

Two Pieces of Chocolate



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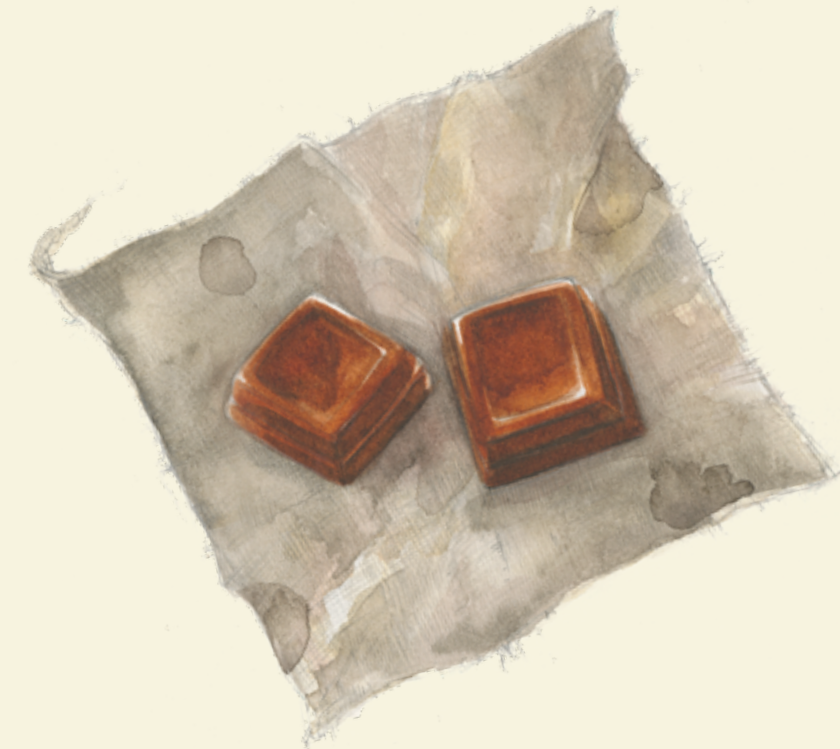
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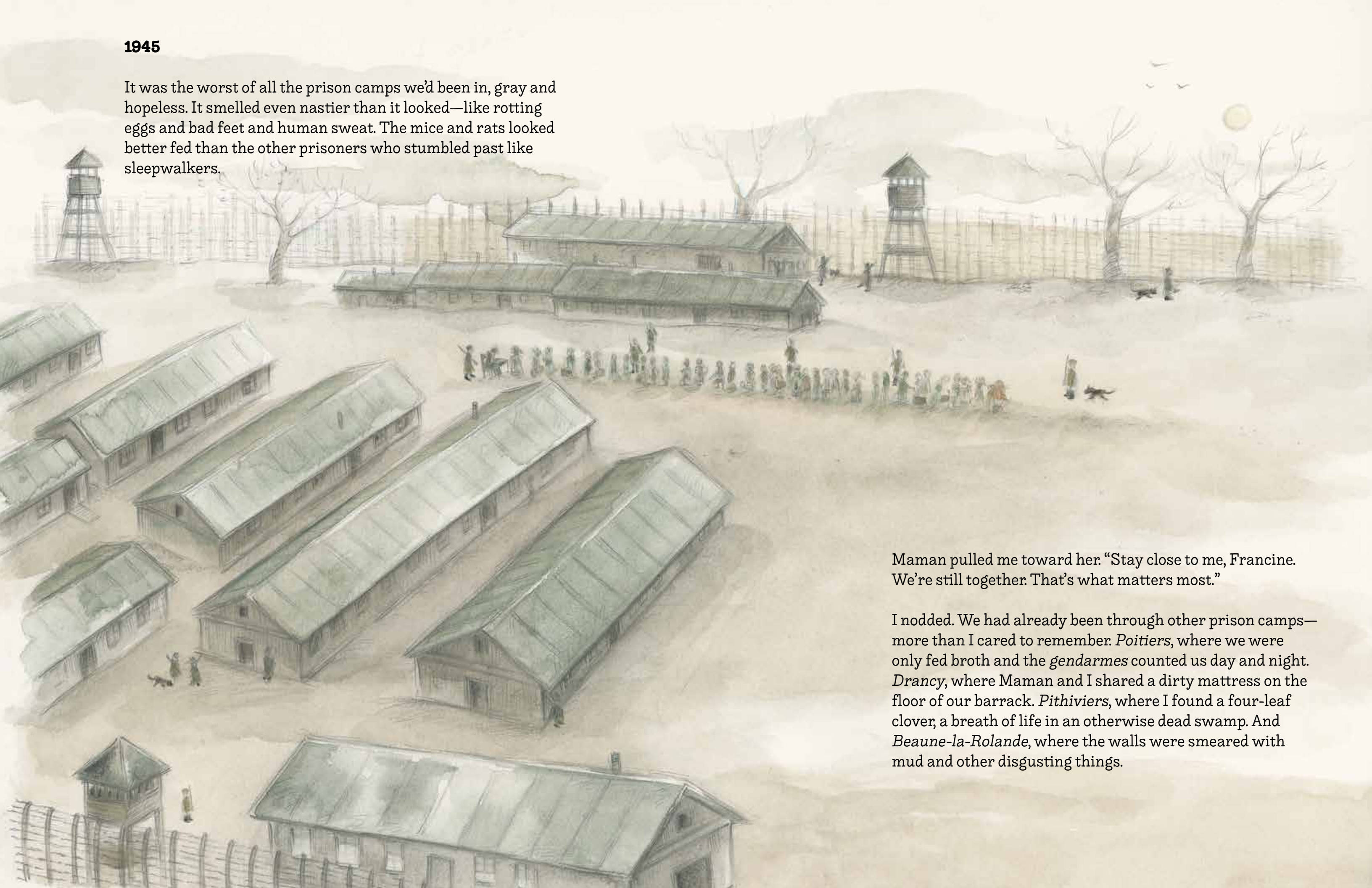


