

CHAPTER 2

For many months after the surrender of France, the radio reported that manpower in Germany was in short supply and many soldiers were forced to return home, handing back some areas of administration to the French authorities so that, to outward appearances at least, the invader's mandate could continue. But the old administration had become eroded by the occupation and its surrender; morale was severely damaged.

With so many of our men at war or in hiding, what remained were those who were more than willing to continue the anti-Jewish campaign. So now, we were at the mercy not only of the Germans, but the French authorities. Our very own people were working against us with the full might of the new rule.

Whether it was goodwill or something else, Jewish children were not yet restricted from going to school and upon my return to Paris I began my first year of High School on Rue des Jeuneurs, where I completed my Brevet Elementaire. This was to be the end of my formal education and the beginning of a new education that was to come.

The invaders' power grew each day with new rules that excluded us from everyday life. Collaborators, too, demonstrated their fear and partisanship in order to gain advantage for their families. The fear drove neighbour against neighbour, creating the worst kind of mistrust amongst us. It was no surprise that the war brought this to the fore, and the general disdain of Jews became a virtue that could save an entire family. Some even manipulated the changes for their own benefit.

At school, children were parroting their parents. One girl, a trusted friend, told me: "Maman says I cannot play with you because Jews are dirty."

"That's not true!" I shrieked. "I have a bath every day."

It did not help matters that the French administration, under the occupying authorities, led this charge of ostracising Jews by introducing more and more restrictions on us. *France Libre* was rapidly adopting the very essence of the invaders' attitude towards its Jewish population.

It shocks people to learn that Parisians had always flirted around the edges of anti-Semitism. There was a great deal of poverty in the Jewish community, particularly those newly arrived to the city, who were lucky enough to be fed by the Rothschild Company on Jewish holidays. Jewish boutiques were vandalised, "Death to the Jews" was graffitied on storefronts.

Maman and Papa were at the dining table poring over jewellery when I came home from school. I touched a few pieces, running my fingers over the cool gold.

"What are you doing, Papa?" I asked.

"Just getting ready," he said cryptically.

"Are you sure this is the right thing to do?" Maman asked. Her hands masked her face, but I could tell her eyes were closed, perhaps even crying.

"It has to be," Papa said with the tiredness I noticed he had after he worked at the markets of Les Halles. "At least we'll have passports if we need to leave in a hurry."

Within days, it was clear from the constant frown on Papa's face that something had gone wrong. There were no passports, nor jewellery.

"I have been taken for a fool," was all he could say.

On the day I learned what it meant to be a Jew in city ruled by Nazis, I asked myself many questions. Was it was my clothing? That's what they say, is not it? *She had on a short skirt, her legs were bare, she flirted with her eyes, she asked for it.* I don't know. Maman reminded me often that I was thin and ugly, with a round face like the full moon, so I don't know what it could have been. With Aunt Louise's ribbons in my hair, I looked eight. I was not well-developed and I felt young, I acted young too.

I don't know how it happened the way it did; I just know that if it had never happened, and if I had never told the commissioner afterwards, my life would have been different. But I can't think about that now. How can I?

It could hardly have been more than ten minutes after curfew. I had hurried from school along Rue de Rivoli to get some paints from *les Magasins du Louvre*. I forgot the time—it was no excuse; I know I was late. I know I had broken the shop curfew, but I must have inherited Papa's disregard for such things so I just covered the yellow star with my schoolbooks and tried not to stand out.

It was ten minutes after four when the policeman stopped me at the door and asked me to lower my books. I thought, *oh merde. I'm going to be deported*. I had now put my entire family in trouble as well.

He said nothing and led me from the shop to the police station nearby, the 1st Commissariat. I was weeping when he ushered me into an office, explaining the circumstances under which he had detained me to another, older, policeman who sat behind a desk. He then left, leaving me alone with the older officer.

I chastised myself for acting like a baby; this man was a French policeman, just like the one in my building who was kind and friendly. It was such a petty crime, after all. Perhaps he would just give me a stern warning and let me go home.

