

LIME BLOSSOM TEA

"They" had occupied "the Chateau" from the beginning.

From her concierge quarters she watched them come and go, all day long amid a racket of boots and motors and marching songs. The first time she saw them change guard, in that goose-stepping ceremony they do, she thought she might die laughing (if she had felt like laughing, but she hardly ever did). One day, a soldier had gone to take his post—one, two, one, two—and, lifting his leg very high and stiffly, had fallen down just as he went to turn. At that point she did laugh, all alone in her satisfaction, and was very happy to see that they saw her laughing. But an officer had kicked the soldier several times while he was still lying on the ground. The soldier got up, bright red, and stood there at attention while the officer gave him what for in a language she did not understand. But one did not need to understand. And she was overcome with pity. Yes, she felt some kind of pity for the soldier. Then those soldiers left, and others came in their place. But that racket of boots and motors and marching songs was always the same.

For a few months, no soldiers showed up. The country folk kept asking her: "So, have your potato bugs left?"¹ To be sure, they still occupied France, but the fact that they were no longer in the vicinity was a great relief to everyone. At that point, Old Lady Renaude decided to put a little order back into the chateau "so Monsieur wouldn't have to see it like this if he came back."

The studs of the soldiers' boots had gouged the parquet floors, and all the rosewood dining room chairs had been broken. One morning, she found the books from the library strewn across the great lawn in front of the house. It had rained, and they were all water-damaged. Old Lady Renaude did not understand much about books, but she knew that Monsieur always had his nose stuck in one. That is why she had carefully gathered them up and placed them in the other room of her quarters, where she stored her honey, her nuts, and her apples.

She spent a good month hanging all the clothing back up in the armoires, washing the windowpanes, and mending the curtains. Just when things were beginning to feel more settled, the soldiers returned. Old Lady Renaude could have cried over all the trouble she had gone to for nothing.

1. In French, a *doryphore* is a type of potato beetle. In the occupied zone, the French came to equate German soldiers with *doryphores* because both were so numerous and both depleted the potato supply.

But there was just a small group of them. And they explained—the short one spoke French fairly well—that they were there just to guard the rail bridge that crossed the river at the far end of the park. And she replied, "Good, good," to cut it short. She was not about to get into a conversation with them now, was she? Then she dropped the bundle of grass she had been carrying on her back, letting out a little groan as she did so. And the soldier said to her: "Allow me, *Matame*."

He grabbed the bundle and took it clear across the park and up to the rabbit hutches.

The following day he saw her going down to the field, scythe and canvas bag in hand. He took them from her and went to cut the grass himself. And now each day, at the same time, he came to get the scythe and the bag so he could cut the grass. There was also a tall blond soldier who would go to the fountain and fill her pail with water. He spoke no French at all. He could only say "Grandmother"—the one word the other guy had taught him—as he patted her on the head. And true enough, her hair was all white, and with each passing day, she looked more and more like an old woman. They were good boys.

So she had been wondering what she could do for them. She saw them mending their own socks. Any way you slice it, a man holding a needle is a pitiful sight. Even when

that man is an enemy and in your home. She set about mending their socks.

In the village they would ask: "Old Lady Renaude, are you turning into a collaborator?"

She defended herself. They were good boys, that was all. And if you had to live side by side with them every day, what would you do? No, of course she did not like their Hitler, or the Maréchal, or Monsieur Laval. Especially not Laval!² She had even torn up the Maréchal's portrait, which she had bought early on when they were told it had to be on display in their homes. So there you have it.

Autumn arrived with the thick mists that rise in the morning, hang low over the river until about ten, then suddenly break to make way for the sun, and with the night that falls early, night in its purest form, come to warn those least prepared that winter is on its way.

Hans often hung around in the evenings; he liked being near her under the lamplight. If only she were ten years younger and did not have the white hair that made them call her "grandmother." In truth, she was only forty-

2. In contrast to how they viewed Pétain, the French overwhelmingly despised Pierre Laval, who served briefly in 1940 as vice president of the Council of State before being ousted. He returned with Nazi support in April 1942 as minister of foreign affairs, information, and the interior. Like Pétain, Laval was charged with treason after the war, but unlike Pétain, Laval was executed.

five, but many would say that she looked ten years older. Regardless, she was old enough to be his mother . . .

He was coughing one day, and she said, "Wait, I'm going to make you a cup of lime blossom tea," because it made her happy to do something his own mother would have done for him. She went into the adjacent room to get the honey she kept on hand for winter colds. Offering him a silver spoon that dated back to her wedding, she said: "Take as much as you'd like to sweeten your tea."