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Second Story Press

1945

It was the worst of all the prison camps we'd been in, gray and hopeless. It smelled even nastier than it looked—like rotting eggs and bad feet and human sweat. The mice and rats looked better fed than the other prisoners who stumbled past like sleepwalkers.



Maman pulled me toward her. “Stay close to me, Francine. We’re still together. That’s what matters most.”

I nodded. We had already been through other prison camps—more than I cared to remember. *Poitiers*, where we were only fed broth and the *gendarmes* counted us day and night. *Drancy*, where Maman and I shared a dirty mattress on the floor of our barrack. *Pithiviers*, where I found a four-leaf clover, a breath of life in an otherwise dead swamp. And *Beaune-la-Rolande*, where the walls were smeared with mud and other disgusting things.

Each camp worse than the one before, and now this German one called *Bergen-Belsen*. I was eight years old when we had first been taken away. Now, I was twelve.

We entered our barrack and quickly claimed a bunk on the top level of the long row of wooden slats and flattened straw. I had learned it was safer on a top bunk—less chance of anyone stealing a precious slice of bread or rummaging through our meager belongings and taking the extra sweater I still had, or the shoes that protected my feet from mud and stones.



Maman looked pale, and I smiled to show her I was still okay. I didn't want her to worry about me.

She already worried so much about Papa, who was a prisoner in some other camp. I missed him more than I missed the life we'd had before that evil Adolf Hitler had taken power and decreed what wasn't allowed for Jews like us. No more school for me, no more work for Papa; there were shops we couldn't enter and angry signs keeping us out of parks and playgrounds and movie theaters. We had to wear a yellow star on every piece of clothing we owned. One look at that star, and everyone knew who we were. Everyone kept away.



Maman pulled me even closer. From the very bottom of the small bag she had managed to bring with her, she pulled a brown paper packet and opened it, one corner at a time, the way I used to unwrap birthday presents. Inside lay two pieces of chocolate. Their sweet smell rose up and took my breath away.

“Where did you get them?” I gasped. We’d had so little to eat. Stale bread, watery soup, a bit of porridge. That was a prison-camp meal. I had not seen or tasted chocolate in years.

Maman shook her head. “It doesn’t matter where they came from. What matters is that I have them. I’ll keep them here for now.” She started to rewrap the chocolate.

“We’re not going to eat them?” My mouth watered at the thought.

“No.”

My shoulders sagged and my stomach twisted. “Maybe just a nibble or two? One small corner...”

Maman’s brows knitted together. “Perhaps I shouldn’t have shown you.”

I wished she hadn’t. How unfair to dangle this treat in front of me only to snatch it away. “Why did you bring the chocolates here if we’re not going to eat them?”

Maman sighed. “I have a plan,” she said. “I’ll keep these chocolates safe in my bag. One day, when I see that you really need them, when you are so sad or weak or have lost all hope, that’s when I’ll give the chocolates to you.”



I stared at the rewrapped packet and thought about snatching it right out of Maman’s hand and popping the chocolates into my mouth, their sweetness flooding to every corner. I could barely keep my hands by my side. But I understood what Maman was saying. One day, I might need the treat more than I needed it today.

I took a deep breath, hunger and longing still battling in my stomach. “Okay. That’s a deal.”

Maman buried the packet back in the bottom of her bag and turned away. “You’re very brave, Francine—and so grown-up. Now, try to get some rest.”

Instead, I glanced around the barrack at the other women prisoners who lay on their bunks, staring blankly into space. Some were older than Maman. None appeared to be as young as I was.