He watched me for a while, me in my pleated skirt and white blouse, still clinging to my books. He walked around his desk watching me all the while, then went to the door and I jerked as the bolt was turned.

When he spoke, I knew my fears were misplaced.

"So, Simonne," he said, "you have been very naughty. What you have done is very serious indeed, also very dangerous. Because you are a Jew, I should hand you over to the Germans and they would be sure to deport you."

He sat on his desk and crossed his arms.

"They would also deport your parents and family, and you wouldn't see them again. You wouldn't want that to happen now, would you?"

"No, Monsieur."

How reassuring were all of the *shoulds* and *coulds*. I was in the hands of a safe, French policeman, just like Commissioner Boucher.

“As this is the first time you have caused any trouble like this, I think I will not tell the Germans about it if you promise not to break the law again. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Monsieur. Thank you Monsieur. I promise not to do it again.”

He had a round friendly face, and a belly like Papa.

“But, of course, you cannot break the law without being punished at all.”

The heavy, sinking feeling, returned. If not deportation, then what?

“What should your punishment be?”

“Please, Monsieur,” I began to cry again. “Please don’t send me away. I won’t do it again.”

He unfolded his arms and gestured at me to come to him.

I stood in front of him, watching the quick rise and fall of his broad chest with each deep breath.

“Well, Simonne,” he said, “I think *I* know the best punishment. But this will have to be something between you and me only. If the Germans hear about this, you and your family are sure to be arrested and sent away. You must not say a word about it to anyone, not even to your mother and father. Do you understand?”

I did *not* understand at all, but under the circumstances, what could I say?

“Yes, Monsieur,” I said without hesitation.

I had barely responded when he placed his hand on my breast and his fingers started rubbing against the softness beneath the thin fabric of my blouse.

A warmth rose to my face. I was flushed with embarrassment, and I wanted only to scream and run from that room but he must have sensed my thoughts and he covered my mouth with his free hand. He stood up and unbuttoned my blouse.

“Remember,” he bent down low to my ear, “don’t make any sound or you will be deported and your family will be killed like the other Jews.”

I would be mortified to tell Papa about this, and I could imagine that rage bursting from his body, and then rushing into this squalid room and pouring bullet after bullet into this pig.

He slid his hand between my legs; his hands were like sandpaper against my twelve year-old skin and I stifled a scream. He was trembling. He pushed me onto the floor. The shock of it took my breath, my voice, any strength that I might have had in my body and he held me close with just one hand over my mouth and pulled off my underwear with the other. He spread my thighs and his knuckles pushed against me as he unbuttoned his pants.

And then there was just blackness and pain as he thrust against me, over and over. Tearing, sharp pain that I could feel all the way to my chest, and I screamed without thinking. A scream that was choked to a mere gurgle by the hand that came down on my mouth. I watched him through my red haze. The same red haze that papa had once described as anger. I watched as his face moved up and down with each crunching of his pelvis against mine, and the pain was almost camouflaged by red. I hated that face, I hated the beads of sweat that fell on my skin like spit.

He stopped moving with a sudden thrust and expelled a deep grunting sigh.

“Now, don’t make a sound,” he said breathlessly. He removed his hand from my mouth and got up, buttoning his trousers.

I willed every muscle to sit up, and pulled my clothing close to me and saw blood.

“We will have to try that again,” he said, now back behind his desk. “It will get easier.”

I sat there on the floor in silence and slowly set about rearranging my clothes. It was almost six o’clock, and I just wanted to go home, but instead he instructed me to sit on a chair and wait while he went on working and watching me from time to time.

My head was full of muffled sounds, like I was like being pulled underwater at *Mers les Bains*. When Papa came and carried me on his shoulders and took me out into the ocean, took me out so far that I feared we might never go back. I would dunk my head and the water gushed into my ears and nose. That is how I felt now, submerged in salty stinging water. I sat there, bleeding, with that burning between my legs.

I watched the clock on the wall. Watched the hands that seemed to stand still. I had to be home before the eight o’clock curfew. He knew that, and yet he forced me to sit on a chair in that office. My anxiety grew as the time approached.

