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It happened on May 10, 1940. Early in the morning, I woke up to a lot of noise echoing through the streets: the droning of engines, people running, gunshots. Suddenly, I heard the doorbell ring. It was my friend Dick.

“Come quick, the Germans are coming.”

“The Germans?”

“Yes, you know, soldiers, planes. Come downstairs quick!”

Germans? Soldiers? I didn't know what he meant. Judging by his behaviour it was something very exciting. I looked around the apartment. My brother was still fast asleep, and my mother too; I guess they hadn't heard the noise. Pa wasn't home; his job had taken him away from The Hague. Hastily, I put on some clothes, left the apartment, and went downstairs. When I arrived on the ground floor, there were soldiers in the portico. Then I noticed where the engine noise came from. Above the soccer fields on the other side of the canal, above the park, and in the distance, as far as I could see, there were planes, big planes.

And there were clouds of parachutes hanging in the sky, with more dropping from the planes. Many drifted in our direction, most of them above the park and the soccer fields. The three Dutch soldiers in the portico were firing their rifles at the figures dangling from the parachutes. I noticed our soldiers were poorly dressed, their uniforms hastily put on. One wore a jacket; the other two were in shirtsleeves. Their puttees were not done

up. I stared at the scene and the consternation around me. The planes, the parachutes, the soldiers shooting their rifles: it was like watching a movie. The whole thing seemed unreal.

Other people gathered in the portico—neighbours from other apartments. I heard one of the soldiers say, “The main attack is on Ockenburg, the airport, about seven kilometres from here. We had no warning, no idea this would happen. We are supposed to be neutral.”

I was bewildered, wondering, “What’s going on? What’s happening?” I looked at Dick, who was now joined by Tonny. “Hey, Jan,” they both yelled, “isn’t this exciting? Isn’t this fun?” Yes, I thought, exciting—but fun? I wasn’t all that certain.

Before long, the battle was over. Our small army, poorly equipped, ill prepared, and surprised, could not withstand the superior force of the invaders. On May 16, the German troops moved in, their black boots pounding on the pavement. Shouting orders, they rounded up the scattered defenders, then marched them through the streets, hands in the air, disarmed, with Dick, Tonny, and I tagging along. We watched as the prisoners were loaded into waiting trucks. The Germans paid no attention to us. We were just little kids.

In some parts of Holland the small Dutch army had stood its ground and fought ferocious battles. On the whole, the Dutch army proved stronger than Hitler and his generals had expected. Rotterdam was among the cities whose defence force refused to give up. On May 14, the Germans, becoming impatient, sent in their big bomber planes and practically flattened the city, setting it aflame. We were only a little over sixteen kilometres away and could hear the devastating bombs hit their targets.

Ed Nadort, who was a few years older than I, saw it happen. He lived in Bolnes, on the outskirts of Rotterdam, and when the planes came in from the east, he and some friends had been on a back road that had an unrestricted view of the city. The planes were flying very low, so low that Ed and his friends could see the

pilots waving at them. The wind blew pieces of charred paper from the burning city toward them after the bombs were dropped. The boys chased and caught some of them and tried to read what was printed through the burned areas. Ed found the front page of a Bible from the St. Laurens church, a beautiful building that had been almost completely destroyed. He told us that a few days after the bombing, he and his family could smell the stench of decaying flesh. That smell was to evoke mental pictures of the bombing for the rest of their lives.

That same night, the sky to the southeast of us lit up, as if the sun had set on the wrong side of the planet. Reports of destruction came in: the main hospital along with four others, two concert halls, twelve cinemas, five hundred cafés, twenty-five hundred stores, seventy schools, twenty-one churches...the list went on. About eight hundred people were killed and tens of thousands injured and left homeless, mainly in the poorer district of the city. As we watched in horror, seeing the glare of the fires against the sky, the tragedy and despair of our situation began to sink in. The next day, fearing further destruction, the Dutch authorities capitulated. We were now officially under control of the foreign power.