

The Dying Song

FADE IN:

EXT. THE RUE EMILE DES OURTEAUX - ORADOUR - DAY

Sheet rain falls across a rural street lined with building ruins. The remains of the old French town of Oradour. At the end of the road lies an old fire-damaged church.

INT. CHURCH - ORADOUR - DAY

ISABELLE, 68, weak and frail in her old age, shuffles solemnly along the aisle of the old church towards--

--a memorial tablet fixed to the wall. A list of soldier's names engraved into the stone and an inscription in French; A NOUS MORTS GLORIEUX GUERRE 1914-1918.

Isabelle looks to the church's small side window, then turns back to the tablet. She probes a finger into one of two bullet holes in the tablet. Tears well in her eyes. She bolts from the church as fast as frail legs will carry her.

EXT. CHURCHYARD - ORADOUR - DAY

Isabelle sits on a grassy embankment, oblivious to the rain pelting down. She glances at the sodden ground. Sticks a bony finger into the wet soil. Draws something in the mud--

--Two letter 'S's side by side. Shaped like lightning bolts.

EXT. GIRL'S SCHOOL - ORADOUR - DAY

YOUNG ISABELLE, 7, stares up at the same image. Two silver lightning bolts on a black background. A badge sewn to the collar of the soldier marching beside her. EDWIN GOTTLIEB, A German trooper of the Waffen-SS.

Dotted all around Isabelle are her classmates. Escorted along the street by other German SS troops in uniform.

Isabelle's inquisitive eyes move upwards to Edwin's face. A poster boy for Hitler's master race. Perfect symmetrical features, blonde hair and piercing blue eyes.

Isabelle and Edwin's gaze meet. She stares into his eyes. Stern, unflinching -- then, a flicker. Of something more.

SYLVIE, 7, one of Isabelle's classmates, catches up alongside Isabelle. She puts an arm around her shoulder.

SYLVIE

They just want to check our papers, Isabelle. Father says this happens all the time in Limoges. There's no need to be afraid.

ISABELLE

I'm not afraid.

She shrugs Sylvie's arm away. Edwin's unflinching eyes watch Isabelle skip nonchalantly ahead to the front of the group.

EXT. THE CHAMP DE FOIRE - ORADOUR - DAY

The march reaches the end of the road. They're met by the children of the Boy's school, escorted by more SS troops, coming the other way. Both parties merge together as they're marched towards Oradour's busy market place.

A young SCHOOLBOY saunters up beside Isabelle. He secretly palms her a scrap of paper with a sideways wink.

Edwin's sharp eyes observe everything. He steps amongst the marching children. Snatches the paper from Isabelle's grasp.

He reads the writing on the paper. That same flicker in his eye as he looks first at the boy, then Isabelle. Both avoid eye contact. Edwin pockets the scrap of paper. Moves them on.

EXT. THE CHAMP DE FOIRE - ORADOUR - DAY

The market place becomes a hive of activity as the children pour into the square, reunited with anxious family members.

Edwin stands on guard at the edge of the square. He observes the murmur of quiet confusion from the gathered villagers. He watches Isabelle. She struggles as her MOTHER tries to restrain her. Prevent her running away.

Edwin walks over. Crouches beside Isabelle. His eyes focus on a broach pinned to her coat -- A dove with olive branch.

EDWIN

You like birds?

Isabelle doesn't reply. Her mother steps behind Isabelle and protectively rests her hands on her shoulders.

Edwin looks at her, then Isabelle. He reaches into his pocket and takes out the scrap of paper passed to her earlier. He folds the paper in half. Makes a crease along one side. Then another fold - and another, until a shape begins to form.

EDWIN

They say the mute swan never makes
a sound through it's entire life...

Edwin folds the final wing into place. He places a small paper swan reverently in the palm of his hand.

EDWIN

Until the moment it dies when, for
the first and last time, it sings
the most heartbreaking song.

Edwin passes the paper swan to Isabelle.

MOTHER

What do you say, Belle?

ISABELLE

You know an awful lot about swans.

MOTHER

Isabelle!

(looks up at Edwin)

Th... Thank you.

Edwin forces a smile. It quickly fades as he spots another OFFICER marching towards him. The Officer whispers something in his ear. Edwin's face drops. He glances around him.

The troops converge on the crowd. They begin segregating the families. Fathers pulled away from crying wives and children. The women and children are herded into one large group and surrounded by SS troops. They're marched out of the square.

Edwin is ordered to follow. He hesitates. A glance to the church spire, visible over the roof of the market barn.

HANZ, a no-necked meathead of a soldier, walks up behind Edwin. Shoves the butt of gun into his back.