A woman on the next bunk stared back at me. At first, I looked away and ran a shaky hand over my scalp. My blonde hair had been cropped close so that lice would have less of a chance to nest there. *Why is she staring? What does she want with me?*

“No. I’m with my mother.” I pointed at Maman, who had fallen back onto the wooden slats, eyes closed, her chest rising and falling slowly.

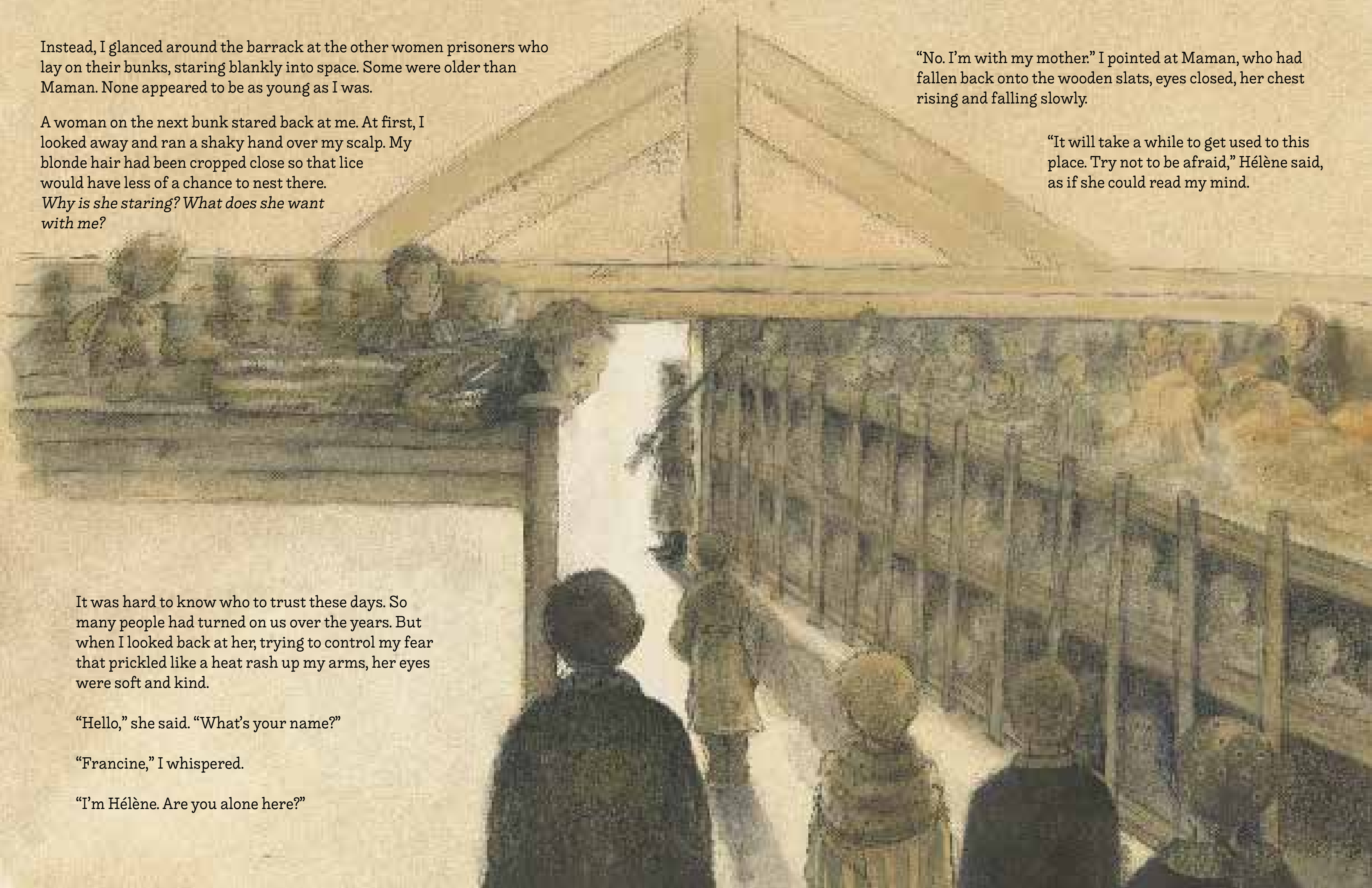
“It will take a while to get used to this place. Try not to be afraid,” H el ene said, as if she could read my mind.

It was hard to know who to trust these days. So many people had turned on us over the years. But when I looked back at her, trying to control my fear that prickled like a heat rash up my arms, her eyes were soft and kind.

“Hello,” she said. “What’s your name?”

“Francine,” I whispered.

“I’m H el ene. Are you alone here?”

