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ANTHONY DOERR

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All the Light
We Cannot See

« *A Novel* »

Anthony Doerr

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For Wendy Weil
1940–2012

In August 1944 the historic walled city of Saint-Malo, the brightest jewel of the Emerald Coast of Brittany, France, was almost totally destroyed by fire. . . . Of the 865 buildings within the walls, only 182 remained standing and all were damaged to some degree.

—Philip Beck

It would not have been possible for us to take power or to use it in the ways we have without the radio.

—Joseph Goebbels

Zero

7 August 1944

Leaflets

At dusk they pour from the sky. They blow across the ramparts, turn cartwheels over rooftops, flutter into the ravines between houses. Entire streets swirl with them, flashing white against the cobbles. *Urgent message to the inhabitants of this town, they say. Depart immediately to open country.*

The tide climbs. The moon hangs small and yellow and gibbous. On the rooftops of beachfront hotels to the east, and in the gardens behind them, a half-dozen American artillery units drop incendiary rounds into the mouths of mortars.

Bombers

They cross the Channel at midnight. There are twelve and they are named for songs: *Stardust* and *Stormy Weather* and *In the Mood* and *Pistol-Packin' Mama*. The sea glides along far below, spattered with the countless chevrons of whitecaps. Soon enough, the navigators can discern the low moonlit lumps of islands ranged along the horizon.

France.

Intercoms crackle. Deliberately, almost lazily, the bombers shed altitude. Threads of red light ascend from anti-air emplacements up and down the coast. Dark, ruined ships appear, scuttled or destroyed, one with its bow shorn away, a second flickering as it burns. On an outermost island, panicked sheep run zigzagging between rocks.

Inside each airplane, a bombardier peers through an aiming window and counts to twenty. Four five six seven. To the bombardiers, the walled city on its granite headland, drawing ever closer, looks like an unholy tooth, something black and dangerous, a final abscess to be lanced away.

The Girl

In a corner of the city, inside a tall, narrow house at Number 4 rue Vauborel, on the sixth and highest floor, a sightless sixteen-year-old named Marie-Laure LeBlanc kneels over a low table covered entirely with a model. The model is a miniature of the city she kneels within, and contains scale replicas of the hundreds of houses and shops and hotels within its walls. There's the cathedral with its perforated spire, and the bulky old Château de Saint-Malo, and row after row of seaside mansions studded with chimneys. A slender wooden jetty arcs out from a beach called the Plage du Môle; a delicate, reticulated atrium vaults over the seafood market; minute benches, the smallest no larger than apple seeds, dot the tiny public squares.

Marie-Laure runs her fingertips along the centimeter-wide parapet crowning the ramparts, drawing an uneven star shape around the entire model. She finds the opening atop the walls where four ceremonial cannons point to sea. "Bastion de la Hollande," she whispers, and her fingers walk down a little staircase. "Rue des Cordiers. Rue Jacques Cartier."

In a corner of the room stand two galvanized buckets filled to the rim with water. Fill them up, her great-uncle has taught her, whenever you can. The bathtub on the third floor too. Who knows when the water will go out again.

Her fingers travel back to the cathedral spire. South to the Gate of Dinan. All evening she has been marching her fingers around the model, waiting for her great-uncle Etienne, who owns this house, who went out the previous night while she slept, and who has not returned. And now it is night again, another revolution of the clock, and the whole block is quiet, and she cannot sleep.

She can hear the bombers when they are three miles away. A mounting static. The hum inside a seashell.

When she opens the bedroom window, the noise of the airplanes becomes louder. Otherwise, the night is dreadfully silent: no engines, no

voices, no clatter. No sirens. No footfalls on the cobbles. Not even gulls. Just a high tide, one block away and six stories below, lapping at the base of the city walls.

And something else.

Something rattling softly, very close. She eases open the left-hand shutter and runs her fingers up the slats of the right. A sheet of paper has lodged there.

She holds it to her nose. It smells of fresh ink. Gasoline, maybe. The paper is crisp; it has not been outside long.

Marie-Laure hesitates at the window in her stocking feet, her bedroom behind her, seashells arranged along the top of the armoire, pebbles along the baseboards. Her cane stands in the corner; her big Braille novel waits facedown on the bed. The drone of the airplanes grows.

The Boy

Five streets to the north, a white-haired eighteen-year-old German private named Werner Pfennig wakes to a faint staccato hum. Little more than a purr. Flies tapping at a far-off windowpane.

Where is he? The sweet, slightly chemical scent of gun oil; the raw wood of newly constructed shell crates; the mothballed odor of old bedspreads—he's in the hotel. Of course. L'hôtel des Abeilles, the Hotel of Bees.

Still night. Still early.

From the direction of the sea come whistles and booms; flak is going up.

An anti-air corporal hurries down the corridor, heading for the stairwell. "Get to the cellar," he calls over his shoulder, and Werner switches on his field light, rolls his blanket into his duffel, and starts down the hall.

