I had woken Mimi, telling her only that she must come but to stay silent – the child has seen so much these last months that she obeys without question. She glanced up at me holding her baby brother, slid out of bed and placed a hand in mine.

The air was sharp with the approach of winter, the smell of woodsmoke lingering in the air from our brief fire earlier in the evening. I saw the *Kommandant* through the stone archway of the back door and hesitated. It was not Herr Becker, whom we knew and despised. This was a slimmer man, clean-shaven, impassive. Even in the dark I could see intelligence, not brutish ignorance, in his face, which made me afraid.

This new *Kommandant* was gazing speculatively up at our windows, perhaps considering whether this building might provide a more suitable billet than the Fourrier farm, where senior German officers slept. I suspect he knew that our elevated aspect would give him a vantage-point across the town. There were stables for horses and ten bedrooms, from the days when our home was the town's thriving hotel.

Hélène was on the cobbles, shielding Aurélien with her arms.

One of his men had raised his rifle, but the *Kommandant* lifted his hand. 'Stand up,' he ordered them. Hélène scrambled backwards, away from him. I glimpsed her face, taut with fear.

I felt Mimi's hand tighten round mine as she saw her mother, and I gave hers a squeeze, even though my heart was in my mouth. And I strode out. 'What, in God's name, is going on?' My voice rang out in the yard.

The *Kommandant* glanced towards me, surprised by my tone: a young woman walking through the arched entrance to the farmyard, a thumb-sucking child at her skirts, another swaddled and clutched to her chest. My night bonnet sat slightly askew, my white cotton nightgown so worn now that it barely registered as fabric against my skin. I prayed that he could not hear the almost audible thumping of my heart.

I addressed him directly: 'And for what supposed misdemeanour have your men come to punish us now?'

I guessed he had not heard a woman speak to him in this way since his last leave home. The silence that fell upon the courtyard was steeped in shock. My brother and sister, on the ground, twisted round, the better to see me,

only too aware of where such insubordination might leave us all.

'You are?'

'Madame Lefèvre.'

I could see he was checking for the presence of my wedding ring. He needn't have bothered: like most women in our area, I had long since sold it for food.

'Madame. We have information that you are harbouring illegal livestock.' His French was passable, suggesting previous postings in the occupied territory, his voice calm. This was not a man who felt threatened by the unexpected.

'Livestock?'

'A reliable source tells us that you are keeping a pig on the premises. You will be aware that, under the directive, the penalty for withholding livestock from the administration is imprisonment.'

I held his gaze. 'And I know exactly who would inform you of such a thing. It's Monsieur Suel, *non*?' My cheeks were flushed with colour; my hair, twisted into a long plait that hung over my shoulder, felt electrified. It prickled at the nape of my neck.

The *Kommandant* turned to one of his minions. The man's glance sideways told him this was true.

'Monsieur Suel, Herr Kommandant, comes here at least twice a month attempting to persuade us that in the absence of our husbands we are in need of his particular brand of comfort. Because we have chosen not to avail ourselves of his supposed kindness, he repays us with rumours and a threat to our lives.'

'The authorities would not act unless the source were credible.'

'I would argue, Herr Kommandant, that this visit suggests otherwise.'

The look he gave me was impenetrable. He turned on his heel and walked towards the house door. I followed him, half tripping over my skirts in my attempt to keep up. I knew the mere act of speaking so boldly to him might be considered a crime. And yet, at that moment, I was no longer afraid.

'Look at us, Kommandant. Do we look as though we are feasting on beef, on roast lamb, on fillet of pork?' He turned, his eyes flicking towards my bony wrists, just visible at the sleeves of my gown. I had lost two inches from my waist in the last year alone. 'Are we grotesquely plump with the bounty of our hotel? We have three hens left of two dozen. Three hens that we have the pleasure of keeping and feeding so that your men might take the eggs. We, meanwhile, live on what the German authorities deem to be a diet – decreasing rations of meat and flour, and bread made from grit and bran so poor we would not use it to feed livestock.'

He was in the back hallway, his heels echoing on the flagstones. He hesitated, then walked through to the bar and barked an order. A soldier appeared from nowhere and handed him a lamp.

