

Excerpt from THE CAGED BIRD SINGS

September 27, 1942; Paris, France

Émile Cohen held in his hand a forged travel pass that, for several months, had allowed him to cross between the free zone and occupied France without incident. Always the astute observer, he suspected that his reddish goatee may have helped him get through the security checks as much as the pass. This trip, in addition to copies of *Franc-Tireur*, the underground newspaper in Lyon, he was smuggling two engraved photographic plates to publish in *Résistance*, the Paris version. The photographs, taken from the seat of a city tram, were his best ever, though probably the last for a while, and he was eager to see them in print. But what excited him most about his return to Paris was the possibility of seeing Jeanne d'Arc. While in Lyon, he concluded that he'd fallen in love with her and couldn't wait much longer to let her in on the secret. The train eased into the Paris Gare de Lyon station as he secured the bundle of contraband tightly against his chest.

Émile exited the train, retrieved his bicycle, and started pedaling at a calculated pace along his usual route through the 5th arrondissement on streets less likely to be patrolled by Germans. He hoped the fog and drizzle might provide good cover while inhibiting bored German sentries from doing their jobs.

The cobblestones rattled Émile's fenders and chain as he pedaled up Rue Mouffetard, with its shuttered butcher shops and bakeries. He thought, maybe Jeanne d'Arc will be at the print shop and we can try for a bite of dinner, or better yet, a sip of brandy again at my place, or—well I can hope, can't I? At the top of the hill, where streets converged at Place de la Contrescarpe, the fog thinned, exposing a large black sedan and two German soldiers, machine guns slung over their shoulders, leaning against the car. Émile's breath stopped short: There was no way he could turn his bicycle around without being stopped, and he could not afford to be searched, so he sped up as he had done many times throughout Paris.

"Halt!" he heard from behind. He pedaled faster over the cobblestones, gripping the handlebar with one hand, steadying the package against his chest with the other. "Halt!" He was almost out of their range, meters from safety, when he swerved right to avoid the raised edge of a manhole cover. In that split second, his front wheel slipped on wet leaves and jolted left, flipping him forward with such force he had no time to break the fall and his head hit the cobblestones with a thump.

When he came to, the two Germans were looking over newspapers they had pulled from under his jacket. He lay there straddling his *vélo*, excruciating pain in his head and ankle. He sensed the warmth of blood on his neck. This is the end, he thought. But within seconds, with the acute realization that "the end" meant he would soon be standing on the wrong side of a firing squad, he knew he had only two options: to flee or to die. With that, a sudden rush of adrenaline enlisted every nerve and muscle in his body and gave him a surge of surprising strength, sharpened his sensory perception, and eliminated all pain. He waited until he saw the soldiers become distracted by some onlookers and then made his move. He picked up the bike, jumped onto the seat, and began pedaling down the hill, cranking the pedals as fast as he possibly could—to flee or to die.

The younger German shouted, "Halt! Halt!" He laid Émile's contraband down on the street, shoved the small crowd to the side, and rotated his machine gun into position.

Émile raced at top speed, high on adrenaline, knowing that the probability that he'd be dead soon was close to certain, but also knowing that he was euphoric in love. His mind was in crystalline focus and his body free of pain, more hyperalert than he had ever been in his life. But then it happened.

At half a block, a short burst of gunshots filled the narrow street. Bullets pierced the headlight and front grille of a parked car. Glass shattered as he sped past. His heart raced, but he wasn't hit and pedaled faster. After a second burst, a searing heat in his right chest took his breath away and he felt himself losing control. No longer able to pedal, he floated along on a pillow of rushing noise, unable to take a breath, cobblestones passing below in slow motion. His vision narrowed down to three images—his lover, Jeanne d'Arc; his brother, Benjamin; and his father—all looking up at him with great expectations, expectations he had every intention of meeting. Just when he felt confident that he would survive, his bicycle careened off into the brick siding of a building, sending the vélo, with him on it, crashing onto the street in a crumpled heap.