Not so long ago, the Hotel of Bees was a cheerful address, with bright blue shutters on its facade and oysters on ice in its café and Breton waiters in bow ties polishing glasses behind its bar. It offered twenty-one guest rooms, commanding sea views, and a lobby fireplace as big as a truck. Parisians on weekend holidays would drink aperitifs here, and before them the occasional emissary from the republic—ministers and vice ministers and abbots and admirals—and in the centuries before them, windburned corsairs: killers, plunderers, raiders, seamen.

Before that, before it was ever a hotel at all, five full centuries ago, it was the home of a wealthy privateer who gave up raiding ships to study bees in the pastures outside Saint-Malo, scribbling in notebooks and eating honey straight from combs. The crests above the door lintels still have bumblebees carved into the oak; the ivy-covered fountain in the courtyard is shaped like a hive. Werner's favorites are five faded frescoes on the ceilings of the grandest upper rooms, where bees as big as children float against blue backdrops, big lazy drones and workers with diaphanous wings—where, above a hexagonal bathtub, a single nine-foot-long queen, with multiple eyes and a golden-furred abdomen, curls across the ceiling.

Over the past four weeks, the hotel has become something else: a fortress. A detachment of Austrian anti-airmen has boarded up every window, overturned every bed. They've reinforced the entrance, packed the stairwells with crates of artillery shells. The hotel's fourth floor, where garden rooms with French balconies open directly onto the ramparts, has become home to an aging high-velocity anti-air gun called an 88 that can fire twenty-one-and-a-half-pound shells nine miles.

Her Majesty, the Austrians call their cannon, and for the past week these men have tended to it the way worker bees might tend to a queen. They've fed her oils, repainted her barrels, lubricated her wheels; they've arranged sandbags at her feet like offerings.

The royal *acht acht*, a deathly monarch meant to protect them all.

Werner is in the stairwell, halfway to the ground floor, when the 88 fires twice in quick succession. It's the first time he's heard the gun at such close range, and it sounds as if the top half of the hotel has torn off. He stumbles and throws his arms over his ears. The walls reverberate all the way down into the foundation, then back up.

Werner can hear the Austrians two floors up scrambling, reloading, and the receding screams of both shells as they hurtle above the ocean, already two or three miles away. One of the soldiers, he realizes, is singing. Or maybe it is more than one. Maybe they are all singing. Eight Luftwaffe men, none of whom will survive the hour, singing a love song to their queen.

Werner chases the beam of his field light through the lobby. The big gun detonates a third time, and glass shatters somewhere close by, and torrents of soot rattle down the chimney, and the walls of the hotel toll like a struck bell. Werner worries that the sound will knock the teeth from his gums.

He drags open the cellar door and pauses a moment, vision swimming. "This is it?" he asks. "They're really coming?"

But who is there to answer?

Saint-Malo

Up and down the lanes, the last unevacuated townspeople wake, groan, sigh. Spinsters, prostitutes, men over sixty. Procrastinators, collaborators, disbelievers, drunks. Nuns of every order. The poor. The stubborn. The blind.

Some hurry to bomb shelters. Some tell themselves it is merely a drill. Some linger to grab a blanket or a prayer book or a deck of playing cards.

D-day was two months ago. Cherbourg has been liberated, Caen liberated, Rennes too. Half of western France is free. In the east, the Soviets have retaken Minsk; the Polish Home Army is revolting in Warsaw; a few newspapers have become bold enough to suggest that the tide has turned.

But not here. Not this last citadel at the edge of the continent, this final German strongpoint on the Breton coast.

Here, people whisper, the Germans have renovated two kilometers of subterranean corridors under the medieval walls; they have built new defenses, new conduits, new escape routes, underground complexes of bewildering intricacy. Beneath the peninsular fort of La Cité, across the river from the old city, there are rooms of bandages, rooms of ammunition, even an underground hospital, or so it is believed. There is air-conditioning, a two-hundred-thousand-liter water tank, a direct line to Berlin. There are flame-throwing booby traps, a net of pillboxes with periscopic sights; they have stockpiled enough ordnance to spray shells into the sea all day, every day, for a year.

Here, they whisper, are a thousand Germans ready to die. Or five thousand. Maybe more.

Saint-Malo: Water surrounds the city on four sides. Its link to the rest of France is tenuous: a causeway, a bridge, a spit of sand. We are Malouins first, say the people of Saint-Malo. Bretons next. French if there's anything left over.

In stormy light, its granite glows blue. At the highest tides, the sea creeps into basements at the very center of town. At the lowest tides, the barnacled ribs of a thousand shipwrecks stick out above the sea.

For three thousand years, this little promontory has known sieges.

But never like this.

A grandmother lifts a fussy toddler to her chest. A drunk, urinating in an alley outside Saint-Servan, a mile away, plucks a sheet of paper from a hedge. *Urgent message to the inhabitants of this town, it says. Depart immediately to open country.*

Anti-air batteries flash on the outer islands, and the big German guns inside the old city send another round of shells howling over the sea, and three hundred and eighty Frenchmen imprisoned on an island fortress called National, a quarter mile off the beach, huddle in a moonlit courtyard peering up.

