

ERIN BYRNE



## *Our Ravaged Lady*

A cathedral and a life catch fire.



She had lived many lives, and here was the burnt offering of another.

Notre Dame's lace spire sizzled, crumbled, and fell, and the gigantic hole it created became a cauldron. Flames, golden to orange to red, assaulted Paris's lavender-tinged sky, and smoke billowed in gray explosions. Silhouetted against glowing cinders, her bell towers stood dignified but unprotected.

My friends and I watched from the edge of Île Saint Louis, mouths agape, tears stinging our eyes, joining in a collective, horror-filled gasp as the cathedral battled for her very existence. The hollow, meandering roar of the conflagration was punctuated by the thunder of falling wood and stone and the screeching of twisting iron.

Firefighters wrestled with the blaze as the stone edifice trapped flames and smoke, rendering the burning "forest" of ceiling beams unreachable. The 850-year-old wood had flared

up like kindling, and by the time the firefighters arrived, it was out of control. Fierce heat scorched them as they ran in to rescue precious relics from the inferno. Victor Hugo's "vast symphony of stone" had Stravinskied.

As she burned, my gut echoed the sentiment. Over the past few years, it seemed my own life had caught fire.

I'd gone through a divorce after a thirty-two-year marriage, and although a long separation had fooled me into feeling prepared, sorrow tore through me.

I'd ushered my two sons into the world of adulthood, a letting go reminiscent of their first day of Kindergarten, when I'd held them tightly, buried my face in their hair, and inhaled sweet, little-boy scents. They'd held me too, their mouths quivering as they adjusted their backpacks and swaggered off.

I'd placed cherished items from my old life around the California house where I was starting over, all the while pinning for the home I left behind in Washington state.

And I'd lost my father: my funny, beloved father who'd taken me sailing, taught me to worship jazz, and always, upon seeing me, called out my name with gusto. His death hurt in a place that seemed unreachable.

I'd also broken my shoulder, endured four concussions, suffered a stroke, and had a heart recorder inserted surgically.

At times, my brain was toast. Daily tasks like pressing garlic or doing dishes caused my head to explode into migraines. I forgot appointments, struggled to find words, and mixed up numbers. My energy plummeted. Depression and anxiety crumbled my equilibrium.

It would take time, the doctors said, to recover.

The night of Notre Dame's fire, I was in the midst of the most recent concussion, from a car accident weeks before. The glow was extra-rosy and the cries of onlookers too loud as the crowd edged ever closer to my claustrophobic brain.

The next day, President Emmanuel Macron addressed the people of Paris: "Notre Dame is our history, it's our literature,

it's our imagery. It's the place we live our greatest moments, from wars to pandemics to liberations."

Notre Dame is France's kilomètre zéro—the precise center of the starting point of all roads in the city and country. Her many lives have been tumultuous. Her first stone was laid in 1163, with the faithful gathering to light candles. She took roughly two hundred years to build, and upon completion, received her bell towers and her best feature—the north and south rose windows—glittering eyes from which her spirit shone forth.

When Notre Dame was just three centuries old, Catholics slaughtered Protestant Huguenots en masse over a three-day killing spree, then celebrated their victory at her altar. Soon afterward, Huguenots attacked her façade, hacking the heads off of her statues—a fad that would continue for centuries.

When she was four hundred years old, Louis XIV, realizing Gothic was out and Baroque was in, had Our Lady's eyes ripped out and replaced with white glass. (Later, Hugo would rant: *Who has installed cold white glass in the place of those stained glass windows that caused the astonished eyes of our ancestors to pause between the rose window of the main entrance and the pointed arches of the apse?*)

Fanatics came after her again when she was five centuries old: Revolutionaries hacked off more statues' heads, attacked the arrow atop her spire, melted down her bells to make cannons, and renamed her The Temple of Reason.

Through all of this, people continued to light candles under bright or colorless glass, in turmoil and in peacetime, in sorrow or in joy.

The week following the fire, I was a guest writer at a literary event and had chosen to read from an essay I wrote on Notre Dame. I'd always felt a strong affinity for the cathedral, and in this piece, I analyzed her extensively, going deep and using my intellect, for my brain was my center, my own kilomètre zéro. I had written the best essay it could conjure.

But that night, my thinking was dulled. My chest burned, and chills wracked my body. By the time I took the stage in an underground cavern packed with poets, artists, and musicians, my throat raged and my voice faltered.

“Her scars and sweetnesses were mine,” I read, wondering if my connection to this cathedral was a blessing or a curse.