And now he was licking the spoon like a little boy.

"I haven't eaten honey in ages," he said. "Back home in Germany, only capitalists can afford to buy it. Capitalism there is even worse than it is here."

Old Lady Renaude was not quite sure what "capitalism" meant. All she knew was that it existed in France and Germany because Hans had said so.

"Hitler rescued capitalism for our country. And we are rescuing it for yours. Here's what I think about Hitler."

He spat into the fire, making it hiss. "That's what I think about him," he repeated.

"Then why did you make him your leader?" asked Old Lady Renaude.

"And what about you, why do you have your Maréchal?" retorted Hans. "Because you were defeated, that's why."

"But you are the victors," said Old Lady Renaude.

"We were defeated," said Hans, "on 30 January 1933."

Old Lady Renaude did not know what had happened on 30 January 1933.³ And she did not ask. Hans kept on talking, his eyes completely focused on the fire, as if he could see what he was describing, there in the fire.

And in the fire, dark settlements on the outskirts of a major city appeared, where all the household and factory waste had been piling up and apparently had to remain. And in the fire appeared all those men and women camped out in huts made of mud brick and plaster debris, who were tolerated because the factories might require their labor. And in the fire appeared those who were crammed together in the huge, smoke-blackened barracks that served as factory housing. Utter hopelessness. They'd found no work for years after the other war, only unemployment and hunger.

When he was a little boy, Hans used to follow the processions through the streets, red flags flapping in the wind, big banners calling for a more human life. For Hans, that meant having bread every day, with some butter sometimes, or some jam. And a set of lead soldiers like the one he saw at the Friedrichstrasse bazaar. For a ten-year-old, such things make life more human.

Mother would say, "This little boy is going to get hurt," then furiously to her husband: "I already have enough to

3. The date Hitler was named chancellor of Germany.

worry about with you!" Hans remembered men coming to their house late in the evening after work. Once they had eaten, they would huddle in close around the table. They kept their voices low and spoke quickly. Hans could not make out what they were saying. His father would look up and say: "Hans, go into the other room; you don't need to be in here." Hans did not like the other room because it had no windows. It was not actually a room; it was a dark storage closet. He would find his mother in there, sitting on a crate and sobbing: "This is all going to turn out very badly."

They now knew they could not trust the gas company service manager who lived a few houses over. Mother used to clean for him, but Father had put a stop to that. And they could not trust the household goods representative from the second floor. They could not say anything in front of either neighbor because both were Nazis: they saw them parading around on Sundays in their brand-new uniforms. The boys had started playing Nazis and Communists in the streets. Hans never wanted to play a Nazi.

Father would come home in the evenings more worried than ever. He would say: "Kaufmann and Hübner just got caught." Mother would beg him: "Please stop this. You're tempting God." He would shrug his shoulders: "I can't stop now, people are depending on me."

The days passed, and Father was still a free man, because neither Kaufmann nor Hübner had given up any names. Little by little they started hearing about what was going on in the prisons and the camps. About the torture . . .

Hans fell silent, his eyes still on the fire. Old Lady Renaude removed her glasses and said: "Things like that aren't possible here in France."

"Things like that are possible anywhere," said Hans. "And here too, Hitler will find men who will do those things. He will find them," he insisted.

The fire crackled. You could hear an owl hooting in the woods nearby. Night had fallen completely.

"One day, around four in the morning, there was a knock at the door. I can still hear my father saying: 'Don't open it.' Those are the last words I ever heard my father say. I remember the tone he used when he said them. But the knocking got louder: 'Open up, police,' someone shouted. Then: 'If you don't open up, we'll arrest your wife and your son too.' So my father went to the door and he opened it.

"The policemen searched everywhere. They found nothing. My mother stood in a corner, crying. Then they took my father away. We found out that he and several others had been shot a few days later."

"My poor boy," Old Lady Renaude whispered.

"They tried to make us believe that they were speaking on behalf of the German people, that their only concern was for the good of the German community. German youths were required to enroll in camps that, they claimed, would turn us all into well-trained animals. And there were many who, on account of being compelled to commit certain acts, wound up believing that they carried them out freely and of their own accord. Because she would go and beg for clothing at the Winter Relief office, my mother wound up believing it was good to be a beggar. What I remembered was my father's death. I managed to get hold of all the banned books he had read. I learned to understand my father's death. It's the only hope we have left of being saved. And maybe the only one you have left as well."