

Excerpt from **THE AGE OF LIGHT**

London

1940

During the Blitz, bunked down with Roland in Hampstead, Lee wakes more than once to find her bed brown with menstrual blood. Something about the surprise of waking to the scream of the air raid sirens sets her body off, starts her cramping. In the morning when the blackout lifts she rinses the sheets out in the sink, but stains remain, light copper blotches.

What Lee can never tell anyone is that she feels almost giddy when she hears the whistle of the bombs drop, when she feels the room shake, when plaster dust coats her face and makes her sneeze. Can never tell them how much she looks forward to the mornings after, picking her way through the city with her camera, the bombed-out tableaux arranged before her like the work of some Surrealist set designer. A church destroyed, but a typewriter balanced on the rubble before it, perfectly unharmed. A statue completely decimated except for one beseeching arm. The black part inside her loves the lawless nature of the blasts.

One night she and Roland wake to a different noise, a giant rustling, as if the house is a parcel being papered over. Lee pulls back the curtain and with a whoosh through the open window comes a ghostly silver fabric, almost consuming her, so much of it she has to beat it

away from her face in order to breathe. A barrage balloon, Roland tells her, laughing, and they work together to pull all the fabric back out of the house. Outside the next day she spends hours photographing it, the balloon's carcass draped over trees or twined around her body. None of the shots are right, but then a week later she is walking through Hampstead Heath and sees another downed balloon, pinned to the ground but still half-filled with air like a giant egg, two geese standing proudly before it. The photo she takes of it is a marvel, the war's first gift to her, and Lee feels buoyed aloft herself with the promise of all that the coming days might offer her.