'We have no milk to feed our babies, our children weep with hunger, we become ill from lack of nutrition. And still you come here in the middle of the night to terrify two women and brutalize an innocent boy, to beat us and threaten us, because you heard a rumour from an immoral man that we were *feasting*?'

My hands were shaking. He saw the baby squirm, and I

realized I was so tense that I was holding it too tightly. I stepped back, adjusted the shawl, crooned to it. Then I lifted my head. I could not hide the bitterness and anger in my voice.

'Search our home, then, Kommandant. Turn it upside down and destroy what little has not already been destroyed. Search all the outbuildings too, those that your men have not already stripped for their own wants. When you find this mythical pig, I hope your men dine well on it.'

I held his gaze for just a moment longer than he might have expected. Through the window I could make out my sister wiping Aurélien's wounds with her skirts, trying to stem the blood. Three German soldiers stood over them.

My eyes were used to the dark now, and I saw that the *Kommandant* was wrong-footed. His men, their eyes uncertain, were waiting for him to give the orders. He could instruct them to strip our house to the beams and arrest us all to pay for my extraordinary outburst. But I knew he was thinking of Suel, whether he might have been misled. He did not look the kind of man to relish the possibility of being seen to be wrong.

When Édouard and I used to play poker, he had laughed and said I was an impossible opponent as my face never revealed my true feelings. I told myself to remember those words now: this was the most important game I would ever play. We stared at each other, the *Kommandant* and I. I felt, briefly, the whole world still around us: I could hear the distant rumble of the guns at the Front, my sister's coughing, the scrabbling of our poor, scrawny hens disturbed in their coop. It faded until just he and I faced

one another, each gambling on the truth. I swear I could hear my very heart beating.

'What is this?'

'What?'

He held up the lamp, and it was dimly illuminated in pale gold light: the portrait Édouard had painted of me when we were first married. There I was, in that first year, my hair thick and lustrous around my shoulders, my skin clear and blooming, gazing out with the self-possession of the adored. I had brought it down from its hiding place several weeks before, telling my sister I was damned if the Germans would decide what I should look at in my own home.

He lifted the lamp a little higher so that he could see it more clearly. *Do not put it there, Sophie,* Hélène had warned. *It will invite trouble.*

When he finally turned to me, it was as if he had had to tear his eyes from it. He looked at my face, then back at the painting. 'My husband painted it.' I don't know why I felt the need to tell him that.

Perhaps it was the certainty of my righteous indignation. Perhaps it was the obvious difference between the girl in the picture and the girl who stood before him. Perhaps it was the weeping blonde child who stood at my feet. It is possible that even *Kommandants*, two years into this occupation, have become weary of harassing us for petty misdemeanours.

He looked at the painting a moment longer, then at his feet.

'I think we have made ourselves clear, Madame. Our conversation is not finished. But I will not disturb you further tonight.'

He caught the flash of surprise on my face, barely suppressed, and I saw that it satisfied something in him. It was perhaps enough for him to know I had believed myself doomed. He was smart, this man, and subtle. I would have to be wary.

'Men.'

His soldiers turned, blindly obedient as ever, and walked out towards their vehicle, their uniforms silhouetted against the headlights. I followed him and stood just outside the door. The last I heard of his voice was the order to the driver to make for the town.

We waited as the military vehicle travelled back down the road, its headlights feeling their way along the pitted surface. Hélène had begun to shake. She scrambled to her feet, her hand white-knuckled at her brow, her eyes tightly shut. Aurélien stood awkwardly beside me, holding Mimi's hand, embarrassed by his childish tears. I waited for the last sounds of the engine to die away. It whined over the hill, as if it, too, were acting under protest.

'Are you hurt, Aurélien?' I touched his head. Flesh wounds. And bruises. What kind of men attacked an unarmed boy?

He flinched. 'It didn't hurt,' he said. 'They didn't frighten me.'

'I thought he would arrest you,' my sister said. 'I thought he would arrest us all.' I was afraid when she looked like that: as if she were teetering on the edge of some vast abyss. She wiped her eyes and forced a smile as she crouched to hug her daughter. 'Silly Germans. They gave us all a fright, didn't they? Silly Maman for being frightened.'