Within weeks of the fire, the cause was narrowed to either a cigarette tossed by a construction worker or a short in the electrical system of the bells. Iron scaffolding on the exterior of the spire welded together that night, increasing the chance of collapse. Hundreds of tons of lead in the spire and roof were released into the night sky, putting surrounding neighborhoods at risk.

The bell towers had been fifteen minutes from crumbling due to the heat, but the firefighters had arced water over the blaze to dampen them. The water saved her towers but seeped into the mortar between her stones. Moving just one—even to rescue her from ruin—might cause her to cave in.

Nothing could be moved, because all had not yet settled.

I was in a similar state.

Even so much as a sip of wine caused vertigo, social events siphoned my energy at an alarming rate, and I required extreme focus to maneuver around the once familiar streets of Paris, as if I’d lost my compass arrow. I was in France to work on a novel, but now writing took twice as long; I couldn’t fit my scenes into the book.

I began to doubt the wisdom of being in Paris. Notre Dame was a ruin, I had bronchitis, and the *gilet jaunes* (Yellow Vests) angrily prowled the streets on Saturdays en masse, the cost of renovating the cathedral making it a new target for protest.

In 1830, when Victor Hugo took up his pen to write *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, he created a character so intertwined with the cathedral that....

*He was its soul. To such a point was he, that those who knew that Quasimodo once existed, now find that the cathedral seems deserted, inanimate, dead. You feel that there is something missing. This immense body is empty; it is a skeleton. The spirit has departed; you see the place it left, and that is all. It is like a skull: the sockets of the eyes are still there, but the gaze has disappeared.*

At the time, Notre Dame was a spectral wreck, matching Hugo's image. The people rallied and the city renovated, but Quasimodo had to wait twenty-five years for his new home to be completed.

Nearly one hundred years after Hugo published his novel, bombs, bullets, and shrapnel punctured Notre Dame's stone as World War I shook Europe. The cathedral was built to last, but by this time, she may have felt disaster-prone.

During World War II, Our Lady's eyes were removed again, and she endured four long years of blind silence, her bells mute. By the liberation of Paris in August 1944, her demise was imminent. But when Hitler ordered his general in Paris to detonate her, Dietrich von Choltitz refused.

On the day of the celebration, Charles de Gaulle approached Notre Dame. Parisians had fought the Germans from barricades—piles of tables and chairs and stools, with any weapon they could find—and chaos still reigned. German snipers remained high in the Gothic arches.

BBC correspondent Bob Reid's radio broadcast described the scene:

*And now, here comes General de Gaulle.*

*The general's now turned to face the square and this huge crowd of Parisians [machine gun fire]. He's being presented to people [machine gun fire]. He's being received [shouts of crowd, shots]...even while the general is marching [sudden sharp outburst of continued fire]...into the cathedral.*

De Gaulle walked straight ahead—shoulders high, his tall frame never flinching as bullets zinged from all sides and people scampered for shelter—into Notre Dame's interior

to a blizzard of fire from the rafters. He remained for a fifteen-minute celebration.

Our Lady of Paris had been waiting a long time for this, and her bells rang out.

It's been said that Louis XIV, that long-haired hippie of a monarch, so hated to suffer waiting that after one courtier appeared late, he drawled, "*J'ai failli attendre*"—I almost had to wait! He considered it his divine right never to suffer a delay. But Parisians have learned—through revolutions, wars, reigns, and riots, in queues and métro stations, in bistros and museums—that most of us have to wait a little.

In the days following the fire, I dragged myself out to observe the people of Paris and scrutinize the incinerated cathedral from all sides. Access to Notre Dame was blocked, so crowds flocked to Île Saint Louis to ponder her cinders and ash, the gaping hole in the center of her flying buttresses, her singed but intact rose windows, like eyes with smudged mascara. I heard other languages, but the French voices were silent. The people of Paris—an elegant Parisienne in white, a swarthy father holding the hands of twin boys, two elderly men dressed with old-fashioned tidiness—quietly contemplated Notre Dame.

I had seen this kind of homage a few years before, when the bells of Notre Dame were replaced. That winter, the new bells were displayed in the cathedral's nave. Bleachers were set out, and people sat on freezing metal seats to meditate on the bell towers. Tourists fidgeted, but Parisians stayed still as statues. Three dignified ladies in black wool coats and colorful scarves and hats, their lipstick fresh, sat just so; a young couple snuggled side by side with intertwined legs. All listened to the chiming of the old bells—and imagined the sound of the new. Would they be sharper or gentler, hollow or full?

*Attendre* is French for "to wait." It also means "to expect."

Perhaps the French take the long view; the past is prologue. To honor the old and envision the new are one and the same. To wait is to anticipate.

