



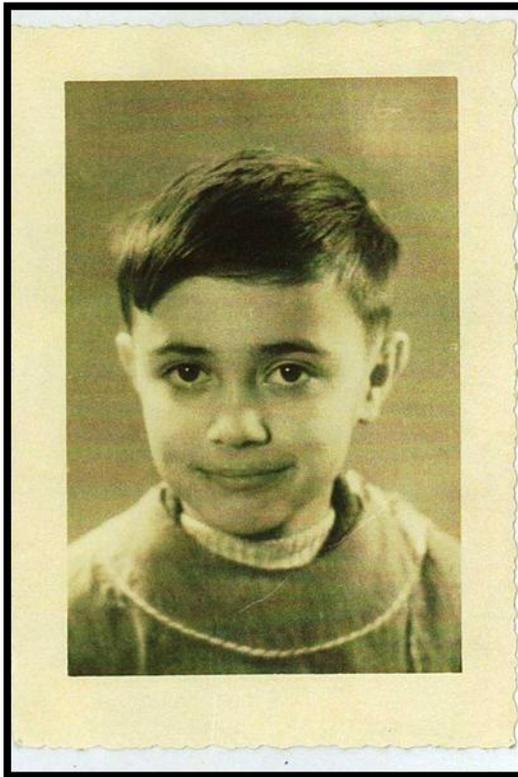
The Boy and his Shield

*Mother, you made him small, it was you who started him;
in your sight he was new, over his new eyes you arched
the friendly world and warded off the world that was alien ...*

*Ah, where are the years when you shielded him just by
placing
your slender form between him and the surging abyss?*

*How much you hid from him then.
The room that filled with suspicion
at night: you made it harmless; and out of the refuge of your
heart
you mixed a more human space in with his night-space.*

- Rainier Marie Rilke, From *Ahead of All Parting*



René Psarolis was happily wrapped in his own insulated world. He was seven years old in the summer of 1944, busy trailing behind his big brother Henri and his pals, walking hand-in-hand with his Papa, and blooming under the nourishing care of his Maman, who cleared a path for light in the darkness of the German occupation.

René's Maman had very dark hair and eyes, with a bold, level brow identical to the one he saw in the mirror each morning. Her smile was solid and steady, and created two creases that made a perfect triangle from her mouth to her nose. When she smiled at him it was utterly impossible for René to stay miserable, mad or afraid.

The mother of a seven-year-old boy instinctively knows the precise dose of the poisonous evil of the outside world that her boy can successfully integrate into his psyche without it spilling into his soul. She cannot prevent his exposure to violence or wickedness, especially if his country is trapped in a brutal occupation or has suffered the ravages of war, but according to his temperament, she runs the worst atrocities through a filter of sketchy details, vague explanations and sudden distractions so that her boy receives life's shocks in smaller, less lethal doses.

If a mother is vigilant in this way, the torture of innocent people, cold-blooded murder, and the dangerous possibility of becoming a target himself remain hazy ideas that hover beyond her son's radius. But like the sharp, shiny tip of a pin approaching a balloon, reality intrudes on the imagination of a boy this age gradually, until all at once it bursts in. Wise is the mother who knows that, though she shields her son, she has no real control over when this moment occurs.

René was born between the two world wars. When he was three years old, Germans took over Paris. The occupation meant fewer toys; candies and sweets disappeared, but he didn't miss them. He spent the next few years in the warm embrace of his family and did not feel deprived in spite of increasing scarcity.

The Psarolis family of four lived on the second floor of a cream-colored apartment building on rue de la Chapelle, facing the bulky church of St. Denis-Jeanne d'Arc. René's jolly Uncle Basile and his wife lived on the sixth floor. The stone façade on the entrance to the building was slightly curved at the top, and in the middle was a man's face with a curly-carved beard over full cheeks, and stern eyebrows. The face appeared to be looking down upon all those who entered with a fierce but protective gaze, with iron balconies rising above in loops and swirls.



One day, René noticed that more American bombers were flying overhead, and Papa pointed at them.

"See son," he said, "those are Americans. They are our friends. We will soon be free."

René didn't quite know what the word "free" meant, but he was lifted by the surge of something unrecognizable in his father's voice.

More frequent wails of the air-raid siren meant trooping down the stairs, across the courtyard to shuffle into the shelter and huddle with the neighbors, who whispered about the Americans landing in Sicily, fighting over in Italy, and bombing the suburbs here to knock out the Jerries' war machinery. That same odd lilt was in their voices that he had heard in Papa's, but René hadn't enough experience of this to recognize it as hope.

Soon the sirens came so often that sometimes the family didn't bother trudging down to the shelter.

The Third Air Division of the United States Air Force continued hitting heavily. One evening just before curfew, René and Henri were walking home on rue de la Chapelle and looked up to see an aircraft being shot down about ten miles away. Through the darkness, the bright torch plunged to earth, and an explosion shook the ground. They could see the fiery orange glow of flames darting up into the sky, but it was way in the distance, beyond the buildings in their neighborhood.

The next day, rumors started spreading that the whole crew had been killed. "Bodies here and there," people said. Two days later, Papa said that the German press was showing pictures of a body they said was the pilot's.

