

Encounter with a Ghost

I hired a car at the airport and drove along the north shore of the lake. It was an hour's drive, skirting Lausanne and taking the road towards Montreux. At Vevey I saw the sign for the turn-off too late and had to go into the town and turn back on myself, cursing for not having asked for a satnav when I picked up the car. The girl at the desk would have happily obliged – she'd managed to persuade me into an excess waiver and a full tank of petrol besides the rate I'd paid online in England. What would another pile of Swiss francs have mattered?

The woman I had come to see lived up the hill behind Vevey, in a modern apartment block couched in plush lawns. Regimented vines marched up the slope on the other side of the road. Below was the distant glimpse of the lake, as blue as forget-me-nots. The whole scene looked as though it had been computer-generated by an architect's office but it was real enough – as real as you can get in Switzerland, which, living as it does on the fantasies of all the others, has always been the least real of European countries.

When I rang I could hear the doorbell inside but no other sound. I wondered whether she had heard it. I wondered – you do when the person in question is eighty – whether she was even alive to hear it. Maybe, even since my email of two days ago, age had finally caught up with her.

And then the door opened.

There was that moment of hesitation that you see in older people, a rapid shuffle of the cards of memory, but as quick as a card sharp in her case, so fast that you could hardly see it. ‘Samuel,’ she said. ‘It must be almost fifty years.’

She’d done her homework. Get your story by heart. Make sure it’s consistent. Make sure you don’t have to think about your replies. But don’t be too accurate. Being too accurate is suspicious. ‘Fifty-one,’ I said. We kissed, on both cheeks. Her skin was soft and powdery, the texture of old velvet.

‘You look middle-aged,’ she said, considering me at arm’s length.

‘That’s because I am.’

I forbore to say the obvious – that she looked old – but it was true. Perhaps I could see the lineaments of beauty in her face – sharp eyes, a mouth that still possessed beguiling curves, the line of jaw and chin that hinted at the features of her youth – but she had stepped over the border into old age and beauty was no longer evident but rather something to be inferred. I can’t deny a shiver of fear remembering what I had once felt for her. Now, there was nothing. Until she spoke, that is. The voice was still the same. The same intonation which she had never been able to disguise, an occasional uncertainty in her syntax that betrayed the French origins lurking behind the English lady she pretended to be.

We went through into the sitting room. The windows looked out over the lawns and I realised that, had she been waiting there, she’d have seen me approaching. She’d have watched me all the way into the building. That pause before opening the door would have been deliberate, as would the hesitation on seeing me. She was still a consummate actress.

‘So how are you?’ I asked.

‘As well as anyone who’s reached eighty. What’ll you have?’

The possibilities were plain enough, sitting on a side table: a bottle of gin and a bucket of ice and a neat squad of tonic bottles. ‘It’s a bit early for me. A small one. Lots of tonic.’

She laughed, as though lots of tonic was an amusing weakness. While she made the drinks, I glanced round the sitting room for clues. They were there sure enough, as I might have expected. A glass-topped box with her medals in it – the Médaille de la Resistance embossed with the cross of Lorraine and the bronze Croix de Guerre. And photographs, one of my parents for a start, holding hands and smiling into the light, my mother with her hair in disorder and a free hand raised almost in salute but actually to keep the sun out of her eyes. Then a framed picture of a figure that I recognised but had never known – Benoît Bérard, the man with whom she had dropped into France in the autumn of 1943. He was standing in front of a sunlit stone wall. The focus wasn't brilliant but you could see that he was a composition of smiles and manly rolled up shirt sleeves and careless hair. 'I suppose I loved him,' she'd told me once, wistfully, as if she couldn't quite remember. Next to this photo was a picture of Clément Pelletier, a studio portrait that made him look more handsome than he really was, and slightly untrustworthy. Or was that my own prejudice finding things that weren't obviously there?

As she handed me my drink, I noticed her hands, the fingers like crustacean limbs, swollen at the joints. They trembled slightly. 'Anyway, it's been a long time,' she said.