“There,” he said, just a few minutes before eight. “It is not yet eight o’clock, so be quick.”

If it had not done so already, my life began its descent into a nightmare. I ran home as fast as I could and climbed the stairs with stabbing pain at each step. I almost ran right into Commissioner Boucher on the stairs.

“Simonne. What’s wrong?” he asked, looking down at my blood stained dress.

I scrunched the hem of my skirt tight against my legs. What must I have looked like to him?

“They arrested me at the *Magasin du Louvre*,” I cried. “They took me to the Commissariat and he—”

I hung my head; I did not want him to see the shame.

“What? Come into my office and clean yourself up.”

I sensed his concern, and it buoyed me a little.

“No, thank you, *monsieur*. I have to get home.”

Maman and Papa were arguing in the kitchen and I tiptoed towards the bathroom.

“I don’t care about the curfew,” Papa yelled. “I’m going now.”

“She will have gone to someone’s house, to study or something.”

“And what if she did not?”

“I’m home,” I yelled out, and ran into the bathroom, quickly locking the door, fearful that they might see me in this state, with blood staining my dress and splattered on my legs. I turned on the water and stepped into the tub.

“Where have you been, *habibti*,” Papa called from behind the door.

The blood swirled down the drain in the bathtub, washing down my legs, my hands, and my dress.

“I’m fine, don’t worry,” I lied, not for the last time, so that they would not worry.

“Well, make sure you are never late again.” He sounded angry, and I hated to disappoint Papa.

I never walked into that shop again, I never wanted to walk into any shop again or anywhere. But I had to maintain a semblance of normalcy so I went back to school the next day, walking such a long way with the stinging pain.

But something was wrong with me. Did everybody know? Everyone on the street, everywhere, they knew that I was not the same anymore. I was different. I tried to put it away, to another part of my mind, like a bad dream.

Only a month later the bad dream turned into a nightmare when my family left me in Paris in the capable care of our friend, the police commissioner, George Boucher.

CHAPTER 3

It was early June 1941, the beginning of summer, and we were huddled around the radio to hear the news. Hitler was preparing for an invasion of Russia, and the German factories were gearing up their production of war materials and supplies. Factory labour was depleted by the increase in the armed forces. Recruitment of volunteer labour in the occupied countries had brought abysmal results, and the conscription of workers was now in full swing.

Street raids, *razzia de la police*, were originally meant to collect Jews, gypsies and other undesirables to be deported to work in factories in Germany and its occupied territories. The raids were now feared as much by non-Jews as by Jews. As soon as a crowd was enclosed, curious onlookers came out to watch from safety on the other side of the barricades. It was terrifying, but I was relieved to find myself outside the circle on those occasions.

On this particular day, the mixed column of police and military vehicles drove past me on Rue Montmartre up to the intersection of Rue Etienne Marcel. There, it turned left into Rue Jean-Jacques Rousseau and stopped, sealing the entrance.

I knew the signs of a *razzia*. They were occurring every day in the streets throughout the city. I felt the chill of fear but it was adrenaline that forced me to hurry to the scene. I was on the right side of the net.

As I approached the barricade, it was apparent that the raid was confined to Rue Jean-Jacques Rousseau. It was never wise to venture too close. Even though the soldiers and police only concerned themselves with those caught inside the barricade of these mass round-ups, they were also known to be unpredictable.

“Don’t stay around watching,” Papa would warn. “Run away quickly.”

From between the vehicles at the end of the street the cordon of soldiers and police flanked both sides of the street, close to the wall of the surrounding buildings, preventing escape into the entrances of buildings and alleyways. The blue-uniformed French policemen herded those caught in the net into the middle of the street and towards the north end, where I stood.

Here, an officer in the black uniform of the SS sat at a table taken down from one of the trucks. A Gestapo officer sat at the table while a few more soldiers and Gestapo moved about the perimeter of the undulating sea of captives. They were a fearsome sight; these men had the power to deport you without reason, and they walked with the assertion of that knowledge.

