



STOLEN
by NIGHT

STEVE WATKINS

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I UN

Jules and I are flying on our fathers' old Favor racing bikes down roads and paths through the Bois de Boulogne, the great park across the Seine from the Eiffel Tower, sending pedestrians and slower riders diving out of our way. We can barely feel our frozen fingers, but neither of us cares. Two men in heavy overcoats throw themselves into thorny rosebushes and curse us loudly. Another stumbles into a shallow puddle. It's Armistice Day, 11 November, but it's no longer a holiday under the German occupation. I have changed out of my school uniform of pleated skirt and tights and blouse and jacket and into a pair of Papa's cycling pants and one of his old wool jerseys. I cut off a fistful of my long hair this afternoon before our ride and tucked the rest under my cap. Jules says I look just like a boy now, which pleases me. Perhaps I will be able to actually enter races for real, like him, and like our fathers when they were young. Perhaps if I pretend I'm a Nicholas instead of a Nicolette.

But today, the freedom of Jules and me tearing past each other in the park will have to do—playing cycle tag under the bare

cedars and beeches and sequoias, past the winter gardens, the two lakes, the Grande Cascade, the windmill, the hippodrome, the empty red-clay tennis courts. We're fourteen and we're free, or that's what we tell ourselves—the bills flipped up on our Peugeot casquettes, our favorite bike caps, our faces bright red from the cold and the wind and the exertion.

Oh, to be out in the countryside instead of locked down here in Paris. What Jules and I wouldn't give to be in the Pyrenees, or the Alps, on the Tour de France, like Papa when he was young, riding solo, a *touriste-routier*, back when cycling was an individual sport and the peloton was banned. We have grown up hearing all the old stories from our fathers of the glory days of the sport, back when wooden rims were required on the mountain stages of the Tour for fear that hard braking would melt the glue holding tires on metal rims.

But that was a different France, and this is a different Paris. The Tour was canceled this past summer after the occupation. There was mass panic ahead of the Nazi advance back in June, with many leaving the city, fleeing to the south and Vichy, to the west and the Atlantic. On trains, in cars and flatbed trucks, on horse-drawn wagons, on foot, carrying everything they owned on their backs, piled in strollers, strapped to handcars.

I remember watching from the balcony of our apartment and seeing an old woman sitting helplessly in the center of the avenue, sobbing, left behind or lost. No one stopped to help until Maman went out and pulled her to the sidewalk. Everyone else was too busy—holding the hands of the little ones, who were also crying, terrified, their faces contorted by fear and their parents' urgency to flee. Except some of the little ones were

abandoned as well. Their faces blank, uncomprehending. They waited. The crowds swelled around them, threatened to trample them. People were shouting what everyone already knew: “The Nazis are coming . . .”

But Papa wouldn’t let us leave. Maman begged him—she was from the countryside, she reminded him; we could go to her village—but he was stubborn, insistent. “The Germans are not coming to crush us, but to save us,” he said. Maman kept quiet after that, but my sister, Charlotte, who is eighteen, argued with him, insisting we must fight. Papa would hear none of it. “This is our home,” he snapped. “We will not flee like those cowards. It may well be good for Paris, for all of France, to have the Germans come in and clean house of all these trade unionists and communists and atheists who have been trying to undermine our institutions and destroy our traditions.”

Charlotte stormed out of the apartment that day—as she has done many days since—to meet her boyfriend, Antoine. Maman assured me, as she always does, that Charlotte would be back, and that surely if we cooperated, the Germans wouldn’t hurt us. In response, Papa stomped through the apartment, picking things up, putting them down forcefully. He did not stop until a figurine broke and Maman gave him a pleading look. A wingless angel now sits on the shelf.

We had read about the Nazi advance in the newspapers and heard about it on the radio—back before the newspapers and radio were banned. How the Germans broke through to take the Netherlands and Belgium in the north. And, to our despair, marched through our own defenses—the supposedly unbreakable Maginot Line between France and Germany, which was not

unbreakable at all, as it turned out. The German army merely went around it, through the Ardennes Forest in their Blitzkrieg. Jules's father, a captain in the French army, was one of a million of our soldiers who surrendered to the Germans and who is still a prisoner of war, in a work camp somewhere deep inside Germany.

Our French flags, le tricolore, are gone. Everywhere now we see bloodred flags with black swastikas instead. Street signs in German. Closed shops. Soldiers goose-stepping through the city—thousands of them, giving their stiff-armed Nazi salutes. But Paris wasn't destroyed. The Germans only bombed two automobile factories at the city's edge. Nothing like what they did to Warsaw, to Rotterdam, to London. Our French army rolled over meekly. And now, five months later, many of those who fled from Paris have begun slowly to return, to register with the German command and the French Police Nationale, and to turn in their neighbors who dare to speak ill of Hitler and the soldiers of the Wehrmacht. There are eyes and ears everywhere.

Jules and I continue our wild ride through the park, laughing and shouting as we sprint to catch each other, practicing our pursuit racing. An elderly Police Nationale, probably assigned to the Bois de Boulogne because he's too old to be a true police, yells at us to slow down as we blaze past him. It is now late afternoon, with perhaps another hour of daylight left for us to ride, to embrace these moments of freedom. The gendarme pretends to give chase, and we pretend to take him seriously. With so few cars on the streets—most have been confiscated by the Nazis, and there is no petrol anyway—we leave the Bois

de Boulogne on Avenue Foch and continue our race down the deserted Champs-Élysées as if on the last stage of the Tour.

But something isn't right. Lining the road and side streets are hundreds of Police Nationale in their blue uniforms and box caps and winter capes, carrying riot shields and clubs, while behind them in tight formation stand columns of heavily armed Wehrmacht soldiers, their faces set in grim masks.

We keep riding, now afraid to stop or even to slow down on the wide, empty boulevard. Until we reach the far end of the Champs-Élysées, and there, massed around the statue of the war hero Georges Clemenceau, is a crowd of young people, thousands strong, maybe tens of thousands, gathered to protest the occupation, something that hasn't happened in all these quiet months since the Nazis took over. We've seen the flyers, of course, like everyone at our schools, like everyone in the city, announcing that there would be speeches at the statue and then a march in open defiance of the Nazis and the traitorous Vichy government.

Students of France! On 11 November, we are gathering to honor the Unknown Soldier at the Arc de Triomphe at 5:30 p.m. for a Day of Memory. 11 November 1918 was the date of a great victory. 11 November 1940 will signal yet another. All students are in solidarity that France must live!

Charlotte argued with Papa about it at breakfast just this morning, insisting she was going; Papa, who works at the Police Nationale Central Office, ordered her to stay away. "You are being

ridiculous,” he shouted at her when she refused. “The Nazis will leave when they are ready to leave, and not because a handful of children threaten to hold their breath until they turn blue. Once we accept the reality of their greater military strength—and the new social order they insist must be followed—then they will withdraw back across the Rhine.”

After the argument, Papa left for work. Maman left to help our neighbors, the Ashers, in their boulangerie down on the street. I left for school. Charlotte left for the Sorbonne, where she is in her first year at university. Or that’s where she said she was going, anyway.

Still, I didn’t believe anyone would be foolish enough to actually show up for the protest. Not even headstrong Charlotte.

Now Jules and I sit on our bikes, a short distance away, both of us amazed at the size of the crowd.

“Perhaps we should join them,” Jules says, catching me off guard.

I stumble to respond. “But all the police,” I say. “And the German soldiers.”

Jules shrugs. “They seem to be only watching. Just in case. What can be the harm?” And then he adds, quietly, “We would honor my father by doing this.”

What can I say to that, except to agree? And wonder if perhaps Jules steered us in this direction, planned for us to end up here all along. We hide our bicycles behind a nearby shop and return to work our way deep into the crowd so we can hear the speeches at the base of the statue—about Clemenceau, the Tiger, the old prime minister, the Father of Victory, who held fast against the Germans in the last war, who engineered the Treaty

of Versailles, who kicked the German dogs out of our country, tails between their legs. About how we must stand strong now in the face of the occupation and march together to honor the spirit of independence. About how we are the manifestants, the ones who will raise our voices in protest, the leaders of what will surely become a mass movement to throw out the Nazis.

Wreaths woven from flowers and lace and sequins and bows are laid at the base of the statue. Some in the crowd wave fishing poles for the new hero General Charles de Gaulle, in exile in Great Britain, exhorting us nightly in BBC broadcasts to continue the fight. Some here have brought instruments, others have fashioned their own with sticks and trash can lids, and they begin to bang and play as the march begins.

I see someone I recognize from school—a quiet girl named Yvette—standing alone, holding the banned tricolore, and we wade through the crowd to join her. She recognizes me, too. “Bonjour, Nicolette.” She has to shout the words. Soon we are taking turns holding the flag aloft and waving it proudly above the protesters. It is too loud to hear one another speak, but Yvette’s wide smile tells us she’s glad we have come.

The crowd swells around us, forcing us into one another, a mass of sweating, chanting bodies despite the November chill. I am thrilled to be here and find myself shouting slogans along with the rest. But I am frightened, too. Worried about the uniformed police and the Wehrmacht soldiers lining the boulevard, standing, waiting, perhaps ready to pounce. Early streetlights illuminate the side streets and the soldiers as the afternoon fades, and eventually Jules and Yvette and I are swept up as the crowd begins our march onto the Champs-Élysées, heading west past

the massive stone columns and domed entrance of the Grand Palais, its windows now shrouded with swastikas, through the first traffic circle at Rond-Point, on toward the Arc de Triomphe, playing and whistling and singing “La Marseillaise” at the top of our lungs as if our voices and our presence here, our witness and our protest, will make a difference.

But we never make it. The police have no intention of letting us. It is as if we are fish, chased into a net. They let us make our way half the distance from Clemenceau’s statue down the Champs-Élysées, within sight of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, cheered on by shopkeepers and citizens, absurdly proud of ourselves for making such a grand statement to the world, or so we hope. But in an instant, everything changes. Without warning, the police charge, their batons raised, descending on those at the fringes. Bodies go down in the street. Others try to flee but are boxed in, and they, too, are clubbed. For a second I think I see my sister, Charlotte, her red hair flying loose around her angry face as she fights to free others from the clutches of the Police Nationale. But as quickly as she comes into view, she vanishes again inside the melee. I try to pull away, to go to her, but Jules and Yvette are clinging to me too tightly.

And then suddenly the police are on us, too. We try to run, but there’s no way to escape, nowhere to go. Fearless Yvette lets go of me and grabs a policeman’s arm to keep him from swinging his club at Jules, but that only makes her a target. He turns on her, striking. She stumbles to her knees, tries to raise herself back to her feet, is clubbed from behind, blood spattering the back of her blouse. She falls again. Jules and I struggle against the crowd that now separates us from her, but two girls help her to

her feet before we can get there. They wrap a scarf tightly over her wound and half carry, half drag her away.

Nowhere is safe. People are screaming, trying to run. Some manage to get away, at least for the moment. Some fight back, only to be beaten to their knees or bloodied into unconsciousness. We are torn in the opposite direction from Yvette.

The Nazis join then, a second wave of violence, their weapons raised. At first they are restrained, using their rifle butts as clubs, but soon, perhaps frustrated with those in the crowd who refuse to disperse—or who are trapped and cannot—they begin firing into the air. Volley after volley. There is the sharp retort of their rifles; there is smoke, crying, desperate wailing, pleas for help that won't come. I keep pulling on Jules, not sure which direction to take, not caring. Acrid smoke stings our eyes. The cacophony of shouting, screaming, shooting deafens us. We aren't fish, we are rats, desperate rats, caring for nothing and no one except to save ourselves—

And in a flash we are free, sprinting past soldiers too busy beating on our fellow manifestants to bother with us, two young kids, too frightened to fight them or defend anyone or do anything except run from the Champs-Élysées and down side streets and then alleys, sure we hear the jackboots behind us, drawing closer, the shouts in German to halt or be shot. We keep running. We have no choice. We slam into brick walls, we careen into others fleeing in the same direction, some howling with rage, some howling with pain, some bloodied and stumbling, some hurling stones behind them at an unseen enemy, some seizing us by the shoulder and spinning us around so they can vault past to a greater chance of escape for themselves.

Everything burns—my lungs, my eyes, my legs. My heart races and threatens to burst, but now it is Jules who won't let go of me when I try to slow down, when I plead with him to let me stop, just for a minute, just to be able to breathe, just so my heart won't explode. We see others ahead of us sliding to the cobblestone street. I fear they've been shot, except I haven't heard any guns for some time, for several blocks. But no, they are rolling under a stone slab of sidewalk into a narrow black space below, and then disappearing into the dark there, a sewer perhaps, but I don't have time to think it through before Jules is pulling me down with him to follow the others, scraping our elbows and knees, tearing our clothes, rolling under the stone, vanishing right there in the center of Paris into the unknown, into the underground where maybe we will be saved.