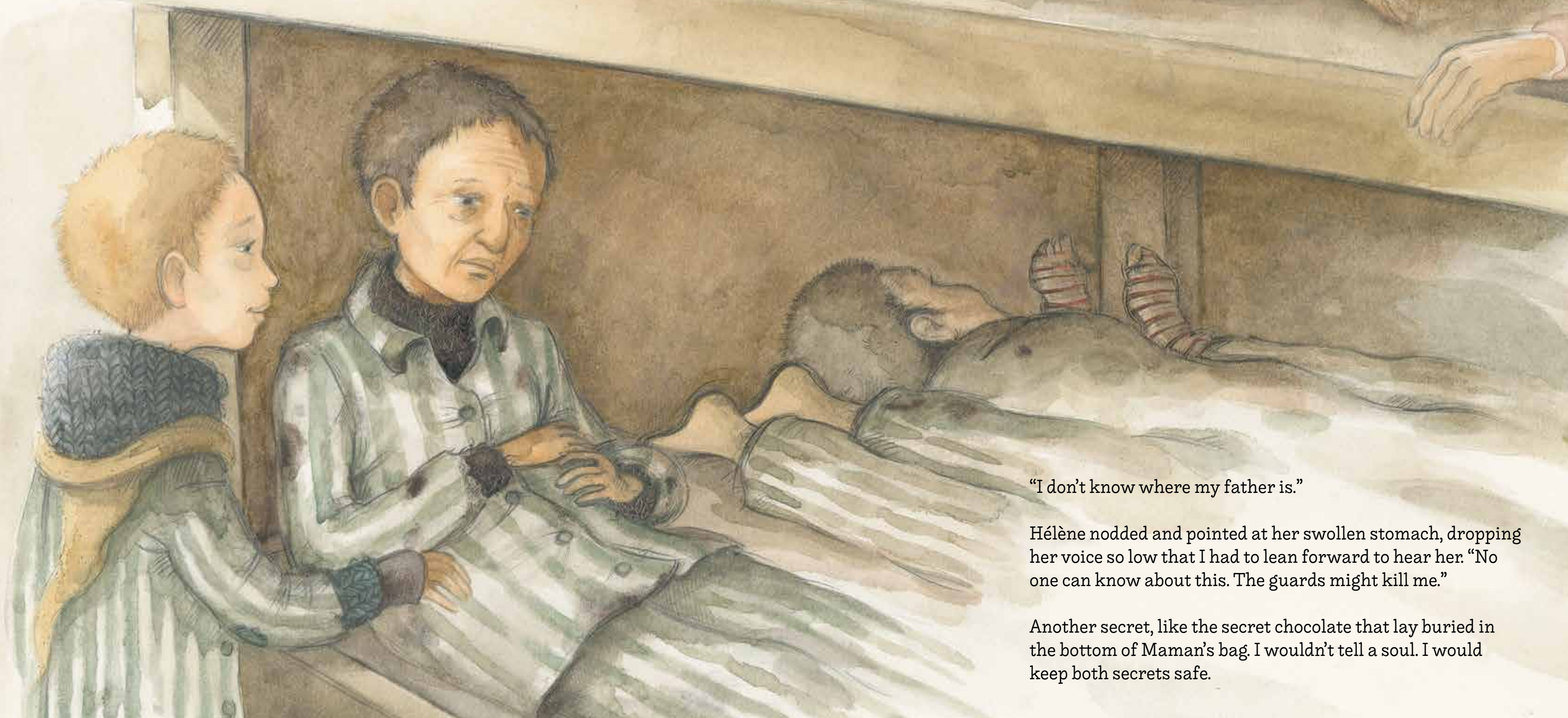


“How long have you been here?” I asked.

“Months now.” H el ene’s cheeks were sunken, and her arms, as thin as tree twigs, were barely strong enough to lift her as she shifted on the wooden slats. I stared at her tummy—it bulged as if she had just eaten a feast. That didn’t make any sense! She caught my stare and quickly wrapped her arms around her waist. “I’m almost ready to give birth.”

A baby! Here in Bergen-Belsen!

“I don’t know where my husband was taken,” she continued.



“I don’t know where my father is.”

H el ene nodded and pointed at her swollen stomach, dropping her voice so low that I had to lean forward to hear her. “No one can know about this. The guards might kill me.”

Another secret, like the secret chocolate that lay buried in the bottom of Maman’s bag. I wouldn’t tell a soul. I would keep both secrets safe.

For the next few weeks, Maman and I tried to adapt to Bergen-Belsen. We spent hours doing backbreaking work—lifting rocks and moving them from one pile to another, sweeping stones and dust from walking paths, or cleaning the latrine, which very nearly made me sick! When we weren't working, we spent hours lined up for a cup of clean water that came from a single faucet in the middle of the prison field. Food was scarce and never enough. When I fell into bed at night, I thought of the chocolates in Maman's bag and wondered if it was time to ask for them. Each night, the answer in my heart was, *Not yet*.



Meanwhile, Hélène was wasting away—almost disappearing. Her arms and legs grew so thin it was difficult for her to walk. Her belly didn't seem to be growing. It was easy to keep her secret about the baby. No one could tell by looking at her in her loose dress. I tried to help Hélène wherever I could, sharing a bit of my water or lifting a heavy boulder from her back in the field, but I wanted to do more. And then I had an idea.





“Maman,” I said one day when we had returned to the barrack, “I need to talk to you about the chocolates.” I had not mentioned them since the day we’d arrived.

“What is it, Francine?” Maman asked, alarmed. “Are you sick?” She reached out to feel my forehead.

“I’m fine, Maman. But I need to do something.” Although I had sworn to keep the secret, I told my mother about Hélène and the baby she was going to have. To my amazement, my mother already knew.

“I guessed. A woman knows these things. I hope Hélène and her child survive.”

I swallowed hard. “About the chocolates... I know you are keeping them for me. But I think that Hélène needs them more. Let me give them to her.”

My mother’s eyes widened. “Are you sure that’s what you want to do, Francine?”

I thought about the two pieces of chocolate and how much I wanted them for myself. I imagined trying to make them last as long as possible as they melted in my mouth and slid down my throat. But I was still strong, and Hélène’s energy was fading along with her will to survive. The chocolates would help her. This was how I could help.

I nodded. “I’m sure.”

When I gave the chocolates to H el ene, she was astonished. She took them from me as if they were fragile glass and slowly lifted a piece to her mouth. Tears glistened in her eyes.

“Thank you,” she whispered.

My heart swelled.





It wasn't long before it was time for H  l  ne's baby to come.

"Keep watch for us!" Maman said, pushing me out the barrack door. "I'll tend to H  l  ne."

As I paced, waiting and worrying, I wondered what I would do if anyone approached. I couldn't keep a guard from pushing past me and barging into the barrack. H  l  ne's cries were loud enough to hear outside the thin wooden walls. And now, the other prisoners inside would know H  l  ne's secret. *Will they keep it?* I wondered.

Thankfully, no guard came by. And when Maman finally opened the barrack door to beckon me inside, I could tell from the determined faces of the women standing behind her that no one was going to betray H  l  ne.



Hélène lay on her bunk holding a tiny bundle in her arms. As I came near, she pulled back a ragged blanket and there lay the baby, hardly bigger than a newly hatched chick, its head as bald as an egg.

“A girl,” said Hélène.

“A miracle,” Maman added, and the women around us murmured in agreement.

“I’m going to call her Yvonne,” Hélène said.

I reached out my hand, and Yvonne wrapped her fingers firmly around mine. “She’s strong,” I said.

“She’ll need to be,” Hélène replied.

Yvonne opened her mouth as if to wail, but no sound came out. “She isn’t crying.” I glanced back at Hélène and Maman. “Is something wrong with her?”

“It’s as if she already knows how to keep herself safe,” said Hélène.

“It’s good if she stays quiet so the guards don’t discover her and...,” Maman stopped short.

“Thank you again for the chocolate,” Hélène said quickly. She rewrapped the baby in her ragged blanket and pulled her close. “You can’t know how much strength it gave me—the sweetest chocolate I ever tasted.”

Every day after I had finished my work detail, I rushed back to the barrack to see Yvonne.

“She’s still not crying,” I said to H el ene days later. “Not even a little bit.”