What, I wondered, was the 'it' in that sentence? Because everything was a long time ago now – her first encounter with my parents, her first meeting with me, those moments when she breezed in and just as suddenly out of our ordinary, domestic lives. She was twelve years older than me, which had meant a great deal then although rather less now. When she had first met us my mother suggested I address her as Auntie Marian and she had laughed the suggestion away. 'It makes me sound like a sixty-year-old spinster.' From the outset she'd been a strange, errant creature who had occupied my fantasies; later she evolved into a daunting, obdurate woman who had fulfilled some of them. She was the first adult I ever called by her

Christian name, the first adult who ever seemed to regard me as a person to respect rather than a child to be condescended to, the first adult with whom I'd had an adult relationship. Somehow, whatever our difference in age, I'd always felt her equal.

Sipping her drink, she considered me with something like sympathy. 'They got you in the end, did they? As I warned you they would.'

I shrugged. 'It seemed a good idea at the time, more interesting than the Foreign Office, more exciting than the Civil Service.'

'And now?'

'Retired, of course.'

'Family?'

'Two children, both married despite their parents' bad example. We got divorced in the seventies and I never remarried.'

She picked on divorced. Was there a hint of satisfaction in her expression? No sympathy, certainly. 'I can't say I'm surprised. I didn't have you down as the – what's the word? – uxorious type. What about the children?'

'They lived with their mother.'

'They always do.'

'Stephanie used to tell me they missed their father. Personally, I don't think they really cared. I'm friends with Edward but I don't see much of Margaret. I guess she blames me for everything.' But I didn't want to talk about my life, I wanted to talk about hers. When they spoke about what Marian did, my parents always talked in oblique terms. Some cultural exchange programme or other, working with the Soviet Bloc. All a bit strange, really. But what happened during the war wasn't strange – it was remarkable. She'd been dropped into the southwest of France as a courier for one of those special operations circuits that France was riddled with. WORDSMITH was its code-name. While there she'd been sent to Paris on some damn fool errand and she'd been arrested. The story was well known

enough, cropping up in books and newspaper articles whenever there was a rush of interest in the French resistance – when that film *Odette* came out, for example. But I knew about it from my mother recounting it, thrilling my post-war child’s mind with the words *Gestapo* and *Resistance*; and, I suppose, from Marian herself. What she never talked about was what happened after, when she had spent time in captivity in one of the concentration camps, and miraculously, like someone coming back from the dead, had survived. But how? How does one achieve such a thing? How does one cheat death when the dice are so loaded against you? Anyway, she had survived and she never talked about it. That’s what my mother said. She was special, strange, both courageous and dangerous, a good friend and someone you wanted to treat with caution, exciting to know but shot through with a sinuous vein of delinquency. ‘She’s dangerous,’ my father said, in an unguarded moment. He was right in that. She was dangerous all right. I can vouch for it.

‘So,’ she said, ‘you’ve come to get me.’

I tried to laugh the accusation off. ‘They dragged me out of retirement simply because I knew you—’

‘But you never gave me away, did you?’

‘Never. It’s just that now . . . they want to close the file. There’s no question of prosecution or anything like that. They just want to tie up loose ends. All in complete confidence, of course.’

She laughed at that. ‘I suppose they wouldn’t want to suffer further public embarrassment. From what I can see, your service didn’t cover itself in glory during the Cold War, did it?’

‘It’s the mistakes that got the publicity. Most of the successes remain secret. That’s the party line, anyway.’

Her eyes were hard and bright, still youthful within that aged frame. ‘Was there a mole at the top, Sam? Is that part of your brief, to find out if I was betrayed?’

‘It’s all entirely unofficial, Marian.’

‘Everything’s unofficial. It always was. Unofficial and therefore deniable.’

‘Something like that.’ I nodded towards the glass-topped box. ‘I see you’ve got your medals out.’

She got up from her chair and went over to them, picking them up and examining them as though she had only just noticed. ‘At least the French did better than the British,’ she said. ‘All the British could manage for us was the MBE. And they gave that to the Beatles.’

I had heard the story before: they’d offered her a civil list MBE and she’d turned it down. Nothing that I did was civil, she’d told them. So eventually the authorities relented and changed it to a military list award. But still only the MBE, the bottom of the range, the decoration you give to school janitors and charity workers . . . and pop singers. ‘They were like that with all of us,’ she said once. ‘Except for the dead darlings.’