Between the barricaded ends of Rue Jean-Jacques Rousseau were, perhaps, some two hundred caged people—men, women, and children of all ages—some wearing the yellow star, some not. Outside the barriers we watched out of curiosity, out of sympathy, and anger. We also watched out of relief that we were on the safe side.

The police moved amongst their prisoners, directing those wearing a yellow badge to stand in one growing group. Amongst them, a young woman was forcing her way to the edges of the barricade, close to the onlookers. A small baby was bundled in her arms. Tears fell down her cheeks and she leaned between a soldier and a young policeman, passing her wailing baby into the first pair of outstretched hands. The guards seemed to ignore the incident but the hysterical screams of the baby attracted the attention of an SS officer who tore the infant from his rescuer's hands and thrust him to the ground.

There was a crack like a fallen watermelon. The baby lay there, no longer screaming. I wanted to run then, flee from the street, from the city, but I was glued to the spot I occupied, along with many others.

The face of the young policeman glistened with tears and he turned away. Then everything happened so quickly, too quickly for me to avert my eyes. The SS officer drew his pistol, his arm straight out before him, and fired two quick bursts of his gun into the back of the crying policeman. I stopped a scream before it found its voice, and hurried from the scene.

As the situation became more serious, Papa stopped wearing his medals in public, and stopped talking about the war at all. At home, however, he was more vocal. The loaded revolver was ever-present, particularly at mealtimes when he removed it from its hiding place under the floorboards in his bedroom and laid it beside his fork.

“I won't let them lay their hands on any of you,” Papa said. “I'd rather kill you than let the Germans take you to the camps. I'm shooting us all. The last bullet is for me.”

Whatever her opinions, Maman kept them well hidden. Then came the news of Uncle Silvain's deportation, which was followed, soon after, by Aunt Louise.

I had seen very little of Aunt Louise since her return from the farm in Rodez.

"I can't believe the level of persecution here," she said to Maman.

"We get by," Maman said.

"What do you mean?" Aunt Louise waved a thin, manicured hand. "Those soldiers, the trucks. It's despicable."

And then she was gone. My beloved Aunt Louise, who smelled of Chanel and wore Balmain, was taken to Auschwitz with Uncle Silvain. I was no longer the centre of anyone's world. I was very much alone.

Maman was right, though. In those times of terror, we did our best to lead a normal life, or at least as normal as possible, although I missed Aunt Louise deeply and wondered if my life could ever contain any joy. Papa continued to get up before dawn to help unload supplies with the stallholders at *Les Halles*. In exchange, they gave him food for the local orphanage and he brought a few wooden crates full home before we went to school.

Maman continued to clean obsessively, starting at four in the morning so that, by the time Andre and I were sitting on our beds in readiness for school, the house was spotless. Her workload did not decrease, even with the war, and I found her at her machine, sewing in silent determination, forging her way through the invasion one stitch at a time.

Maman never taught me to sew or use the machine. If I asked her to make me a dress, she told me to buy a simple pattern. "Nothing complicated" she would say, and I would make it myself under her supervision. Even so, I learned from watching her, silently observing her stitch precise little button holes. I long for her to talk to me while we worked together, to respond, or perhaps just to say something nice.

Papa was the opposite. He would let me sit amongst the writers of the National Library while he worked, as long as I was silent. I would give anything to climb the tall ladders, just like Papa, to put my hands on dusty leather-bound tomes with scrawls I barely recognised.

It was beneath the vaulted ceiling of the library that I came to know these men whose names Papa whispered to me, but I knew them as part of my daily canon at school—Jean Cocteau, Albert Camus, Jean Paul Sartre. I was a little girl amongst these legends of the third floor mezzanine of the oval reading room, where the general public were not allowed to go. I felt like somebody, knowing that I had special permission to be in the dimly-lit area with the circles of light casting an eerie glow on the ancient leather-bound books in their towering shelves, that only Papa could remove.