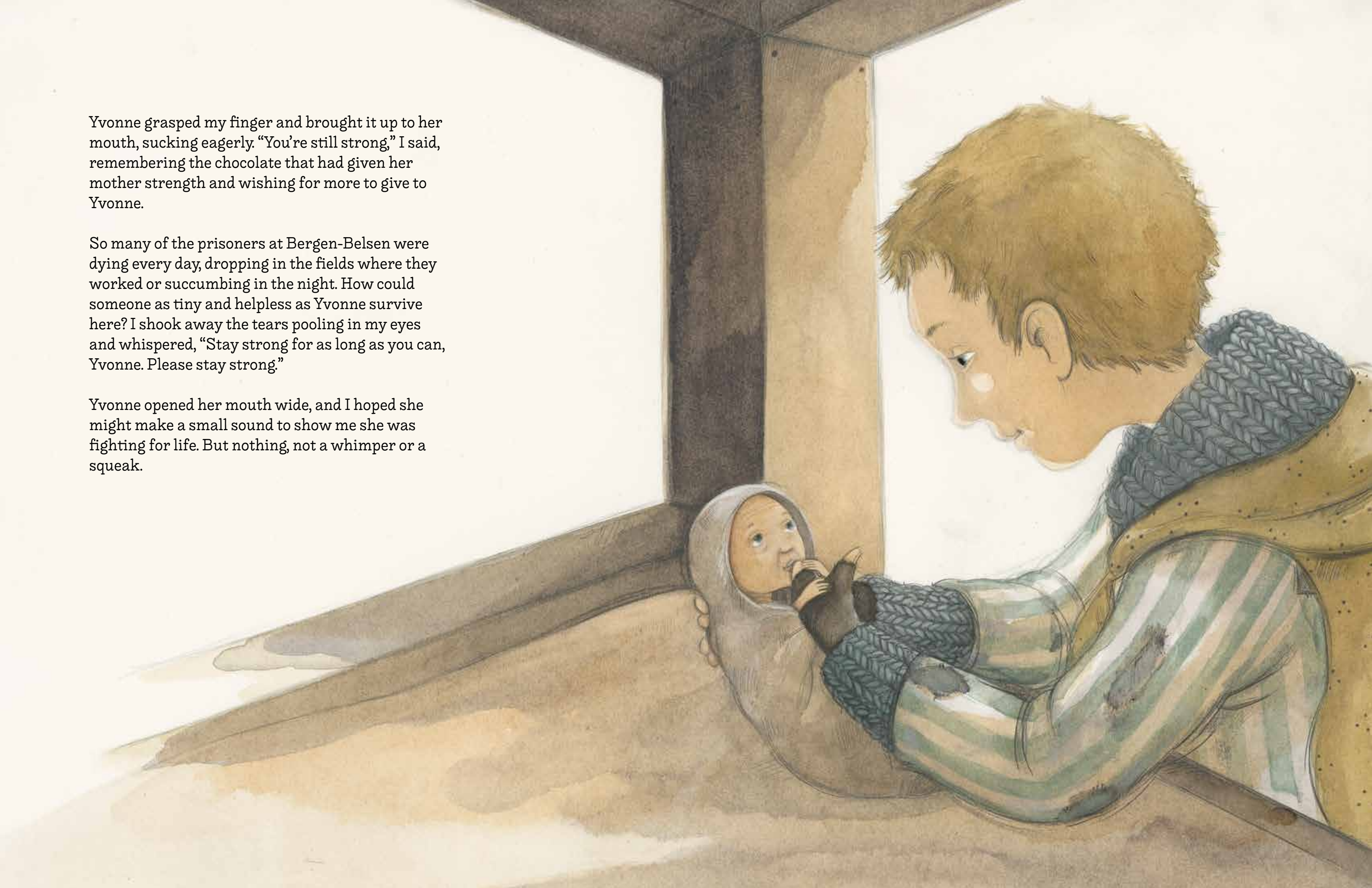


“Perhaps she knows better,” H el ene replied. The baby was so quiet we could leave her asleep on the top bunk in the barrack for hours at a time. H el ene was able to produce a bit of milk, but it wasn’t enough. Maman or I would sneak back from our work whenever we could to spoon some thin, turnip-peel soup into her tiny mouth.

Yvonne grasped my finger and brought it up to her mouth, sucking eagerly. "You're still strong," I said, remembering the chocolate that had given her mother strength and wishing for more to give to Yvonne.

So many of the prisoners at Bergen-Belsen were dying every day, dropping in the fields where they worked or succumbing in the night. How could someone as tiny and helpless as Yvonne survive here? I shook away the tears pooling in my eyes and whispered, "Stay strong for as long as you can, Yvonne. Please stay strong."

Yvonne opened her mouth wide, and I hoped she might make a small sound to show me she was fighting for life. But nothing, not a whimper or a squeak.





“Any day now, Francine,” Maman whispered one night as I held Yvonne and rocked her in my arms. “There are rumors Hitler has disappeared, and his soldiers are running for their lives.”

Hélène looked on from her bunk. “My baby will soon be free. All of us will be free.”

I could hardly imagine freedom after all these years. Would we return to Paris? Could I go back to school? Would we see Papa? It was hard to believe any of it. But I held on to their words as tightly as Yvonne held on to my finger. And the day finally came when everything changed.



The guards disappeared from their posts. The shouting stopped, there were no more orders to line up or work harder. And in the distance, a new group of soldiers came marching through the gates of Bergen-Belsen. They carried British flags and smiled, saying the war was over and we no longer had to be afraid.

I raced back into the barrack and climbed to the top bunk where Yvonne lay wrapped in her ragged blanket. She grabbed my finger and pulled it into her mouth.

“We did it,” I whispered. “We’re still alive and we’re free.”

Yvonne stared back at me. Then she opened her mouth and wailed a long, loud cry. It was a joyful sound. It was triumphant. It was the sound of life.

Many Years Later

Francine and her daughter entered the large meeting room filled with elderly people who had managed to survive the Second World War and the Holocaust. There were other people present as well. Doctors and other professionals had come to talk about how the war had changed so many, and to support aging survivors.