Who were the dead darlings? Noor Inayat Khan, of course, the fragile, ethereal daughter of an Indian sufi mystic. And Violette Szabo, the working-class girl from Stockwell. And the one surviving darling, played by Anna Neagle in the film: Odette Sansom, who became Odette Churchill, who became Odette Hallows. They all got George Crosses, the highest civilian award for gallantry, and who’s to say they didn’t deserve them? And a couple of George Medals were dished out to one or two others. But only civil list MBEs for the remainder – is that an honour or an insult?

‘It’s dead and buried now,’ she said. ‘Water under the bridge. Milk that’s been spilt. What other clichés are there?’

I laughed. There are many. The whole damn story is riddled with clichés, heroine being one of them. Traitor being another.

Northolt, 1945

The airfield was slick with rain, the concrete hardstandings turned to mirrors, aircraft glistening like fish, the wind a damp breath. Flights had been delayed so Atkins had been waiting for almost an hour, sometimes sitting in the car smoking, but more often, when the drizzle lifted, getting out and standing on the concrete apron, as though just being there would bring the aircraft in. The corporal who had been detailed to accompany her had suggested she could wait in the officers' mess but she had turned the offer down. She wouldn't have felt at ease in the mess despite her rank and uniform. Flight Officer was nothing more than a sham, like the flag of convenience that merchant ships carry. Your flag might say you came from Panama but no one really believed it.

'Can't they give us any idea?' she asked.

'It's taken off, ma'am,' he assured her, 'and what goes up must come down. Sooner or later.'

The woman didn't smile.

'They say . . .' he added.

'What do they say?'

'They say there've been terrible things over there. I saw it in that Pathé News. Did you see it, ma'am? Them camps. Terrible it was.'

She didn't answer. She didn't want to get drawn into conversation, and certainly not with this corporal and certainly not

about what was happening in Germany at the moment. Instead she listened, and finally heard something on the air – the sound of distant engines. There had been many aircraft moving around while they'd been waiting, aircraft taxiing and taking off, aircraft dropping down over the houses to the left and hitting the runway with a screech of rubber and a dash of spray, the sound of aero engines so loud in her ears that she could barely think. But there was something about this new sound, as though it came from far away. 'Is that it?'

'Might be, ma'am. You never know your luck.'

The sound drew nearer, somewhere over to the east; and then the aeroplane could be seen, dropping out of the cloud, a twin-engined machine with a sharp and almost eager look to it, as if it were straining forward over its swept wings.

'Yup,' the corporal said, 'that's the Dakota. 'Bout time too.'

They watched the aircraft fly downwind and turn onto the approach. It dropped onto the tarmac, bounced once or twice then settled down, running to the end of the runway, turning and taxiing towards them, chin up, with the tail snaking slightly to give the pilot a better view of the ground in front. An aircraftman made ritual semaphore with what looked like table tennis bats and the engines stuttered into silence. There was a pause before the fuselage door opened and passengers began to climb down onto the tarmac.

'It's a lady, isn't it?' the corporal asked. 'The one you're waiting for, I mean.'

'A woman, yes.'

The passengers were walking towards them, a mixture of Army and Air Force, all officers, one with gold braid on his cap. She remembered to salute and was surprised to get a salute in return. And then they had gone past and there was just the aircraft, with the door open and no one in sight.

'Maybe she missed the flight,' the corporal suggested.

'She's there,' said Atkins.

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She had sat motionless in her seat while the uniforms left, hoping they wouldn't notice her. They'd watched her during the flight, whispering about her so quietly that she couldn't make out what they were saying, nodding if they caught her eye, even giving brief smiles; but once the aircraft had landed they made their way down the slope towards the open door and out into the daylight without casting a glance in her direction. Only the dispatcher, a middle-aged flight sergeant who had tended her with quiet care throughout the flight, came up from the tail and stooped over her like a doctor and asked if she was feeling all right. Because it was time to go, ma'am. Was there someone waiting for her?

She hoped so. They had assured her there would be.

Did she need help unbuckling her seat belt?