The child watched her mother, silent and solemn. Sometimes I wondered if I would ever see Mimi laugh again.

'I'm sorry. I'm all right now,' she went on. 'Let's all go inside. Mimi, we have a little milk I will warm for you.' She wiped her hands on her bloodied gown, and held her hands towards me for the baby. 'You want me to take Jean?'

I had started to tremble convulsively, as if I had only just realized how afraid I should have been. My legs felt watery, their strength seeping into the cobblestones. I felt a desperate urge to sit down. 'Yes,' I said. 'I suppose you should.'

My sister reached out, then gave a small cry. Nestling in the blankets, swaddled neatly so that it was barely exposed to the night air, was the pink, hairy snout of the piglet.

'Jean is asleep upstairs,' I said. I thrust a hand at the wall to keep myself upright.

Aurélien looked over her shoulder. They all stared at it.

'*Mon Dieu*.'

'Is it dead?'

'Chloroformed. I remembered Papa had a bottle in his study, from his butterfly-collecting days. I think it will wake up. But we're going to have to find somewhere else to keep it for when they return. And you know they will return.'

Aurélien smiled then, a rare, slow smile of delight. Hélène stooped to show Mimi the comatose little pig, and they grinned. Hélène kept touching its snout, clamping a hand over her face, as if she couldn't believe what she was holding.

'You held the pig before them? They came here and you held it out in front of their noses? And then you told them off for *coming here*?' Her voice was incredulous.

'In front of their snouts,' said Aurélien, who seemed suddenly to have recovered some of his swagger. 'Hah! You held it in front of their snouts!'

I sat down on the cobbles and began to laugh. I laughed until my skin grew chilled and I didn't know whether I was laughing or weeping. My brother, perhaps afraid I was becoming hysterical, took my hand and rested against me. He was fourteen, sometimes bristling like a man, sometimes childlike in his need for reassurance.

Hélène was still deep in thought. 'If I had known . . .' she said. 'How did you become so brave, Sophie? My little sister! Who made you like this? You were a mouse when we were children. A mouse!'

I wasn't sure I knew the answer.

And then, as we finally walked back into the house, as Hélène busied herself with the milk pan and Aurélien began to wash his poor, battered face, I stood before the portrait.

That girl, the girl Édouard had married, looked back with an expression I no longer recognized. He had seen it in me long before anyone else did: it speaks of knowledge, that smile, of satisfaction gained and given. It speaks of pride. When his Parisian friends had found his love of me – a shop girl – inexplicable, he had just smiled because he could already see this in me.

I never knew if he understood that it was only there because of him.

I stood and gazed at her and, for a few seconds, I remembered how it had felt to be that girl, free of hunger, of fear, consumed only by idle thoughts of what private moments I might spend with Édouard. She reminded me

that the world is capable of beauty, and that there were once things – art, joy, love – that filled my world, instead of fear and nettle soup and curfews. I saw him in my expression. And then I realized what I had just done. He had reminded me of my own strength, of how much I had left in me with which to fight.

When you return, Édouard, I swear I will once again be the girl you painted.

2

The story of the pig-baby had reached most of St Péronne by lunchtime. The bar of Le Coq Rouge saw a constant stream of customers, even though we had little to offer other than chicory coffee; beer supplies were sporadic, and we had only a few ruinously expensive bottles of wine. It was astonishing how many people called just to wish us good day.

'And you tore a strip off him? Told him to go away?' Old René, chuckling into his moustache, was clutching the back of a chair and weeping tears of laughter. He had asked to hear the story four times now, and with every telling Aurélien had embellished it a little more, until he was fighting off the *Kommandant* with a sabre, while I cried '*Der Kaiser ist Scheiss!*'

I exchanged a small smile with Hélène, who was sweeping the floor of the café. I didn't mind. There had been little enough to celebrate in our town lately.

'We must be careful,' Hélène said, as René left, lifting his hat in salute. We watched him, convulsed with renewed mirth as he passed the post office, pausing to wipe his eyes. 'This story is spreading too far.'

'Nobody will say anything. Everyone hates the Boche.' I shrugged. 'Besides, they all want a piece of pork. They're hardly going to inform on us before their food arrives.'

The pig had been moved discreetly next door in the

early hours of the morning. Some months ago Aurélien, chopping up old beer barrels for firewood, had discovered that the only thing separating the labyrinthine wine cellar from that of the neighbours, the Fouberts, was a single-skin brick wall. We had carefully removed several of the bricks, with the Fouberts' co-operation, and this had become an escape route of last resort. When the Fouberts had harboured a young Englishman, and the Germans had arrived unannounced at their door at dusk, Madame Foubert had pleaded incomprehension at the officer's instructions, giving the young man just enough time to sneak down to the cellar and through into our side. They had taken her house to pieces, even looked around the cellar, but in the dim light, not one had noticed that the mortar in the wall was suspiciously gappy.

This was the story of our lives: minor insurrections, tiny victories, a brief chance to ridicule our oppressors, little floating vessels of hope amid a great sea of uncertainty, deprivation and fear.

'You met the new *Kommandant*, then?' The mayor was seated at one of the tables near the window. As I brought him some coffee, he motioned to me to sit down. More than anyone else's, his life, I often thought, had been intolerable since the occupation: he had spent his time in a constant state of negotiation with the Germans to grant the town what it needed, but periodically they had taken him hostage to force recalcitrant townspeople to do their bidding.

'It was not a formal introduction,' I said, placing the cup in front of him.

He tilted his head towards me, his voice low. 'Herr

Becker has been sent back to Germany to run one of the reprisal camps. Apparently there were inconsistencies in his book-keeping.'

'That's no surprise. He is the only man in Occupied France who has doubled in weight in two years.' I was joking, but my feelings at his departure were mixed. On the one hand Becker had been harsh, his punishments excessive, born out of insecurity and a fear that his men would not think him strong enough. But he had been too stupid – blind to many of the town's acts of resistance – to cultivate any relationships that might have helped his cause.

'So, what do you think?'

'Of the new *Kommandant*? I don't know. He could have been worse, I suppose. He didn't pull the house apart, where Becker might have, just to show his strength. But . . .' I wrinkled my nose '. . . he's clever. We might have to be extra careful.'

'As ever, Madame Lefèvre, your thoughts are in harmony with my own.' He smiled at me, but not with his eyes. I remembered when the mayor had been a jolly, blustering man, famous for his bonhomie: he'd had the loudest voice at any town gathering.

'Anything coming in this week?'

'I believe there will be some bacon. And coffee. Very little butter. I hope to have the exact rations later today.'

We gazed out of the window. Old René had reached the church. He stopped to talk to the priest. It was not hard to guess what they were discussing. When the priest began to laugh, and René bent double for the fourth time, I couldn't suppress a giggle.

'Any news from your husband?'

I turned back to the mayor. 'Not since August, when I had a postcard. He was near Amiens. He didn't say much.' *I think of you day and night,* the postcard had said, in his beautiful loopy scrawl. *You are my lodestar in this world of madness.* I had lain awake for two nights worrying after I had received it, until Hélène had pointed out that 'this world of madness' might equally apply to a world in which one lived on black bread so hard it required a billhook to cut it, and kept pigs in a bread oven.

'The last I received from my eldest son came nearly three months ago. They were pushing forward towards Cambrai. Spirits good, he said.'

'I hope they are still good. How is Louisa?'

'Not too bad, thank you.' His youngest daughter had been born with a palsy; she failed to thrive, could eat only certain foods and, at eleven, was frequently ill. Keeping her well was a preoccupation of our little town. If there was milk or any dried vegetable to be had, a little spare usually found its way to the mayor's house.

'When she is strong again, tell her Mimi was asking after her. Hélène is sewing a doll for her that is to be the exact twin of Mimi's own. She asked that they might be sisters.'

The mayor patted her hand. 'You girls are too kind. I thank God that you returned here when you could have stayed in the safety of Paris.'

'Pah. There is no guarantee that the Boche won't be marching down the Champs-Élysées before long. And besides, I could not leave Hélène alone here.'

'She would not have survived this without you. You

have grown into such a fine young woman. Paris was good for you.'

'My husband is good for me.'

'Then God save him. God save us all.' The mayor smiled, placed his hat on his head and stood up to leave.

St Péronne, where the Bessette family had run Le Coq Rouge for generations, had been among the first towns to fall to the Germans in the autumn of 1914. Hélène and I, our parents long dead and our husbands at the Front, had determined to keep the hotel going. We were not alone in taking on men's work: the shops, the local farms, the school were almost entirely run by women, aided by old men and boys. By 1915 there were barely any men left in the town.

We did good business in the early months, with French soldiers passing through and the British not far behind. Food was still plentiful, music and cheering accompanied the marching troops, and most of us still believed the war would be over within months, at worst. There were a few hints of the horrors taking place a hundred miles away: we gave food to the Belgian refugees who traipsed past, their belongings teetering on wagons; some were still clad in slippers and the clothes they had worn when they had left their homes. Occasionally, if the wind blew from the east, we could just make out the distant boom of the guns. But although we knew that the war was close by, few believed St Péronne, our proud little town, could possibly join those that had fallen under German rule.

Proof of how wrong we had been had come accompanied by the sound of gunfire on a still, cold, autumn morning,

when Madame Fougère and Madame Dérin had set out for their daily six forty-five a.m. stroll to the *boulangerie*, and were shot dead as they crossed the square.

I had pulled back the curtains at the noise and it had taken me several moments to comprehend what I saw: the bodies of those two women, widows and friends for most of their seventy-odd years, sprawled on the pavement, headscarves askew, their empty baskets upended at their feet. A sticky red pool spread around them in an almost perfect circle, as if it had come from one entity.

The German officers claimed afterwards that snipers had shot at them and that they had acted in retaliation. (Apparently they said the same of every village they took.) If they had wanted to prompt insurrection in the town, they could not have done better than their killing of those old women. But the outrage did not stop there. They set fire to barns and shot down the statue of Mayor Leclerc. Twenty-four hours later they marched in formation down our main street, their *Pickelhaube* helmets shining in the wintry sunlight, as we stood outside our homes and shops and watched in shocked silence. They ordered the few remaining men outside so that they could count them.

The shopkeepers and stallholders simply shut their shops and stalls and refused to serve them. Most of us had stockpiled food; we knew we could survive. I think we believed they might give up, faced with such intransigence, and march on to another village. But then Kommandant Becker had decreed that any shopkeeper who failed to open during normal working hours would be shot. One by one, the *boulangerie*, the *boucherie*, the market stalls and even

Le Coq Rouge reopened. Reluctantly, our little town was prodded back into sullen, mutinous life.

Eighteen months on, there was little left to buy. St Péronne was cut off from its neighbours, deprived of news and dependent on the irregular delivery of aid, supplemented by costly black-market provisions when they were available. Sometimes it was hard to believe that Free France knew what we were suffering. The Germans were the only ones who ate well; their horses (our horses) were sleek and fat, and ate the crushed wheat that should have been used to make our bread. They raided our wine cellars, and took the food produced by our farms.

And it wasn't just food. Every week someone would get the dreaded knock on the door, and a new list of items would be requisitioned: teaspoons, curtains, dinner plates, saucepans, blankets. Occasionally an officer would inspect first, note what was desirable, and return with a list specifying exactly that. They would write promissory notes, which could supposedly be exchanged for money. Not a single person in St Péronne knew anyone who had actually been paid.

'What are you doing?'

'I'm moving this.' I took the portrait and moved it to a quiet corner, less in public gaze.

'Who is it?' Aurélien asked as I re-hung it, adjusting it on the wall until it was straight.

'It's me!' I turned to him. 'Can you not tell?'

'Oh.' He squinted. He wasn't trying to insult me: the girl in the painting was very different from the thin, severe woman, grey of complexion, with wary, tired eyes, who

stared back at me daily from the looking-glass. I tried not to glimpse her too often.

'Did Édouard do it?'

'Yes. When we were married.'

'I've never seen his paintings. It's . . . not what I expected.'

'What do you mean?'