Even now, Francine found it difficult to think of that time, and she rarely let others see the pain she had endured during her long years of imprisonment. Thankfully, the memories had softened over the years. She was still strong and her mind was sharp and clear.

Francine turned to her daughter. "I wish we'd had some kind of help when the war ended. There was so little for us then."

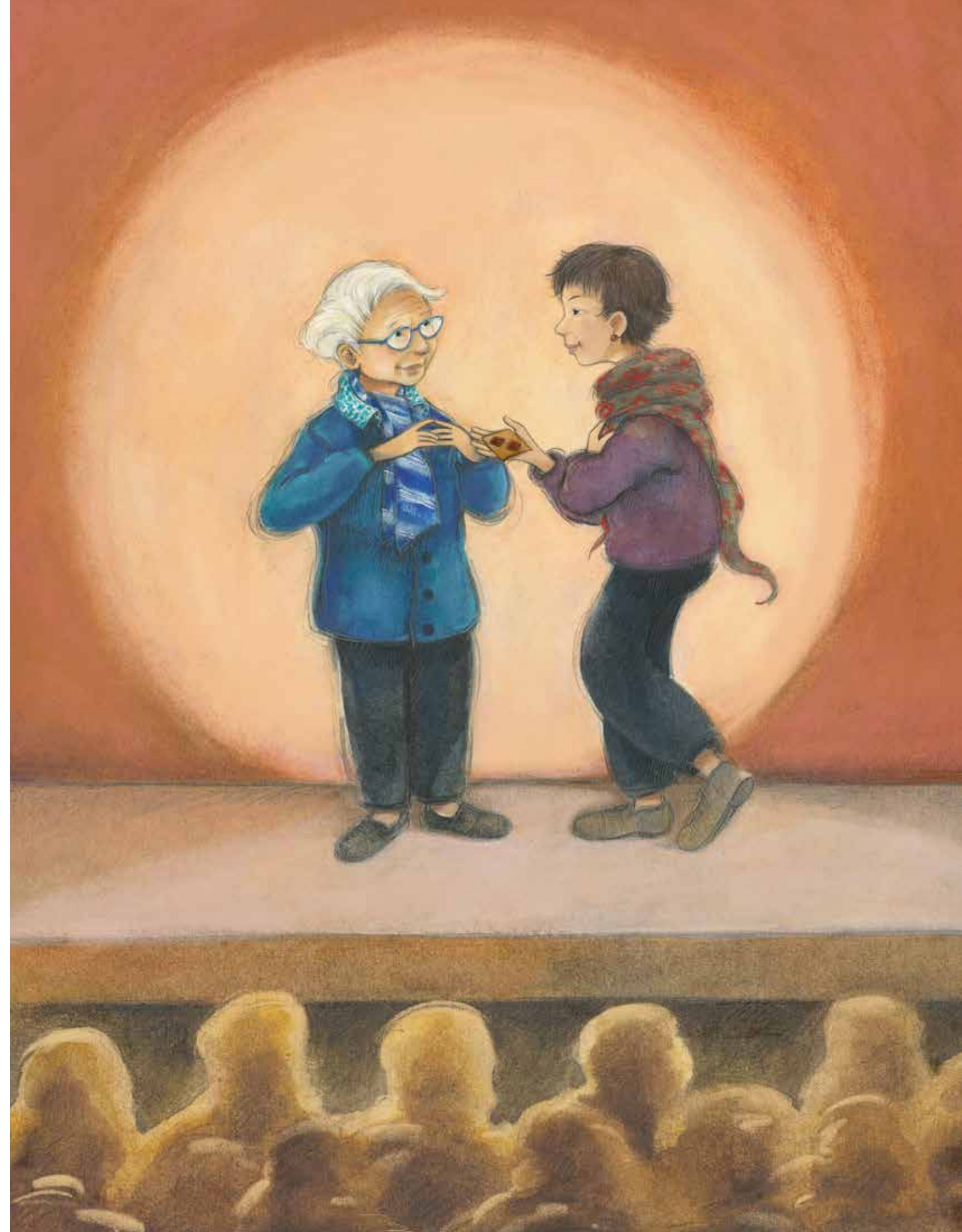
They took their seats as the audience quieted. A woman walked to the stage and stood in front of the microphone.

"Before I begin," she said, "I'd like to ask Francine Christophe to come to the stage." *What's this?* Francine didn't know this woman. She glanced at her daughter, who shrugged.

Cautiously, Francine rose and approached the stage. The woman pulled a small packet from her purse. She slowly unfolded each corner of the packet as carefully as one might unwrap a birthday present. Inside lay two pieces of chocolate.

Francine gasped at the memory of her mother revealing the chocolate to her in Bergen-Belsen. Maman had died years ago, and very few people knew the story of the chocolate. How could this stranger know?

The woman smiled at her. "You helped save my mother's life in Bergen-Belsen. I'm the baby that was born there. My name is Yvonne."