She didn't. She could manage that. Like undoing the buckle on a parachute harness, wasn't it? She remembered that well enough although it was a long time ago, over a year ago, and in another world. She attempted a smile as she left her seat, carrying the suitcase they had given her at the Red Cross. It contained all she owned, which was a change of clothing and some washing things. Washing things were the wonder. A toothbrush, a tin of toothpaste, a bar of soap that smelled of carbolic sitting almost untouched in a metal box. A flannel. And a tube of lipstick. Treasures worth ten, twenty times their weight in food.

Pulling her beret down over what was left of her hair, she cautiously made her way down the slope of the fuselage towards the rectangle of daylight at the end. For a moment she stood there in the entrance, looking out like a small mammal at the opening of its burrow scanning for predators. She saw nothing more than a stretch of concrete, with a black car parked a hundred yards away and two figures standing nearer, waiting. Beyond that was just the stuff of an airfield: hangars, a low-lying building of some kind, a squat control tower with a glass box on top like an aquarium, where silhouettes moved back and forth against the panes. Watching her, perhaps.

Carefully she climbed down the steps to the ground. Her shoes were too big for her and she had to drag her feet when she walked. They were all the Red Cross had in the way of women's shoes. Her own shoes had been so ruined they'd taken them away at the hospital and she never saw them again. Anyway they were made of cardboard, whereas these were leather. More treasure.

'Here she is,' the corporal said. 'You were right, ma'am.'

'Of course I was right.'

The woman crossing the stretch of concrete towards them seemed shorter than her actual height, as though she had been crushed into a form that was too small for her. Perhaps the military greatcoat that she was wearing created the illusion. She was the first, the very first to come back but, Atkins hoped, not unique. It was difficult in those first weeks to calculate what the chances were of there being others. As things transpired, of the women, there would be only three others. There would be more men, but then there had been more men in the first place; and Atkins only felt personally responsible for the women. Her girls. Forty dispatched, twenty-six returned safe and sound, one way or another; fourteen arrested and missing. Until this moment. Doing the mathematics meant you could push the emotions aside; she'd long ago learned to suppress emotion because by denying it the remainder of you might survive more or less intact.

The two women met like formal acquaintances, Atkins holding out a hand almost as though to ward off any closer and more intimate gesture. If you were trying to guess you'd have suggested a woman greeting a prospective employee, a maid perhaps, come from the country. Or perhaps a social worker meeting a patient recently released from a convalescent home. Even the words exchanged had a distant formality about them:

'Marian, how good to see you.'

‘Miss Atkins. I wondered who would come, whether I would even recognise whoever it was.’

‘Have you had a good flight?’

‘I slept a bit. I’ve grown used to sleeping in difficult conditions.’

Atkins watched her carefully. The younger woman’s skin seemed stretched over her facial bones, giving her complexion a strangely luminous sheen. There was a darkness around the eyes, a sculpted hollowness to her cheeks. Atkins was reminded of a painter whose work she had seen in Paris before the war, a Norwegian called Munch.

‘Shall I take your suitcase, ma’am?’ the corporal asked.

Marian held the case to her as though if she released it she might never see it again. ‘No. No, I’ll keep it.’

‘Your clothes . . .’ said Miss Atkins.

‘The Red Cross gave me some. I didn’t really have much when they found me.’

‘No, of course not.’

‘The shoes don’t really fit.’

‘No, they don’t, do they? We’ll soon put that right.’ But what else would there be to put right? Atkins wondered.

The corporal held the car door open for them. ‘Scuse my asking, ma’am. But have you come from Germany?’

‘Of course she’s come from Germany,’ Atkins snapped. ‘The aeroplane came from Germany; Miss Sutro must have come from Germany.’

He looked from one to the other. He was young, barely out of school, and with a youthful insouciance that would get him into trouble in the service but maybe would be an advantage once he was back in civilian life; whenever that might be. ‘Have you come from one of the camps?’

Atkins’s face compressed with anger at his question. Marian looked back at him with an expression that was devoid of any real feeling. ‘Yes, I have.’

He nodded. ‘Welcome back, ma’am,’ he said.