I would sit beside Jean Cocteau mostly, and I avoided Sartre after he told me I had the same name as his girlfriend. “Yuk,” I thought. “I wouldn’t want to be *your* girlfriend, not even if you paid me.” He was so ugly, with those thick glasses and little pig eyes. Plus, I knew he did not like Jews.

Jean Cocteau spent his time writing and illustrating and, what seemed to me at least, an extraordinary amount of time staring at the ceiling. What did they think about in the dimly-lit room?

At the time when I met Cocteau, he came to the library often and would read book after book. Papa said they called him *The Frivolous Prince*, and he dressed very well, you know, in a three-piece suit and hat. And I’ll never forget this one time, he asked me what my favourite story was.

“Is it Cinderella?” he tried to guessed.

“No,” I said. “That’s stupid. I like Beauty and the Beast better.”

“You know it?”

“Of course.”

“Why is it your favourite?” he smiled.

“Well, I like the poor beast. He’s so ugly and then, in the end, he becomes a handsome prince.”

He laughed and pushed some papers towards me, which contained drawings.

“I am writing the film.”

“Really?” I said, not quite understanding how the squiggles and lines on the paper might become a *film*.

“Why do *you* like it?” I asked.

“It takes me back to my childhood.”

“That must have been a long time ago,” I said sitting back in my chair.

He laughed and laughed.

Mostly, the days were dull. I read and reread the same school books. I missed the old, everyday pleasures of walking or playing in the park with Christiane and going to the cinema and laughing with Marcelle. We heard from her so rarely now.

Marcelle was the beautiful one, with wavy red hair and fair skin; she was the least Arabic-looking of us all. Marcelle was full of light and passions, especially for boys. She was just sixteen when she began having affairs, and she had lots of boyfriends. Oh, the magical stories she told as we lay in the bed that we shared. I did not understand most of what she said, kissing this and kissing that, but she made me long to be grown up so that I too could have such special stories.

I was often a willing accomplice to her rendezvous. Marcelle would take me to the cinema but left me there alone soon after the lights were dimmed while she went off with one of her boyfriends, assuring me that she would return before the movie was over. I didn't mind; the cinema was an adventure, an escape into impossible romance, journeys across the desert, women clinging to men, those fraught moments when lovers said *adieu*, with Bette Davis and her wide plaintive eyes, and my favourite femme fatale, Viviane Romance. Then, when Marcelle returned from her tryst, the spell was over and we walked back home slowly while I told her the entire story. Sitting around at dinner, I teased her, “remember that scene when—”, and she would kick me hard under the table. I missed her, my big sister. Her death, when it came too soon, was like having a part of me removed.

For a brief time, my life was improved by my new friendship, which was to prove a very mixed blessing in the long term.

Everyone knew that Police Commissioner George Boucher was a very important man. He was in charge of a whole police district. He was influential, Maman said, and a good ally. He was very handsome too, I will not deny it, and garnered the admiration of women in the neighbourhood, making him the envy of every husband.

The commissioner and I continued our silent greetings from our respective rooms where I would frequently find him staring out of his window. He seemed lonely, or perhaps just deep in thought. From time to time our glances would meet, and we waved at one another across the short distance between us. Our chance meetings were a break from the gathering gloom in my life.

Our friendship developed quickly after that chance meeting on the stairs after what happened at the police station. Our frequent encounters on the landing or the stairs, now went little beyond polite chit chat and had turned into longer exchanges and we often wound up talking about the sort of things that interested me and what I liked to do. Just like grownups.

“So, Simonne, what do you like to do?”

“Oh, the cinema. I used to love going to the cinema.”

“Well, Simonne, we will have to do something about that,” he said. “Would you like me to take you to a film tonight? That is, of course, if your parents will allow you to go.”

There was never any doubt in my mind that they would let me go. I was starved of fun, and the commissioner would protect me.

“Oh yes, Monsieur! Yes, please take me.”

I imagined myself, for a moment, casually mentioning to my friends how I had been out with a French police officer. *The Commissioner*.

I heard then, the words that burst my delicious reverie.