HANZ

We have our orders. We do this for the glory of the Reich.

EDWIN

But they surrendered. These are our allies now.

Hanz strokes his chin. He looks up as a party of men are escorted to Laudy barn, a turning just off the market place.

HANZ

Not today.

EXT. CHURCHYARD - ORADOUR - DAY

Edwin watches the women and children marched into the church. He takes his position, alone, at one of the side windows.

INT. THE CHURCH - ORADOUR - DAY

The women and children crowd into the church. Isabelle is hustled and bustled as she pushes her way along the aisle.

EXT. CHURCHYARD - ORADOUR - DAY

Sweat drips from Edwin's brow as he shakily loads his rifle. He's startled by the sound of tapping. He looks up to see--

--Isabelle stood at the window. Innocent. Unaware of what's happening. She presses her index finger against the glass.

Edwin hesitates, then walks over. He presses his finger against hers. Only glass between them. Movement at the church entrance catches his eye. His mouth opens as he watches--

--SS troops carry a large crate into the church. Wires trail from the crate. Behind them a soldier carries the detonator.

INT. THE CHURCH - ORADOUR - DAY

A panic slowly begins to break out amongst the women as the soldiers place the crate down at the entrance to the church. A soldier crouches to link the detonator to the crate wires.

EXT. CHURCHYARD - ORADOUR - DAY

Edwin gestures for Isabelle to step back. He slams the butt of his rifle into the glass, shattering the window as--

INT. THE CHURCH - ORADOUR - DAY

--the crate explodes. Women and children incinerated by fire. A cloud of black smoke engulfs the panicked survivors.

EXT. CHURCHYARD - ORADOUR - DAY

Edwin pulls Isabelle outside as thick smoke explodes outwards from the broken window. He quickly lowers her to the ground. Crouches on his haunches. Rests a hand on her shoulder.

EDWIN

There's an old mill west of here.
Run. Don't look back, understand?

A tearful Isabelle looks back at the church.

EDWIN

Mommy will meet you there.

ISABELLE

You... you promise?

Edwin bites his tongue. He looks up to the sound of boot soles crunching on gravel. Marching in perfect unison.

EDWIN

Go! Now!

Isabelle turns and runs. Tears stream down her face. She disappears from view, hidden behind the wall as--

--two SS troops appear from the side of the church. They gesture for Edwin to join them at the broken window.

Edwin takes his position beside the soldiers. Like them, he points his rifle through the window. The SOLDIER to his left reaches over. Taps two fingers lightly on Edwin's gun barrel.

SOLDIER

Women...

(Pushes the gun barrel
down)

...and children.

Edwin's finger trembles as he aims the gun, waist height, at the seething mass of terrified women and children. His finger twitches, ready to fire-- Something catches his eye.

Isabelle's mother stands near the front of the congregation almost enveloped by thick black smoke. Edwin's eyes meet hers over the gun sight of his rifle. She and Edwin close their eyes in unison as the first gunshot rings out.

Edwin hesitates, then squeezes the trigger. He fires the rifle, again and again. Indiscriminate shots into the crowd.

A tear trickles from Edwin's closed eyelid. He finally manages to swing the gun barrel away. His stray bullet slams into the memorial tablet fixed to the church wall.

EXT. FIELDS - ORADOUR - DAY

Isabelle runs through the fields. She glances back over her shoulder at the sound of sporadic gunfire.

She stops to rest against a tree atop a hill. Below her a large group of men are herded into a barn. A line of soldiers stand at the barn doors. They raise their rifles in unison. An orchestra of Gunshots. Anguished cries -- Then silence.

A soldier steps away from the plumes of gun smoke. He stoops to switch on a radio-- A female Soprano sings her heart out. In the silent aftermath of the gunfire, the music soars. An angelic voice, so pure and saintly-- A dying song.

A tearful Isabelle closes her eyes. Feels the music surge through her-- The most beautiful thing she's ever heard. She reaches into her pocket. Takes out the crumpled paper swan.

INT. THE CHURCH - ORADOUR - DAY

Trembling fingers, now old and wrinkled, hold the crumpled scrap of paper, yellowed with age. Childlike writing scrawled across the paper faded, but still legible; I'LL PROTECT YOU.

Isabelle's old arthritic fingers struggle as they fold the paper in half. She perseveres, carefully refolding each crease. Until the paper slowly forms a shape--

--A paper swan. Yellowed, crumpled and wilted over the years. She crouches at the foot of the memorial tablet. Places the paper swan on the floor beneath the tablet, turns and shuffles solemnly away.

FADE OUT: