

# Everything Will Be Fine, Forever

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**p 90-95**

## 13

Home never felt the way it used to.

I'd always thought home was mainly about a house. After all, the words started and ended with the same letters.

Now I knew that wasn't the case. Or not entirely. Home was also the place where your house was located. The houses around it, the street and the market square up the road. But everything looked different now: it was mainly dust and debris. Everything was dirty and cleaning seemed pointless. Dust blew around and crept back wherever it wanted, into the tiniest nooks and crannies. It went upstairs and slid under our bedroom doors. Our hair became rough and dry, like a horse's mane.

But home was about people too. About family, the neighbours. Many of the neighbours' houses were gone. Simply gone. All that was left was a mountain of stones. The houses that *were* still standing looked lonely and scared. Precisely how I felt sometimes. There were fewer and fewer people in our city. Those still there acted differently than they would otherwise. And when people acted differently, home became a bit less homely. Because many people were grieving for their sons, brothers or fathers who now had to fight. Or for family killed by a bomb or grenade.

From time to time my father was angry. Particularly when it came to the mayor, who had fled the city.

'A father of the citizens, they call the mayor! It would be lovely if I were to leave my family in the lurch the way he did with the city. A father worthy of the name stays. Always.'

'A mother too,' said my mother.

'Of course,' said my father. 'Although I have to point out, we don't have a mother of the citizens.'

'Perhaps she wouldn't have run away,' my mother said. 'Mothers stay.'

If someone else had told me about war, I would have thought I would be scared all the time. But when it came to it, I wasn't. We were scared, sometimes. But most of the time we got on with life. Not just as before, but we lived and did things we would have done anyway. We ate, even if it was less than it would have been. We slept and had nightmares, from time to time. We went to school,

although the class had grown much too big for our little group. We laughed. And we weren't even pretending. We played, Clara too. Especially Clara. She found lead pellets from grenades in the street. She stuffed them all into her little bag with the bullets. Jules helped her. 'All marbles,' he said in satisfaction.

There was one thing that was sometimes annoying when playing: I missed Johanna. I didn't know where she was. All I knew was that she had fled with her family.

Every day we heard about new deaths. Sometimes we knew them a bit, sometimes not at all. But we always prayed for the dead and their family. Deep inside of course we were relieved that we were still alive. When we heard a violin, playing the same high-pitched note louder and louder, we held our breath. Then it was a matter of waiting for an explosion. When we could tell the explosion wasn't meant for us, we were able to breathe again. Sometimes we would lie on our tummies with our heads at the foot of the bed and watch the flashes in the black sky. Then I would pull Clara close to me, and point to heaven. We saw great arches of light. Then Clara would sigh and say the fireworks were so beautiful.

One night I was fed up with all the booming. It seemed as if we would never be allowed to sleep normally again. I threw off the covers, went to stand at the window and glared angrily at nothing in particular.

'Stupid cannons.'

'Stupid grenades,' said Rosa, coming to stand next to me.

'Stupid, stupid war!' said Clara, with a tremble of rage in her voice.

'That's right, Clara,' I said, 'stupid, stupid war.'

Then we looked for ways to block our ears. Pieces of cloth, crayons, cotton wool. But nothing helped. So I lay down on my bed with my fingers in my ears. Until my hands went to sleep, but not me.

One late autumn day the banging and rumbling outside grew louder than ever. The ground shook. When we stood outside our house we saw fire and smoke rising over the rooftops. My mother put her hands over her mouth and began to cry. My father stared, with large, dark eyes and shook his head.

'Bastards,' whispered Oscar, his voice quivering in his throat. Then, loud and hoarse: 'Bastards!'

The way they all looked, it frightened me. More than the fire itself. If they thought it was so serious, it must be really serious. De Hallen and Saint Martin's Church were on fire. Our heart, my father called it. They'd touched the heart of the city.

I was certain that now we really would flee. Far away, to France. But my father wouldn't give way. He repeated what he had once heard from that soldier: nothing was worse than running away. So we stayed.

Christmas came and we went together to early mass. As we stood there, so close to one another, because it was cold and because we wanted to be close, the priest called a French soldier forward. He sang, that soldier. We'd never heard a voice like his before. I grew warm and felt a shiver run down my spine. When he was finished, everyone remained still. Here and there noses were blown.

'That's how an angel must sound,' my mother whispered, without looking at anyone. She wiped her nose with a handkerchief. My father said nothing and simply watched. But I saw his chin trembling and his eyes wide, because he didn't want to let the tears roll.

## 22

Life became almost normal, there in the Chartreuse. And normal was what we wanted most in the entire world.

We went to school, as we had before. Except it was a nun who taught the lessons, not the master.

I wondered how many nuns there could be. Since the war began they were everywhere. With their bulging cheeks, and hands that were sometimes hard and sometimes soft.