“Of course,” he whispered, “We will have to keep it very secret, or we could both be in very serious trouble.”

I understood. Of *course*, I understood. Imagine the trouble I could get him in if he was caught accompanying a Jew to the cinema. He was a saint!

Maman willingly gave her consent. How could she show any doubt in the face of our powerful neighbour? If she had any misgivings, she exhibited none. She thanked Monsieur Boucher for his kindness to me.

“I don’t like his attention,” Papa said later.

Regardless what he thought, Maman had her way and, for once, I supported her, even if she insisted that *Andre* accompany us. *Ugh*, how embarrassing.

Dressed in my best, and without the dreadful Jewish star, I waited close to the door and listened for any movement outside. Soon enough, the doorbell rang and maman ushered me and Andre into the commissioner's charge. He wore the tweed sports jacket and slacks that were like a uniform. With few words of greeting, he led me down the stairs and into the street.

I almost had to skip to keep up. A brisk walk through the small streets and galleries and along Rue Vivienne brought us to the cinema near the Boulevard des Italiens. The commissioner ushered me past the box office window at the entrance of *Le Vivienne*, through the inner door, and to a seat in the back corner of the cinema.

My legs jiggled in anticipation, and the tips of my shoes *taptaptapped* the carpeted floor. I glanced around at the audience, and I completely forgot the precariousness of my situation.

Andre paid no attention to us at all, keeping to himself as usual. The film, *Le Baron Munchausen* was like all films at the time, dubbed from the original German, and it was not long before I was immersed in the story. Every pain and sorry that befell the hero became mine, his joy was mine, so too his terror. By my side, my companion experienced the highs and lows along with me as I squeezed and pinched his arm, or hid my face in his chest; and like the gentleman I knew him to be, he put his arm around me and held me close until the lights came on.

"Habibti," Papa asked grimly when I got home from that first outing. "Habibti, was he correct?"

His eyes were like saucers, staring into me like he did, into my soul. For me, his expressions were soft, but when he was angry, his eyes blazed. Right now, I could not tell how he felt.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Was he correct? Did that man touch you or say anything wrong?"

I was shocked that Papa would have such thoughts.

"Oh no, Papa."

The thing is, by the time he did become inappropriate I trusted the commissioner with all my heart, but all I wanted was to go to the cinema. Really,

it all started innocently enough. He never *really* touched me until later. Until the cellar, he had been very correct.

Our relationship continued and blossomed as the weeks went by, with three more illicit visits to the cinema. The tall, blond, blue-eyed policeman with the soft, almost timid voice became my confidant, advising me and sympathising with my adolescent observations. Just to be acquainted with such a person changed me. I held my head up. I was an equal. I wasn't just another Jew.

Papa probed me whenever I went on an outing with the commissioner, but I never indicated any impropriety. I would not risk losing these privileges and I reported my escort's superb manners. Even when things started to change. I did not tell my father when Monsieur *le commissaire* started to kiss me on the cheek at times to soothe my anxiety in the dark theatre while everyone was engrossed in the film. We sat in the back corner seats as was our custom; it was too risky to sit amongst people because somebody might recognise me. During the film, he put his arm around me, comfortingly. Occasionally he grasped my thigh and placed my hand on his, large dependable hands, burning and heavy, pressing into me. I noted it, but did not pay it much attention; he was my friend. I did not have any male friends; maybe this is how men behaved, especially when they were your protector, your knight in shining armour who took you on outings when everyone else was prohibited.

No, I did not tell Papa that there was ever any sort of indiscretion at all, because he cared, just as if I were his very own daughter. He took me to see Edith Piaf at the *ABC Music Hall* on one occasion. There she was, in a black dress and white collar, a cross around her neck hanging from a black velvet ribbon. She was tiny and vulnerable, like a child, but with a voice that rang through my heart. The commissioner glanced at me and smiled; his eyes glistening with tears in his eyes while all around us German soldiers guarded us.

His attention was enough to make the German occupation and its terror fade into the background for a brief time. I wanted our friendship to last forever.