'Well – it's strange. The colours are strange. He has put green and blue in your skin. People don't have green and blue skin! And look – it's messy. He has not kept within the lines.'

'Aurélien, come here.' I walked to the window. 'Look at my face. What do you see?'

'A gargoyle.'

I cuffed him. 'No. Look – really look. At the colours of my skin.'

'You're just pale.'

'Look harder – under my eyes, in the hollows of my throat. Don't tell me what you expect to see. Really look. And then tell me what colours you actually see.'

My brother stared at my throat. His gaze travelled slowly around my face. 'I see blue,' he said, 'under your eyes. Blue and purple. And, yes, green running down your neck. And orange. *Alors* – call the doctor! Your face is a million different colours. You are a clown!'

'We are all clowns,' I said. 'Édouard just sees it more clearly than everyone else.'

Aurélien raced upstairs to inspect himself in the looking-glass and torment himself about the blues and purples he would no doubt find. Not that he needed much excuse, these days. He was sweet on at least two girls and spent

much time shaving his soft, juvenile skin with our father's blunt old cut-throat razor in a vain attempt to hasten the process of ageing.

'It's lovely,' Hélène said, standing back to look at it. 'But . . .'

'But what?'

'It is a risk to have it up at all. When the Germans went through Lille, they burned art they considered subversive. Édouard's painting is . . . very different. How do you know they won't destroy it?'

She worried, Hélène. She worried about Édouard's paintings and our brother's temper; she worried about the letters and diary entries I wrote on scraps of paper and stuffed into holes in the beams. 'I want it down here, where I can see it. Don't worry – the rest are safe in Paris.'

She didn't look convinced.

'I want colour, Hélène. I want *life*. I don't want to look at Napoleon or Papa's stupid pictures of mournful dogs. And I won't let *them* –' I nodded outside to where off-duty German soldiers were smoking by the town fountain '– decide what I may look at in my own home.'

Hélène shook her head, as if I were a fool she might have to indulge. And then she went to serve Madame Louvier and Madame Durant who, although they had often observed that my chicory coffee tasted as if it had come from the sewer, had arrived to hear the story of the pig-baby.

Hélène and I shared a bed that night, flanking Mimi and Jean. Sometimes it was so cold, even in October, that we feared we would find them frozen solid in their nightclothes,

so we all huddled up together. It was late, but I knew my sister was awake. The moonlight shone through the gap in the curtains, and I could just see her eyes, wide open, fixed on a distant point. I guessed that she was wondering where her husband was at that very moment, whether he was warm, billeted somewhere like our home, or freezing in a trench, gazing up at the same moon.

In the far distance a muffled boom told of some far-off battle.

'Sophie?'

'Yes?' We spoke in the quietest of whispers.

'Do you ever wonder what it will be like . . . if they do not come back?'

I lay there in the darkness.

'No,' I lied. 'Because I know they will come back. And I do not want the Germans to have gleaned even one more minute of fear from me.'

'I do,' she said. 'Sometimes I forget what he looks like. I gaze at his photograph, and I can't remember anything.'

'It's because you look at it so often. Sometimes I think we wear our photographs out by looking at them.'

'But I can't remember anything – how he smells, how his voice sounds. I can't remember how he feels beside me. It's as if he never existed. And then I think, What if this is it? What if he never comes back? What if we are to spend the rest of our lives like this, our every move determined by men who hate us? And I'm not sure . . . I'm not sure I can . . .'

I propped myself up on one elbow and reached over Mimi and Jean to take my sister's hand. 'Yes, you can,' I said. 'Of course you can. Jean-Michel will come home,

and your life will be good. France will be free, and life will be as it was. Better than it was.'

She lay there in silence. I was shivering now, out from under the blankets, but I dared not move. My sister frightened me when she spoke like this. It was as if there was a whole world of terrors inside her head that she had to battle against twice as hard as the rest of us.

Her voice was small, tremulous, as if she were fighting back tears. 'Do you know, after I married Jean-Michel, I was so happy. I was free for the first time in my life.'