More About Francine Christophe

Francine Christophe was born in Paris, France, in 1933, the same year that Adolf Hitler came into power in Germany. In 1940, Francine's father, a lieutenant who had served in the French army, was arrested and sent to a prison camp. In 1942, while trying to flee Paris, Francine and her mother were arrested. They endured many hardships in numerous prison camps before being sent to Bergen-Belsen.

Because Francine's father had been deemed a prisoner of war, Francine and her mother had some privileges in Bergen-Belsen. They could bring small bags with personal belongings into the camp. Among these, Francine's mother brought two pieces of chocolate that she vowed to keep for a time when her daughter really needed them to lift her spirits. There was another woman in the barrack, H el ene, who was pregnant. She was keeping it secret from the guards, whom she feared would kill her if they discovered her pregnancy. It was actually Francine's mother's idea to give the chocolate to H el ene when they saw she was becoming too weak, and they worried she and her baby would not survive. Francine agreed immediately. H el ene's baby was born in Bergen-Belsen and named Yvonne. Remarkably, the first time Yvonne cried was on the day the camp was liberated by the British Army. Francine said it was as if the baby had been born on the day of liberation.

Francine eventually married and had two children. Decades later, she organized a conference on Holocaust survivors and their mental health. She arranged for professionals like psychologists and psychiatrists to address how things might have been different if survivors had support and counseling after the war ended to help process and heal from their traumas. Among the speakers was one psychiatrist who, during her address, asked Francine to approach the podium. The woman pulled a piece of chocolate from her pocket, offered it to Francine, and revealed she was the baby, Yvonne.

Stories of survivors like Francine are incredibly important to preserve this history and ensure it is not forgotten by future generations. I have written a number of books based on the lives of survivors. In recent years, I have become more and more interested in the stories of rescuers, those who helped Jews during the Holocaust. These brave individuals demonstrated extraordinary moral courage and good citizenship during a terrifying time in history.

Francine Christophe's story is unique because she was both a victim of the Holocaust through her imprisonment and a rescuer, reaching out to a fellow Jewish prisoner in need and putting that person's life before her own. She was only twelve years old.

Bergen-Belsen

Bergen-Belsen was established in 1940 in Northern Germany. It was initially built to be a prisoner-of-war camp. Jewish people were held captive and were intended to be exchanged for German prisoners of war. Eventually, it became part of the Nazi concentration camp system. Life in Bergen-Belsen was brutal. There was little food or water, overcrowding, forced labor for the prisoners, and the sanitary conditions were horrific. So many died of exhaustion, starvation, and disease that at the end of the war, the prisoners were moved and the camp burned down to prevent the spreading of disease.

For Ayaan—a budding and talented young writer.

Acknowledgments

My ongoing gratitude to Margie Wolfe and the wonderful women of Second Story Press who continue to publish and promote my books. Stories about the Second World War and the Holocaust are more important than ever, and SSP is at the forefront of publishing these books.

The illustrations by Gabrielle Grimard are simply stunning! I'm thrilled that she came on board for this project.

Huge thanks to Ayaan Dhruv for helping with the research on Bergen-Belsen. I look forward to reading more of his stories and poems.

And ongoing love to my family—my husband, children, and my new and beautiful grandson, Miles. One day he will be carrying these stories forward. That's how this history will stay alive.

Kathy Kacer's many books focus on the Second World War and the Holocaust. A winner of numerous Forest of Reading Awards, the Jewish Book Award (Canada and the US), and the Yad Vashem Award for Children's Holocaust Literature (Israel), Kathy has written unforgettable stories inspired by real events. She lives in Toronto and speaks to children in schools and libraries about the importance of the Holocaust and keeping its memory alive. She dreams of singing and dancing but has decided to leave that to her talented kids.

Gabrielle Grimard uses various media to research and create the illustrations for a book, but her favorite aspect will always be color. She uses mainly watercolors, gouache, and oil. She adds a touch of wooden pencil for the details. She has illustrated dozens of books and has been nominated for several awards. She lives in Montreal, Quebec.

**Two secrets.
An act of kindness.
And the power of hope.**

In 1945, young Francine and her maman are sent to the Bergen-Belsen Nazi prison camp, where life is gray and hopeless. Determined to lift Francine's spirits, Maman shares a secret: hidden inside her bag are two pieces of chocolate. They're the first sweets Francine has seen in years, but Maman tells her not to eat them. "One day, when I see that you really need them...that's when I'll give the chocolates to you."

When Francine meets Hélène, a fellow prisoner, she learns another secret: Hélène is pregnant. But there is very little food, and even less hope. Hélène and her baby are in grave danger. Remembering the chocolates, Francine realizes she may be able to help.

Francine's act of kindness will make ripples in their lives for decades to come.

Inspired by a remarkable true story.



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