The weeks moved on, and the machinery of German domination became more efficient and comprehensive. Immediately, with the German invasion of Russia in 1941, the strong body of French communists threw their support behind the Resistance. Its strength in numbers and its power base now greatly enhanced, the Maquis soon became a force to be reckoned with. Its activities increased, from sabotage and stealing explosives from the enemy, to train derailments and outright guerrilla action in the streets, for which they were renowned.

In France, the Resistance movement had become more effective than ever, and the invader's response to sabotage was to inflict more terror on the civilian population, killing large number of hostages, particularly in villages where Resistance members were found or suspected to be hiding. These villages were razed to the ground and, occasionally, their inhabitants were massacred leaving Jews and non-Jews to suffer together.

The Jews in Paris, unprotected by even the illusive armour of the law, were the first to experience the increased retaliation. Street raids were intensified; individuals were arrested in the streets for the flimsiest of reasons like a star that was imprecisely placed, whole families disappeared from their homes, and more and more trainloads of Jews were being deported to far flung destinations.

The dark cloud of terror hung over us all, collectively and individually. The grim intention of Hitler's final solution was becoming more and more clear each day, Papa said. He wanted our annihilation, and we knew the only way to evade this was to make it to the end of the occupation without being shot or deported. We held onto some hope, but on most days, the bleakness was too much and I spent the days reading and staring into the courtyard, and we each had our own inner demons to wrestle, often those that had little to do with the war.

I would often lie awake in bed listening to my parents arguing. They were fighting more now, most often about Papa's whereabouts; his outings often lasted until dawn and Maman always waited for him to get home. I sometimes saw her in the kitchen, with her head in her hands, crying silently. Their whispered argument began the moment papa arrived and closed the door. These fights were not new.

"It's because she won't let him near her," Marcelle used to say.

“What?”

“That’s why he goes to the prostitutes.”

“Marcelle!”

“You see him; he walks with his hands behind his back,” Marcelle explained, “and the prostitutes think he’s a policeman and give him free sex.”

“I don’t believe you,” I said with my hands over my ears, trying to block Marcelle’s crudeness.

“It’s true. Where do you think he goes at night?”

But tonight they were whispering in Arabic. It may as well have been Chinese.

I lay in bed, listening to the familiar *tick tock* on my bedside table. *Tick tock tick tock*, even rhythms. My breathing relaxed and I closed my eyes.

“*Va t’en. Va t’en. Va t’en. Va t’en.*”

The sound came gradually into my consciousness.

“*Va t’en. Va t’en. Va t’en. Va t’en.*»

What is that? Was I dreaming? I heard the words, «go now,» and they were as clear as the ticking clock.

The voice disappeared but I lay awake, too afraid to move or even look at the window.

I told my parents the following morning. In normal times, Maman would have dismissed me and my *intuition* as a silly fantasy, but these were not normal times.

“Maybe it was a sympathiser,” maman said.

“Do you think it was a warning?” Papa asked, pacing. “Was it a man or a woman?”

I looked from one to the other and traced my memory back to the previous night. My brain was tired and slow from too little sleep but I didn’t want to disappoint Papa.

“A man, I think.”

“I’ve heard of this before,” Maman said to Papa. “Neighbours or other sympathisers sending warnings.”

Maman paid a visit to Commissioner Boucher as soon as she could.

“He’ll know if there’s some sort of threat.”

Of course he would. He was our friend, our protector, and he confirmed, later that morning, what we had tried to avoid for so long—we were on the deportation list. If we were to escape, it had to be right away; he would arrange our passports.

It was impossible to keep terror at bay while we packed a few essentials for the train trip to Bordeaux, where we could rely on Marcelle to help us settle in safety.

“I am concerned though,” said the commissioner. “You must not draw attention to yourselves. With four people travelling, I fear you might.”

“What would you have us do?” my father asked.

The commissioner looked from Andre then back to me.

“Split up,” he said, and nodded slowly.

“Split up?”