I knew what she meant: our father had been quick with his belt and sharp with his fists. The town believed him to be the most benign of landlords, a pillar of the community, *good old François Bessette*, always ready with a joke and a glass. But we knew the ferocity of his temper. Our only regret was that our mother had gone before him, so that she could have enjoyed a few years out of its shadow.

'It feels . . . it feels like we have exchanged one bully for another. Sometimes I suspect I will spend my whole life bent to somebody else's will. You, Sophie, I see you laughing. I see you determined, so brave, putting up paintings, shouting at Germans, and I don't understand where it comes from. I can't remember what it was like not to be afraid.'

We lay there in silence. I could hear my heart thumping. She believed me fearless. But nothing frightened me as much as my sister's fears. There was a new fragility about her, these last months, a new strain around her eyes. I squeezed her hand. She did not squeeze back.

Between us, Mimi stirred, throwing an arm over her head. Hélène relinquished my hand, and I could just make out her shape as she moved on to her side, and gently

tucked her daughter's arm back under the covers. Oddly reassured by this gesture, I lay down again, pulling the blankets up to my chin to stop myself shivering.

'Pork,' I said, into the silence.

'What?'

'Just think about it. Roast pork, the skin rubbed with salt and oil, cooked until it snaps between your teeth. Think of the soft folds of warm white fat, the pink meat shredding softly between your fingers, perhaps with *compôte* of apple. That is what we will eat in a matter of weeks, Hélène. Think of how good it will taste.'

'Pork?'

'Yes. Pork. When I feel myself waver, I think of that pig, and its big fat belly. I think of its crisp little ears, its moist haunches.' I almost heard her smile.

'Sophie, you're mad.'

'But think of it, Hélène. Won't it be good? Can you imagine Mimi's face, with pork fat dribbling down her chin? How it will feel in her little tummy? Can you imagine her pleasure as she tries to remove bits of crackling from between her teeth?'

She laughed, despite herself. 'I'm not sure she remembers how pork tastes.'

'It won't take much to remind her,' I said. 'Just like it won't take much to remind you of Jean-Michel. One of these days he will walk through the doors, and you will throw your arms around him, and the smell of him, the feel of him holding you around your waist, will be as familiar to you as your own body.'

I could almost hear her thoughts travelling back upwards then. I had pulled her back. Little victories.

'Sophie,' she said, after a while. 'Do you miss sex?'

'Every single day,' I said. 'Twice as often as I think about that pig.' There was a brief silence, and we broke into giggles. Then, I don't know why, we were laughing so hard we had to clamp our hands over our faces to stop ourselves waking the children.

I knew the *Kommandant* would return. In the event it was four days before he did so. It was raining hard, a deluge, so that our few customers sat over empty cups gazing unseeing through the steamed windows. In the snug, old René and Monsieur Pellier played dominoes; Monsieur Pellier's dog – he had to pay the Germans a tariff for the privilege of owning it – between their feet. Many people sat here daily so that they did not have to be alone with their fear.

I was just admiring Madame Arnault's hair, newly pinned by my sister, when the glass doors opened and he stepped into the bar, flanked by two officers. The room, which had been a warm fug of chatty companionability, fell abruptly silent. I stepped out from behind the counter and wiped my hands on my apron.

Germans did not visit our bar, except for requisitioning. They used the Bar Blanc, at the top of the town, which was larger and possibly friendlier. We had always made it very clear that we were not a convivial space for the occupying force. I wondered what they were going to take from us now. If we had any fewer cups and plates we would have to ask customers to share.

'Madame Lefèvre.'

I nodded at him. I could feel my customers' eyes on me.

'It has been decided you will provide meals for some of

our officers. There is not enough room in the Bar Blanc for our incoming men to eat comfortably.'

I could see him clearly for the first time now. He was older than I had thought, in his late forties perhaps, although with fighting men it was hard to tell. They all looked older than they were.

'I'm afraid that will be impossible, Herr Kommandant,' I said. 'We have not served meals at this hotel for more than eighteen months. We have barely enough provisions to feed our small family. We cannot possibly provide meals to the standard that your men will require.'

'I am well aware of that. There will be sufficient supplies delivered from early next week. I will expect you to turn out meals suitable for officers. I understand this hotel was once a fine establishment. I'm sure it lies within your capabilities.'