"I heard the body was picked up by a French family," said Papa, proudly. "They covered his face, out of respect for the guy."

After that, during that particular hour of evening as he and Henri headed home from their afternoon play, René's heartbeat would quicken and he would pump his legs faster and hear his footsteps slap the sidewalk. Even though that flaming airplane had landed far away, he began to envision one spiraling down out of the sky and smashing Henri and him, or Papa on his way home from work, or Maman as she went out to find food. But when they walked under the entrance to their building, the carved face looked down as if to say, "You're safe here," and they scrambled up the stairs. Once home, he forgot his fears—the impact upon the boy was muted by the routine of his family, kept in rhythm, as such routines are, by his mother.



Winter meant bitter cold and less and less food.

René's Maman had to queue for hours just to get a drop of milk, if she was lucky. Sometimes she'd spend half the day inching toward a shop, reach the door, and there would be nothing left. Shutters would slam down with a tired voice saying, "Come back tomorrow."

All there was to eat was turnips. Henri would reach over and pinch René's nose, he'd open his mouth, and Maman would put a spoonful in.

"One day," she would murmur, "you'll have something sweeter."

There were no phones, no radios, no real news, for the newspapers were all run by Germans and collaborators. If a camera was discovered, it would be stomped upon and smashed. René had never actually seen a German up close, only in the backs of trucks trolling by, but they had continued to create a long list of things René and Henri were absolutely *not* allowed to do when out in the neighborhood—pretending to be soldiers, or waving airplane-hands and wailing engine-sounds at the top of their lungs were *Verboten*—still, whispering, chasing each other, and jostling games were enough to keep their boy-spirits up.

Such is the way of a seven-year-old boy. He exists in the now. Whatever didn't make sense yesterday is gone; whatever will happen tomorrow is hazy. Life is all about the action of his body, the way he can make things move through space, and his place in the hierarchy of his pals. In this way, René floated through life with buoyant boyiness.

One day René's Papa did not come home. By evening, Maman was desperate. She could not have gone into the local police station and said to the gendarmes, 'My husband has disappeared, help me find him'. She knew they would have just laughed in her face and told her to go home and maybe someday she'd find out what had happened to him.

An icy hand of fear gripped René's throat every time he thought of Papa. At night it squeezed tighter and his eyes were open so wide that he could feel cool air swirling around their edges. But Maman sat on the edge of his bed for a longer time than usual, so he slept.

Three days and nights passed with no sign of Papa. On the afternoon of the fourth day, someone knocked on the door and Maman signaled for the boys to stay back. She opened the door only a bit, but through the crack they recognized a friend of Papa's.

"I've no one to keep the boys after curfew; I'm bringing them," Maman said in a low voice which the boys strained to hear. After he left, she said nothing, just continued washing socks with the soap that turned her hands red. After dark, Maman, Henri and René walked through the silent, deserted streets to the friend's house and there was Papa.

The four of them embraced as relief flooded through each of them in different waves. René's throat opened and his breath flowed in and out freely.

"Did you see anything, any people looking in the alley? Nobody, no stranger?" René had never heard his Papa's voice tremble like this.

Maman assured him there was nothing unusual, and reminded him that the concierge would chase anybody away who didn't belong.

After a few days, Papa returned home but didn't go out.

After the boys were asleep each night, he told his wife what had happened. He had been grabbed off the street by two Germans who forced him into a wagon packed with men, a few he recognized. They were headed toward Gare de l'Ouest, where Papa knew soldiers were putting able-bodied men on goods trains; they needed manpower to work in Germany as forced labor. When the wagon slowed, Papa and two other men opened up the door and jumped out. They knew the Germans would be searching for them, so they had to lie low for a few days, thus it was three or four days later that he reached the friend's house, but of course he couldn't come home too soon. The Germans had eyes everywhere, they would have been waiting for him. The French people did not ask questions anymore. If they did, they would be beaten and taken away.

For a while, whenever friends came to visit, the adults would speak in whispers. René's ears perked up as he tried to make sense of the whole thing, but Maman took care to distract him by a task or a treat. His mood bounced back up as a cork does after being submerged.

One night, René was jolted awake by his father's voice.

"Get up, this time we have to go to the shelter," Papa said loudly. The air raid sounded its usual shrill, cascading wail through the window, but there was additional booming and it sounded as if it were raining hard. The sky outside glowed red into the room.

The intensity of the noise was horrific.

The four of them headed downstairs to cross the courtyard. At the bottom step, they stopped short.

Debris was falling onto the stone floor of the courtyard in a deafening downpour. The air was an eerie crimson and it was raining sharp metal pieces that flashed and crashed to the ground.

René could not even see to the other side of the courtyard. It was like the sky had broken and all of it was being dumped on this square of stone right in front of their faces. On their own square of stone.

For children, at times the whole world seems a chaos of showering events, and they all sense that the day will come when they must step into it and enter a time when nothing will shield them from sharp edged shrapnel.

The family sat down on the steps, Henri and René in front of their parents. René began shivering, although he was not cold. He smelled a rush of Maman's orangey scent and felt something soft laid on his shoulders and smoothed across his back. It was her sweater. He leaned back against her legs, keeping himself inside her safeness. He soon stopped shaking.

"I know this is the worst night, but things will be all right," she whispered.



