

fission

Based on a true story

Also by
Tom Weston

The Alex and Jackie Adventures:

First Night: being a ghost story

The Elf of Luxembourg: *being a love story*

Tom Weston

fission

Based on a true story



tom weston media

FISSION

Copyright © 2011 by Tom Weston.

All rights reserved. Except for brief extracts cited in critical review, no part of this book may be reproduced in any form whatsoever without written permission. For information visit: www.tom-weston.com.

Although based on actual events and people, this book is a work of fiction; some timelines, locations and characters have been changed or composited for the sake of the narrative. Some text is derived from documented speeches, papers, memoirs and other correspondence, but is mostly drawn from the author's imagination and should not be construed as real.

“The Tyger” by William Blake, from *Songs of Experience*, published in 1794.

The cover was designed by Cassandra Mansour. It features *“SnowDay Love”* by Penny Antonoglou, and used with the kind permission of the owner; and *“Portrait of Lise Meitner”* by Lotte Meitner-Graf, London, and used with the kind permission of Anne Meitner.

Printed in the United States of America.

Library of Congress Control Number: 2011903961

ISBN 978-0-981-94135-6



tom weston media

To Larry

CONTENTS

<i>Fade In . . .</i>	11
Death	19
Pride	63
War	107
Rise	139
Exile	209
Honor	279
<i>. . . Fade Out</i>	323

Fade in . . .

“**N**o apology! There is no reason to apologize.”

“You have told us that you had qualms about helping to organize gas warfare, and that you spoke to Haber about your scruples.”

“This again? Why must we keep going over this? What more is there left to say? It is ancient history best forgotten. I am history.”

Fade In

Otto Hahn, formerly aged 88, yet soon to become timeless, bristled at the questions which he had dodged so often throughout his life but was compelled to answer now. The Wars, the Nazis, the Bomb! The cheap shots at his honesty and integrity always hurt, but now the questions were not accusations, they were . . . ? . . . data collection, as if asking for place of birth on a passport application or directions to the railway station. Otto had always felt the story misrepresented and inconvenient, but now the interrogator appeared aloof and matter of fact, and this made the questions all the more searing.

“Remain aloof also! This person will try to make you feel inferior. Do not give him the satisfaction.”

“I knew that the Hague Convention prohibited the use of poison in war. I didn’t know the details of the terms of the Convention, but I did know of that prohibition. Haber told me the French already had rifle bullets filled with gas, which indicated that we were not the only ones intending to wage war by that means. He also explained to me that using gas was the best way to bring the war to an end quickly.”

Otto sipped from the brandy glass in his left hand; his right held a cigar. He sat in a comfortable, leather club chair, in an oak paneled room, library fashioned and full of tired, leather-bound books; and beyond the perfume of the cigar he could smell the age of the room. A setting so familiar and relaxed that the conversation could have been taking place in his old staff room at the Kaiser Wilhelm, for God’s sake.

“And you found those arguments convincing?”

“Except for the projection screen!”

Fade In

“You might say that Haber put my mind at rest. I was still against the use of poison gas, but after Haber had put his case to me and explained what was at stake, I let myself be converted. I then threw myself into the work wholeheartedly.”

“You have also told us that you saw with your own eyes the effect of poison gases on enemy soldiers. And you also say that what you saw made a very deep impression upon you?”

The light from the projector cut through the cigar smoke and demanded his attention, as if the Bat Signal bled into the night sky of Gotham City. On the screen flashed remnants of Otto’s past life: the decisions made, the roads not taken, the effect of his life on others. He tried to pretend that the projector and the images did not trouble him. He could not completely ignore them and he stole a glance whenever the interrogator looked away to write down an answer.

A grandfather clock to the left of the projector chimed the hour. 6:00 PM. The projector of Otto’s life displayed the date - April 22nd, 1915 - World War One - The battle of Gravenstafel. After the alternating cold and mud of the winter months, the campaigners found the spring evening surprisingly warm and lazy, and the cloudless sky shone a handsome, brilliant, sapphire blue.

In the German trenches, soldiers with improvised masks around their mouths, simultaneously open 6,000 metal canisters. With an accompanying discharge of sound, as if a hundred steam trains departed from the station at the same time, the yellow-green chlorine gas rises. The gas carries on the wind, over no-man’s land, southwest towards the French trenches, turning the sky the color of a fairy tale golden sunset, beautiful and beguiling to the men who had never before seen its like. This graceful, serene, man-made cloud, four miles wide, rolls gently over the allied soldiers.

Otto remembered the scene in sharp detail not dulled by the passage of time, and shook his head in a futile attempt to change the past. Thanks in part to his ingenuity and industry, six thousand men would die before the clock chimed the quarter hour.

Fade In

Overpowering the retreating air, the gas flows downwards into the trenches, blocks out the daylight and embraces its victims, first in soft, blanket warmth but quickly turning to ruthless, hellish fire. In a sudden panic, men start to abandon their posts. Others stagger around, blinded and choking.

Although the German soldiers could not see the pandemonium in the French trenches, they could hear it well enough. The screams of men and horses, cows, sheep and dogs all screaming in a sick, doleful, choral requiem, to the rhythmic drum beat of rifles and large guns, fired indiscriminately and without discipline into the cloud, as if the soldiers battled an ethereal enemy. But the sounds did not escape the cloud for too long, and as it settled in the bottom of the trenches the Germans then only heard the silence.

Smoke filled the screen. Otto felt it flow down from the screen, where it danced on the floor and billowed around his feet.

He knew the interview had concluded. He had answered the questions truthfully and factually, but he felt that his answers lacked something - was it context? - No, that wasn't it. Humility, regret, shame? - Again no; the interrogator seemed as indifferent to these emotions as Otto had in life.

The smoke, instead of dissipating, rose again, gained strength and thickened. The interrogator, never much more than a silhouette at the best of times, became obscure. Otto gulped down the last of his brandy, but it tasted of vinegar. The fire in the cigar died and the ash from its tip fell into the smoke.

Otto remembered.

What he missed was the pain, locked deep within him, yet almost always present, almost always intrusive - almost, but not quite. And he longed for life again. Not that he would behave any differently, but perhaps so that he could experience the pain he had avoided the first time.

“Yes, that is true. I felt profoundly ashamed - was very much upset. First we attacked the soldiers with our gases, and then when

Fade In

we saw the poor fellows lying there, dying slowly, we tried to make breathing easier for them by using life-saving devices on them. It made us realize the utter senselessness of war. First you do your utmost to finish off the stranger over there in the enemy trench, and then when you're face to face with him, you can't bear the sight of what you've done and you try to help. But we couldn't save those poor fellows."

"The old lie: Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori."

"How sweet it is to die for one's country?"

"Just so."