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The inside of the car smelled of cigarettes and old leather. It reminded Marian of something. There were other memories of other cars but she struggled desperately to find this particular one, groping back to a world that seemed to belong to someone else – a time before the war when there was a young girl called Marian Sutro with the smell of jasmine and sandalwood in her nose, a fragrance that came from the first bottle of scent she ever owned. And then that smell of tobacco and leather, which was the smell of the Delage in which her family had toured the north of Italy. Remembering brought with it a little burst of further recollection: she had wanted to stay in Geneva because Clément was there, but of course she couldn't tell them that. So she and her parents piled into the car and set off for a two-week tour round the Italian lakes that was rendered miserable by her sulking. 'What on earth is the matter with the girl?' her father asked at frequent intervals.

'Women's problems,' her mother replied.

Two years later it was the same car that got them across France to Bordeaux and away on the last passenger ship out to England.

Homecoming

‘Back to London, ma’am?’ the driver asked.

‘Oxford,’ Miss Atkins said. ‘We’re going to Oxford.’ She turned to Marian. ‘Is that all right? We thought you’d want that.’

She shrugged. Where else might she go? Wherever she was sent, really. Choice hadn’t featured much in her life recently. ‘Yes, yes, I suppose I do.’

‘That’s fine, then.’

The car made its way through the regimented lanes of the Air Force station. There were rows of huts that awoke another memory, a more recent one, one she was already trying to bury like someone interring a body during the night – the camp. Rows and rows of huts under a leaden north German sky. A world of grey. As they turned onto the main road Atkins produced a cigarette case and they lit up, huddling over Atkins’s gold lighter as though sharing a secret. Marian drew smoke in greedily and coughed at the shock. In contrast to her own eagerness there was something of a controlled ritual about Atkins’s smoking. She tapped the cigarette, then wedged it carefully between her fingers before raising it to her lips like a communicant taking the host. Her fingers were stained with nicotine.

Marian pointed. ‘Could I . . . ?’

Atkins frowned. ‘Could you what? Oh, the cigarettes. Of course.’ She handed over the packet and watched while Marian

hid it away in the pocket of her coat. ‘Your cough . . .’ she said. ‘I assume you were seen by a doctor.’

‘Doctors. More than one. American. British. Even a Swedish one from the Red Cross. The Red Cross deloused and vaccinated us. Typhus, typhoid, everything they could think of.’

‘That’s good, then. But we’ll have you see one of ours.’

There was a silence. There were so many things that might be said but somehow none of them seemed appropriate. ‘Buck sends his best wishes,’ Atkins offered, as though it was a birthday celebration or something.

‘Buck?’

‘Colonel Buckmaster.’

‘Oh, of course.’ Marian tried to picture the man and failed. A smile was all that remained in her memory, an oleaginous smile like the Cheshire Cat’s.

‘Where were you held?’ Atkins asked. ‘By the Germans, I mean.’ The question was almost casual, as though she was asking about a minor inconvenience, a mere delay in travel plans.

‘A place called Ravensbrück.’

The woman nodded, but clearly the name meant nothing to her. ‘And you escaped?’

‘I was on a work commando at the Siemens factory. One day they took us westwards. I think they were afraid that the Russians were coming.’ She shrugged and looked out of the window. The outer suburbs of London – rows of semi-detached houses – gave way to fields and farms. Low hills and the occasional spinney. A small, delicate landscape.

‘How did you get away?’

Marian thought about the matter. The question implied that escape was something willed, planned, decided. But nothing was planned and every moment was a moment in which you might die; that moment of escape as much as any other. She sucked in smoke and coughed again. ‘We were being marched along this road . . .’ Not *this* road running through the Chiltern Hills, but

another road crossing cold flats, rimed with ice and brushed over with snow. Not a decorative little wood on one side but a dark forest straddling the way ahead. 'There was an aircraft. American, British, I don't know. Two engines, I remember it had two engines. It came down low and fired at us. And in the chaos we escaped. Three of us. Others . . .' Others were killed. Others died. Others vanished from her own little world, which now became that of the forests, a place where creatures hid and foraged, and died or survived according to laws that were impossible to determine. The laws of chance or nature or something. 'We spent some days in the woods and then hitched a lift on a Red Cross lorry. They took us to the Americans.'

