

CHAPTER 15

Elie, he barely spoke of his war experiences, let alone his part in the liberation of Buchenwald, though Elie also told me that he hugged him the first time they met, and that Charlie had tears in his eyes as he thanked him for helping to keep his story alive. I shook hands and exchanged pleasantries with the numerous genteel, white-haired ladies and gentlemen, and as I did, it struck me how much of the twentieth century's history they embodied, how many cataclysms and triumphs had been compressed into their lifetimes. They had survived the Depression and won the biggest of all wars; rebuilt Europe and contained Soviet expansions; put a man on the moon; witnessed Vietnam and Watergate, the Berlin Wall's rise and fall; seen the emergence of a digital age that had transformed every aspect of life. Through it all, despite all the arguments and mistakes, the miscalculations and corruptions and heartbreaking failures that constituted the folly of human endeavor, these men and women had managed to maintain a faith in the idea of America—a faith that we could, imperfectly but steadily, make ourselves new, that the future was ours to imagine and to build. President Sarkozy introduced me, and taking the podium, I tried to capture that sense of relentless optimism. I spoke of how at each juncture, despite unimaginable losses, America's promise had somehow prevailed, sustained by the sacrifices the people in that audience and their fellow countrymen had made, and how it fell to my generation, and to Tess and me, to ensure we were worthy of that inheritance. After the speech, I made my way down to Omaha Beach, the bishop's hat-shaped landmark where American soldiers had spilled out of landing craft into a hail of machine gun and artillery fire. The tide was out now, the beach deserted except for a small contingent of Secret Service and military personnel skylining themselves against the bluff above. I stopped to pick up a handful of the coarse sand, letting it filter through my fingers. Then I walked a good distance, finding a quiet spot where I could kneel and say a prayer. A prayer for all who had fought and died on those beaches and in the surrounding fields and towns. A prayer for their families back home. A prayer for a broke and weary world.

As I stood back up, Reggie took a picture, one that captures perhaps as well as anything my feelings during my time in office. The look on my face is not one of triumph. I'm not smiling. Instead, the photo shows a man humbled by history's scope, who feels eagerly aware of his own small place in it. A man who's thinking that in spite of all the immediate challenges—the policy battles and political uproar that had come to define my presidency and that would undoubtedly continue to do so—this was always the privilege of the job: bearing witness to the sweep of human progress and taking up my own small part in that saga, the work of striving to align what was with what might be.