All summer, the cathedral's sanctuary was open to the elements. Her interior remained a jumble of accumulated debris. Charred wood like Pick-up sticks and stone chunks lay on the floor in pinpoint rays of sunlight, on shredded cane chairs, among piles of ashes. Everything could cave in at any moment. Even months after the fire, Notre Dame was still considered a triage site.

Meanwhile, my own condition worsened. Neurological testing revealed a chasm in memory, in word retrieval, in vision. The latest concussion had sparked the cumulative effects of all four concussions and the stroke, and my brain remained in chaotic clutter along with the issues I'd traveled to Paris to escape.

Even with my divorce finalized, I did not see a way forward. I raged at the ravages of age on my appearance—the last time I'd dated, I was in my twenties, but I had no desire to be a nun. The few times I ventured out, I chocked up dull, time-wasting endeavors with Louis XIV types that fizzled out.

Friends endured my scatterbrained spaciness, my last-minute cancelations, my need for solitude. Writing was an act of faith: I couldn't type well, so I wrote random scenes in longhand. I often woke up alone with an iron band of fear sinking into my chest: My brain was not strong enough to be my center, and this left a terrifying void.

But in those instants, I tried to take a longer view. I came to see that Hugo's belief in Quasimodo swinging from those flammable rafters, and Charles de Gaulle's heroic stride, and the resilience that Our Lady herself displayed in all her brokenness were not qualities of the brain. They were qualities of the heart.

---

Recently, my family scattered my dad's ashes into Puget Sound, Washington. He'd been gone three years; we agreed that we were glad we waited. As his ashes floated and swirled, then sank into the murkiness, chips and clumps mingling with the water, we spoke of his humor, the music he played on the piano and drums, and his fiercely loyal love—all that abides now that the ashes are gone.

Winter has come, and I am free of many concussion symptoms. My vision is clear, I can drive, and the scenes I wrote in longhand are fitting neatly into my novel.

I look around my home at the relics of my previous life: the Greek vase and Swedish plate on my mantle, crystal candle holders, photos of the four of us as a family, my dad's bongo drums. Like Quasimodo, I've had to wait, but my home has become the place where I live my greatest moments, my wars, my pandemics, my liberations.

Our Lady persists, on pause. Her roof was carefully covered last fall, but she stays bound inside within her melted iron scaffolding. Christmas came and went with no mass, no movement, no restoration of her sanctuary. But inside the cathedral, among the detritus and dust, stands the altar with its gold cross, and next to that, the marble *pietà* where Notre Dame's namesake holds her departed with love.

The center of the center remains, and the rest is reimagined.

Each night, I light three candles in a row and contemplate them in the way I learned from the people of Paris, who find layers of meaning in the combination of past, present, and future. Sometimes the past fizzles out (gratefully), or it's time for a new present (a fresh start), or the future grows dim (but still illuminated).

A few nights ago, the past and the future went out at exactly the same moment. So tonight, fresh candles burn on either side of the present, creating a silhouette of Notre Dame



as she now stands—her tall spire gone, and her low center flanked by her bell towers. I remember that cauldron of violent flames licking the sky.

*Parisien* magazine wrote, “*La catastrophe nous renvoie à nous humilité et notre impuissance.*” The catastrophe refers to our humility and our helplessness.

It is during these times, when I’m aware of both, that what endures becomes clear.

What will Notre Dame’s next life be like? An international contest is on to design a new spire, with hundreds of ideas flooding in: a glass solar roof with an urban farm; a greenhouse sanctuary for birds; a new home for her 180,000 bees; a blue-tiled roof made from recycled ocean plastic; a swimming pool. But Paris’s chief architect has threatened to resign rather than allow a modern spire.

Until Our Ravaged Lady rises from the ashes, we will just have to do as she does: feel our universal humanity and stand with dignity in our humility and helplessness. Light a few candles...and wait a little.



*Erin Byrne is author of Wings: Gifts of Art, Life, and Travel in France, editor of Vignettes & Postcards from Paris and Vignettes & Postcards from Morocco, and writer of The Storykeeper film. Her work has won many awards, she has taught writing all across the globe, and she hosts LitWings literary salon, which features writers, photographers, and filmmakers, in the Bay Area and Paris. Erin is Collaborating Curator of Travel Writing and Photography for The Creative Process Exhibition, which travels to the world's leading universities. She is working on a novel set in occupied Paris, Illuminations. Erin has unwittingly hosted parties in Paris on the nights of the 2015 terrorist attacks, the Notre Dame fire, and the covid-19 pandemic. [www.e-byrne.com](http://www.e-byrne.com).*