'Do you know anything about any of our other girls?'

'Yvonne.'

'Baseden?'

'Rudellat. Yvonne Rudellat. She was there in the camp. She wasn't in my block but I saw her from time to time. She was using another name.'

'Another name?' Atkins had taken a notebook from her respirator bag.

'Jacqueline . . .'

'That was her field name.'

'But she called herself Jacqueline. I don't remember the surname. Galtier, something like that. Gaudier, perhaps. But she left the camp earlier, I think it was in February. I don't know where they went. People said some kind of convalescent camp. That was the rumour. We envied them.'

Atkins wrote: *Jacqueline Galtier? Gaudier? February.* 'Any others?'

'I heard stories. They said there was someone held in solitary, in the bunker. That was the rumour. A British parachutist, people said. Winston Churchill's daughter was one of the stories. Odille? I don't remember exactly.'

'Odette? She was arrested with Peter Churchill. Perhaps it was her.'

‘Perhaps.’

‘Anyone else?’

If she stares out of the window perhaps the questions will stop. There have been so many questions. The American intelligence officer asked her questions, dozens of questions that referred to a time that seemed so distant as to belong to another person in a different world. She had wanted those questions to stop but they kept on mercilessly:

‘How did you get to France?’

‘I jumped.’

‘Jumped?’

‘Parachute. I parachuted.’

‘When was this?’

When was it? Time was dilated, the whole of her previous life compressed into a few moments, the last year in the camp stretching out into decades. ‘I don’t recall. October, I think. The October moon. Look it up in your calendar.’

‘Last year?’

Was it last year? Days, months stumbled through her brain, the units of misery, the texture of her existence, a medium she struggled through, like wading waist deep through icy water. ‘The year before. Nineteen forty-three.’

‘You parachuted into France in the *fall of forty-three*?’ There was incredulity in his tone. ‘Where was this exactly?’

‘The south-west. North of Toulouse. I forget the name of the place . . .’

‘And who sent you?’

‘I can’t tell you that.’

‘Why not?’

‘Because it’s secret. If you contact British intelligence they’ll confirm my story. Please, do that. Please. I beg you.’

‘And then you were arrested. Where was that?’

‘In Paris. Near Paris, not *in* Paris. At a railway station.’

‘Name?’

She shook her head. ‘I forget. If you show me a map, maybe then . . .’

But he hadn’t fetched a map. Instead he’d sent her to the place they were holding dozens of women, a whole congeries of women, women weeping and complaining, women arguing and shouting, women picking lice from each other’s hair, women sitting huddled in corners waiting as they had waited for so long. ‘I shouldn’t be here,’ she complained to one of the guards. ‘I’m a British intelligence agent. I should be sent to the nearest British headquarters.’

The guard had looked at her with pity, as though she was mad.

‘No one else,’ she told Atkins. ‘At least, I don’t think so. There were thousands in the camp. Tens of thousands, maybe hundreds, I don’t know . . . I don’t know anything very much . . .’

‘Perhaps later, when you’re rested.’

Rested. It seemed so unreal, the idea of rest. When your life had been either sleep or waking, the one annihilation, the other a kind of hell, rest seemed a state of unimaginable delight. Hell or Hades? Hades was cold, wasn’t it? Her father knew that kind of thing. Hades, cold; Hell, hot. So both those places, Hell and Hades. And sleep was heaven.

They drove on towards Oxford, the conversation desultory, as though the two of them were vague acquaintances who knew little about each other; or relatives who knew too much. There were questions she should ask – what happened to Benoît? What happened to her whole circuit? And Yvette, what happened to her? – but somehow she couldn’t formulate them into words. They lay there in her mind, ghosts of questions, mere phantasms skulking around her brain.

Where was she going?

She had to keep reminding herself – she was going home, wherever that was.

They passed a sign saying Stokenchurch and she wondered what a stoken church might be. There would be some arcane

meaning. All place names meant something. Even Ravensbrück must mean something. Rabensbrück, maybe: the bridge of ravens, across which ravens walk into hell. There were crows picking at the fields, crows or rooks. Once she knew the difference. Her father had explained. Rooks were more social animals, he told her. They had bare faces which made it better for them to root around in rotting corpses, which was what they did, just like people in the camp. Carrion feeders. Ravens as well.

‘Anyway,’ Miss Atkins said, ‘at least you are back.’

‘Yes.’ What was the expression? *Back from the dead*. But she didn’t say it because it sounded melodramatic. Instead she said, ‘I wasn’t Marian Sutro, did I explain that? I was Geneviève Marchal. She died of pleurisy and I swapped names. That was how I survived. Someone else dying for me.’

‘Well, now you are Marian Sutro once again.’ As if to confirm this remarkable resurrection, Atkins opened her case again and produced an identity card and two ration books. For the first time she smiled. ‘And you’ve got these to prove it. Don’t worry, they’re genuine.’

It was a joke. She smiled. Cautiously, Marian opened the identity card. The photo looked back at her from the past – a thoughtful face she barely recognised. Almost beautiful. She had almost been beautiful. The realisation was a small shock. ‘I don’t look like this any more.’

‘You will soon enough.’

‘Will I?’ She stared out of the window, through the vague reflection of her present face, and wondered where that girl had gone and what she had been replaced with. ‘So what’ll happen now?’

‘Once you’ve rested we’ll have you up to London to get the medics to check you over and to have a bit of a talk. Eventually, you’ll have to write a report. We’ll want to know exactly what happened. How you were arrested, how you were treated. Where you went, all that kind of thing.’

Marian shook her head at the passing fields. ‘I’d rather forget.’ But instead, insistently, the other memory of the other car is there – a narrow, black car with chevrons on the radiator. A Citroën Traction. The same interior smell of leather and cigarettes but supplemented by sour sweat. And the perfume of the Alsatian woman, who turns round in the front passenger seat to look back at her. ‘You think you’re clever,’ the woman says. ‘But you’ve just been lucky. Up to now.’

‘Where are you taking me?’

The woman doesn’t reply. Her thin smile is like a hairline fracture in bone.

‘Where are you taking me?’

The woman turns back and stares through the windscreen at the road ahead.

‘Where are you taking me?’

No one answers. Marian can taste blood from her split lip. The men crammed in on either side of her shift their backsides on the leather seat. The car crosses the river and threads its way through a town. Orléans, she knows that. The Maid of Orleans. La Pucelle. Jeanne d’Arc.

Slowly, with the inexorable logic of physiology, her bladder fills.

‘I need the lavatory.’

No answer. They are out of the town now, driving on through the flatlands south of Paris, a forest on the left and the road dead straight and empty but for the occasional horse-drawn cart or stuttering *gazogène*. She repeats her demand, insistently, like a child shouting at its mother. ‘I need to have a pee. Do you understand? A piss. Otherwise I’ll just go here in the car.’

It’s the woman who finally relents. ‘Pull over where you can,’ she tells the driver.

The vehicle slows and comes to a halt. They are somewhere in France, somewhere on a long empty road with a line of poplar trees through which the breeze seethes like the sea raking

a shingle shore. Marian holds out her hands. 'You'll have to take the handcuffs off. How am I meant to do anything if my hands are tied?'

'Be careful,' the Alsatian woman warns them. 'She's a dangerous bitch.'

The man on her left unlocks one of the handcuffs and clips it to his own wrist, then pushes her out of the car. The other is already out with his pistol drawn and pointing at her. Any chance of escape has vanished. Manacled to her guard she turns away and uses her free hand to pull her knickers down. The men watch. The woman smokes. Marian squats to let go a stream of yellow piss into the grass and down into the ditch. One of the men, the one who had hit her round the mouth, says something to the other. She only catches some of the words – *eine geile Fotze* – but she can guess the rest, more or less. There is laughter – that particular male kind of laughter, smeared with dirt. She tries not to appear to understand. Her knowledge of German may be an advantage, to be kept secret. Awkwardly she straightens up and pulls up her knickers. They bundle her back into the car and the journey continues.

For a while she sleeps, her head rocking from side to side with the motion of the vehicle, at one point resting on the shoulder of one of the men beside her. She wakes with a start and snatches herself upright.