Four years of occupation, and the roar of oncoming bombers is the roar of what? Deliverance? Extirpation?

The clack-clack of small-arms fire. The gravelly snare drums of flak. A dozen pigeons roosting on the cathedral spire cataract down its length and wheel out over the sea.

Number 4 rue Vauborel

Marie-Laure LeBlanc stands alone in her bedroom smelling a leaflet she cannot read. Sirens wail. She closes the shutters and relatches the window. Every second the airplanes draw closer; every second is a second lost. She should be rushing downstairs. She should be making for the corner of the kitchen where a little trapdoor opens into a cellar full of dust and mouse-chewed rugs and ancient trunks long unopened.

Instead she returns to the table at the foot of the bed and kneels beside the model of the city.

Again her fingers find the outer ramparts, the Bastion de la Hollande, the little staircase leading down. In this window, right here, in the real city, a woman beats her rugs every Sunday. From this window here, a boy once yelled, *Watch where you're going, are you blind?*

The windowpanes rattle in their housings. The anti-air guns unleash another volley. The earth rotates just a bit farther.

Beneath her fingertips, the miniature rue d'Estrées intersects the miniature rue Vauborel. Her fingers turn right; they skim doorways. One two three. Four. How many times has she done this?

Number 4: the tall, derelict bird's nest of a house owned by her great-uncle Etienne. Where she has lived for four years. Where she kneels on the sixth floor alone, as a dozen American bombers roar toward her.

She presses inward on the tiny front door, and a hidden catch releases, and the little house lifts up and out of the model. In her hands, it's about the size of one of her father's cigarette boxes.

Now the bombers are so close that the floor starts to throb under her knees. Out in the hall, the crystal pendants of the chandelier suspended above the stairwell chime. Marie-Laure twists the chimney of the miniature house ninety degrees. Then she slides off three wooden panels that make up its roof, and turns it over.

A stone drops into her palm.

It's cold. The size of a pigeon's egg. The shape of a teardrop.

Marie-Laure clutches the tiny house in one hand and the stone in the other. The room feels flimsy, tenuous. Giant fingertips seem about to punch through its walls.

“Papa?” she whispers.

Cellar

Beneath the lobby of the Hotel of Bees, a corsair's cellar has been hacked out of the bedrock. Behind crates and cabinets and pegboards of tools, the walls are bare granite. Three massive hand-hewn beams, hauled here from some ancient Breton forest and craned into place centuries ago by teams of horses, hold up the ceiling.

A single lightbulb casts everything in a wavering shadow.

Werner Pfennig sits on a folding chair in front of a workbench, checks his battery level, and puts on headphones. The radio is a steel-cased two-way transceiver with a 1.6-meter band antenna. It enables him to communicate with a matching transceiver upstairs, with two other anti-air batteries inside the walls of the city, and with the underground garrison command across the river mouth.

The transceiver hums as it warms. A spotter reads coordinates into the headpiece, and an artilleryman repeats them back. Werner rubs his eyes. Behind him, confiscated treasures are crammed to the ceiling: rolled tapestries, grandfather clocks, armoires, and giant landscape paintings crazed with cracks. On a shelf opposite Werner sit eight or nine plaster heads, the purpose of which he cannot guess.

The massive staff sergeant Frank Volkheimer comes down the narrow wooden stairs and ducks his head beneath the beams. He smiles gently at Werner and sits in a tall-backed armchair upholstered in golden silk with his rifle across his huge thighs, where it looks like little more than a baton.

Werner says, "It's starting?"

Volkheimer nods. He switches off his field light and blinks his strangely delicate eyelashes in the dimness.

"How long will it last?"

"Not long. We'll be safe down here."

The engineer, Bernd, comes last. He is a little man with mousy hair and misaligned pupils. He closes the cellar door behind him and bars it and sits

halfway down the wooden staircase with a damp look on his face, fear or grit, it's hard to say.

With the door shut, the sound of the sirens softens. Above them, the ceiling bulb flickers.

Water, thinks Werner. I forgot water.

A second anti-air battery fires from a distant corner of the city, and then the 88 upstairs goes again, stentorian, deadly, and Werner listens to the shell scream into the sky. Cascades of dust hiss out of the ceiling. Through his headphones, Werner can hear the Austrians upstairs still singing.

. . . *auf d'Wulda, auf d'Wulda, da scheint d'Sunn a so gulda* . . .

Volkheimer picks sleepily at a stain on his trousers. Bernd blows into his cupped hands. The transceiver crackles with wind speeds, air pressure, trajectories. Werner thinks of home: Frau Elena bent over his little shoes, double-knotting each lace. Stars wheeling past a dormer window. His little sister, Jutta, with a quilt around her shoulders and a radio earpiece trailing from her left ear.

Four stories up, the Austrians clap another shell into the smoking breach of the 88 and double-check the traverse and clamp their ears as the gun discharges, but down here Werner hears only the radio voices of his childhood. *The Goddess of History looked down to earth. Only through the hottest fires can purification be achieved.* He sees a forest of dying sunflowers. He sees a flock of blackbirds explode out of a tree.