I heard my sister's intake of breath behind me, and I knew she felt as I did. The visceral dread of having Germans in our little hotel was tempered by the thought that for months had overridden all others: *food*. There would be leftovers, bones with which to make stock. There would be cooking smells, stolen mouthfuls, extra rations, slices of meat and cheese to be secretly pared off.

But still. 'I am not sure our bar will be suitable for you, Herr Kommandant. We are stripped of comforts here.'

'I will be the judge of where my men will be comfortable. I would like to see your rooms also. I may billet some of my men up here.'

I heard old René mutter, '*Sacre bleu!*'

'You are welcome to see the rooms, Herr Kommandant. But you will find that your predecessors have left us

with little. The beds, the blankets, the curtains, even the copper piping that fed the basins, they are already in German possession.'

I knew I risked angering him: I had made clear in a packed bar that the *Kommandant* was ignorant of the actions of his own men, that his intelligence, as far as it stretched to our town, was faulty. But it was vital that my own townspeople saw me as obstinate and mulish. To have Germans in our bar would make Hélène and me the target of gossip, of malicious rumour. It was important that we were seen to do all we could to deter them.

'Again, Madame, I will be the judge of whether your rooms are suitable. Please show me.' He motioned to his men to remain in the bar. It would be completely silent until after they had left.

I straightened my shoulders and walked slowly out into the hallway, reaching for the keys as I did so. I felt the eyes of the whole room on me as I left, my skirts swishing around my legs, the heavy steps of the German behind me. I unlocked the door to the main corridor (I kept everything locked: it was not unknown for French thieves to steal what had not already been requisitioned by the Germans).

This part of the building smelt musty and damp; it was months since I had been here. We walked up the stairs in silence. I was grateful that he remained several steps behind me. I paused at the top, waiting for him to step into the corridor, then unlocked the first room.

There had been a time when merely to see our hotel like this had reduced me to tears. The Red Room had once been the pride of Le Coq Rouge; the bedroom where my

sister and I had spent our wedding nights, the room where the mayor would put up visiting dignitaries. It had housed a vast four-poster bed, draped in blood-red tapestries, and its generous window overlooked our formal gardens. The carpet was from Italy, the furniture from a château in Gascogne, the coverlet a deep red silk from China. It had held a gilt chandelier and a huge marble fireplace, where the fire was lit each morning by a chambermaid and kept alight until night.

I opened the door, standing back so that the German might enter. The room was empty, but for a chair that stood on three legs in the corner. The floorboards had been stripped of their carpet and were grey, thick with dust. The bed was long gone, with the curtains, among the first things stolen when the Germans had taken our town. The marble fireplace had been ripped from the wall. For what reason, I do not know: it was not as if it could be used elsewhere. I think Becker had simply wanted to demoralize us, to remove all things of beauty.

He took a step into the room.

'Be careful where you walk,' I said. He glanced down, then saw it: the corner of the room where they had attempted to remove the floorboards for firewood last spring. The house had been too well built, its boards nailed too securely, and they had given up after several hours when they had removed just three long planks. The hole, a gaping O of protest, exposed the beams beneath.

The *Kommandant* stood for a minute, staring at the floor. He lifted his head and gazed around him. I had never been alone in a room with a German, and my heart was thumping. I could smell the faint hint of tobacco on him,

see the rain splashes on his uniform. I watched the back of his neck, and eased my keys between my fingers, ready to hit him with my armoured fist should he suddenly attack me. I would not be the first woman who had had to fight for her honour.

But he turned back to me. 'Are they all as bad?' he said.

'No,' I replied. 'The others are worse.'

He looked at me for such a long time that I almost coloured. But I refused to let that man intimidate me. I stared back at him, at his cropped greying hair, his translucent blue eyes, studying me from under his peaked cap. My chin remained lifted, my expression blank.

Finally he turned and walked past me, down the stairs and into the back hallway. He stopped abruptly, peered up at my portrait and blinked twice, as if he were only now registering that I had moved it.

'I will have someone inform you of when to expect the first delivery of food,' he said. He went briskly through the doorway and back to the bar.

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