He smiles. She looks away, past the other man, out of the window. Paris is coming upon them by stealth: houses, villages merging into suburbs, warehouses becoming factories, railway lines converging into shunting yards; and then familiar buildings standing shoulder to shoulder along the boulevards, tall blocks with mansard roofs. There is a glimpse of water as they cross the river, a glimpse of the Bois on one side, and suddenly through the windscreen, down converging parallels of trees, a view of the Arc. She knows where they are, the exact address to which they are going: 84 Avenue Foch. Paris Headquarters of the Sicherheitsdienst, the SD, the intelligence agency of the SS.

She knows the addresses and the organisations – the Geheime Staatspolizei, the Abwehr – their uniforms, their ranks, their characteristics. Hours of lectures at Beaulieu have given her this, the intricate theology of enemy intelligence.

‘My parents. Do they know I’m coming?’

The road passed through woods and breasted an escarpment, winding downwards to the plain below. She’d forgotten the smallness of England, its vulnerability. A small country of which she knew almost nothing.

‘I telephoned them as soon as we had news of your arrival. I’d already written, when we first heard you were safe.’

‘So they’ll be expecting me.’

‘Of course they’ll be expecting you.’

‘And my brother?’

‘I’m sure they’ll have told your brother.’

She thought for a while. ‘It’s going to be more difficult with family,’ she said. ‘With people who know me.’

‘You’ll find your feet soon enough.’

Find your feet. The feet were the most important part of the body, much more important than your brain. Women had scratched each other’s eyes out over a pair of boots. In the evenings they unwrapped their feet and washed them with what little water there might be. Washed each other’s feet, often. Tenderly. With love. Like Christ. Your feet were your life. With your brain you could only think, but if you had your feet you could work and if you could work you might survive.

The journey went on. There were houses now, the outskirts of Oxford, the road dropping down Headington Hill to the river. There was Magdalen Tower from where she had heard the choristers sing on May Morning in the second year of the war, a piece of England that she had barely understood at the time and understood even less now, a place of picture postcards, not a home. Bicyclists besieged them in the High Street and the Cornmarket. St Giles spread open as wide as a Paris boulevard;

and then they were on the Banbury Road and turning into the street that she had last seen in the early autumn of 1943, thinking that she might be away a few months, that she was going on the greatest adventure imaginable, that she would live or die. Instead she had achieved something different: neither death nor life but an existence between the two states, a kind of limbo.

The car slowed, turned into a gravel drive and came to a halt. Marian peered up at red brick and steeply pitched roofs, at a hint of turret, a suggestion of gargoyle, the intimation of an ogee window. She tried to evoke a sense of familiarity from the stew of her memory but the place remained strange to her – her family had only lived here for eighteen months and it had never become home, not in the way the house in Geneva had been home, not imbued with memory so that somehow you were moulded to it and it to you.

‘Here we are,’ said Atkins, as if to remind her.

‘Of course.’

The driver came round and helped her out. She stepped onto the gravel just as the front door opened like some device in a stage set, to disclose her parents, or some simulacrum of her parents artificially aged as though for a theatrical performance, her father quite grey and stooped, her mother small and stout where once, Marian supposed with a sudden rush of understanding, she had been petite and voluptuous.

There was an awkward moment of greeting, the pair shuffling round her, neither knowing which one should embrace their daughter first. And she didn’t know how to respond, how to conduct herself, how to navigate the treacherous waters of familial discourse. Two years had been enough to kill any instinct she may have possessed. ‘Papa,’ she said. ‘*Maman.*’

They fussed around her and made small exclamations of surprise and simulated delight and barely disguised shock – ‘You’re so thin. Frank, *elle est tellement maigre!*’ – and kissed her as though she were made of something fragile and frangible whereas she was, Marian knew, as tough as rope.

‘This is Miss Atkins,’ she said, pulling away.

Atkins smiled. The smile never spread to her eyes. It was a social convention, like shaking hands. ‘I’m glad I can deliver her back to you,’ she told them. ‘She’s been very courageous. We’re very proud of her. And now I have to get back to London, so I’ll leave her in your care for the moment.’ She might have been speaking of an invalid.