'Motherly,' said my father of the soft nuns. They were a bit like a mother. But I disagreed. Of course I disagreed. Because it made me think of my real mother, who was now gone for ever and ever. Whenever I felt like I was going to cry, I began to whistle. It helped that I was no good at it, because that meant I had to practise really hard and keep on whistling. It was so difficult I couldn't think about anything else. So I forgot why I'd actually started whistling.

My father and Oscar went to work, just as before. As carpenters. Tables, chairs and beds. A new door, a bench, a drying rack. And sometimes a coffin. That was normal too.

Only our family was no longer normal. It had been cut to pieces. Shredded like paper and dispersed between all the buildings. The boys here, the girls there. And there were always other people around.

Two shreds were gone. Taken by the wind, all the way up. To heaven.

One early summer's day I was playing with Johanna in the orchard beside the Chartreuse. We were practising cartwheels, playing leapfrog and looking to see who could stand on her hands the longest without falling. Johanna did the most beautiful cartwheels, but I could stand on my hands for longer. With a cry I fell again. I stayed lying in the grass. A blond head appeared upside down above me.

'I want to play too,' said Clara.

I sat up straight and brushed the tickly grass from my arms.

'Well, can you stand on your hands?' asked Johanna.

'Yes,' said Clara.

She stooped over, bent her knees slightly, and pushed her hands under her feet.

'Pff, oh Clara!' I snorted. Johanna couldn't help laughing either.

Clara stuck her tongue out at us, then lowered herself onto the grass.

'I want to play something else,' she said. She rounded her lips as if she was a little angry.

'We don't,' I said teasingly.

'Yes you do!' she insisted.

'No we don't!'

We went on like that until she pushed her hand over my mouth. A sweaty little hand that smelt sweet and salty at the same time.

'I want to play little heaven,' she said.

I pushed her hand away carefully.

'I don't know that game,' I said.

I was about to stand up again and do another cartwheel, but Clara gripped my hand.

'Yes you do, you told me about it.'

I looked at her. Her eyes were serious and stern. She wasn't going to let me get out of it just like that.

'Heaven, where mama and Rosa are.'

I pulled away, harder than I'd meant to.

'That game doesn't exist,' I said.

I ran away from the lawn, away from Johanna and Clara, all the way inside. Through the corridors to the dormitory. But there were people everywhere. So I went and sat on the toilet and started to whistle.

Clara was adamant.

I could see it in her eyes, which continued to look at me questioningly. In her mouth, which became a flat line. And every time she asked I had an answer ready.

There were too many clouds to play little heaven.

I had sums to do.

It was almost dinner time.

But Clara had answers.

You didn't need to see heaven, because it was in our heads anyway.

Johanna would do my sums for me.

There would be plenty of time to play after dinner.

I so wished she was a bit stupider.

Summer grew older and the sun blazed. The air was almost too heavy and hot to breathe in. But inside the thick cloister walls it was safe and cool.

'Do you know where we can find even more cool?' my father said one day.

We just looked at him, no one said anything.

'By the sea,' he said.

Jules and I cheered simultaneously.

My father had organised it all. We were allowed to borrow a cart and two strong horses, from a farmer who was pleased with the new table my father had made him. And best of all: we were going alone. Just us.

The ride took a long time, but that didn't matter. We had food and drink, hats to keep the sun off, and the speed created a breeze. But the main thing was, we knew with every step the horses took that we were getting closer to the sea.

I could see it in the sky, which was widening, ever wider. Until it hung over the land like a great blue dome. Until it merged into that other blue, the blue of the sea.

'The sea!' shouted Clara.

We jumped from the cart and ran the last stretch to the beach. We laughed and squealed at the tops of our voices. Because we were happy, because we had burnt our feet on the sand. We ran even faster, until we splashed into the water. Jules threw himself in clothes and all.

'Jules!' I shouted.

'Alice!' he shouted back.

Then I followed his example. As did Clara. And Oscar. And in the end my father too.

We stayed until the heat died down, and the sun coloured the sky reddish-orange.

The sand was now lovely and warm.

Clara nestled up against me.

'Now,' she said. I knew precisely what she meant.

'They see us, and we see them,' I said.

'Do they see when I wave?' Clara asked.

'Of course.'

Clara waved. She pointed to the horizon.

'Heaven's on the sea. Then they can come down, can't they? And swim over here, to us?'

'It's too far, they'd drown,' I said.

'Then they'd die again,' said Clara. She frowned.

'We don't want that, do we?'

She shook her head.

‘Would they be talking about us too now?’

‘Probably.’

‘What would they say?’

‘I think they’re happy that we’re happy.’

‘They’d say: look how beautiful the world is!’

I laughed softly, but not really.

‘That’s what you said when we were given the globe. You said, “Look how beautiful the world is, Clara.”’

‘Yes, that’s what I said.’

‘They remember that, and they’re saying it now too.’

‘Who knows?’

‘And we can see how beautiful heaven is.’

‘Yes.’