“Go separately. Four people won’t be safe. Leave one of the children here with your neighbour, Madame Mallenaide. She’s leaving in a few days with another companion. She can take one of them with her.”

I sensed Papa’s nerves as he looked at me and Andre, his eyes were wider than I had ever seen. He looked frightened.

“You need to decide who you are taking so I can arrange the papers.”

We spent the day finishing our packing, deciding what worldly possessions we would take, which toys to leave behind, and we talked very little.

I heard their voices, deep slow whispers, and tried not to think of who they would take and who they would leave behind. I know it was only for a few days but I didn’t want to be the one to wait, but I knew I would be; Maman would not leave Andre behind.

The commissioner returned at night with false papers and travel plans; one passport for Maman, one for Papa, and one for Andre. They had chosen, and even though I already knew, my heart still fell. They chose him over me.

Papa put his hands on my shoulders and knelt down in front of me.

“Habibti, listen, the commissioner did not have time to prepare papers for you. Madame Mallenaide will take care of you and bring you to us in a few days.”

He held me close and his breath cooled my tears. I wanted to be brave, to understand that these were desperate times, that we all had to make sacrifices. But I cried instead. He lied to me though. They chose Andre instead of me. *She* chose her little *choux choux*. Papa had nothing to do with it, he would never leave me, and I didn’t want to be separated from papa, not even for just a few days.

“Just a few days. Remember what I have always said; look up at the sky at night. And when you see the first star—”

“I’ll know that you’re seeing it too.” I tried to smile through my tears, I really did.

“And we’ll send each of all the love in the world.”

I waited in the kitchen with the noisy clock, while locks were clicked on suitcases. Maman delivered me to Madame Mallenaide on the third floor. She left me unceremoniously while I wept. It was for a few days, but at that moment, it may as well have been forever.

The door of the apartment closed and I stood in the unfamiliar room that smelled musty and old. My entire world was contained by a small cardboard suitcase—a black dress, a comb, a toothbrush, and the red dress and cloth platform espadrilles I was now wearing.

After a fitful sleep, I woke in a strange room to the sounds of angry German voices in the street below. Madame Mallenaide came and peered cautiously out the window with me. A black car was parked in front of the building and two armed soldiers stood nearby on the kerb. Furniture scraped impatiently on the floor of the apartment below. My apartment.

Below us, a man in civilian clothes and a uniformed policeman emerged from the building. I was sick to see my doll in the hands of that policeman, who tore it apart, its arms, its legs, its head, tossing *my* child onto the pavement.

The morning dragged on while I waited for more news, although I dare not ask the adults. I was left to myself while Madame Mallenaide prepared for our departure on the dining table. There was an elderly Jewish man hiding in the apartment with me but I was in no state to talk to my co-conspirator. I could

think only of seeing Marcelle and Papa. I was relieved that Papa was able to escape safely because of me. I was like a hero. Like France's own Jeanne D'Arc, I too was sacrificing my own happiness and freedom for the safety of my family.

My growing pride did little to relieve my loneliness, and despite looking out of my window that night for the first star in the sky, I knew Papa was too far away.

It was around midday on the second day that the commissioner came for me. In his tweed jacket and with neatly combed hair he had some news.

"The plans for Simonne's removal have been changed," he said. "A young girl travelling with your group might attract unwanted suspicion. I have arranged temporary sanctuary until suitable arrangements can be made."

Madame Mallenaide and the old man were to travel from the occupied zone to *France Libre* in relative safety. I understood how I might endanger the whole plan, after all, a young girl with an old couple was suspicious. We all understood. So if I could not be with my family, remaining in the protection of Commissioner George Boucher was a comforting thought.

I was led from the apartment building to a police car parked in the street. He sat me in the front passenger seat, and got in behind the wheel and drove.

"Now Simonne," he said after a short while, "I am taking you somewhere safe."

I nodded.

"It is a secret place," he reassured me, "a very special hiding place."

I did not take my eyes off him while he spoke, but I was acutely aware that I was blinking tears and that my breathing had all but stopped in anticipation on his next words. The rapid explosion of heart beats was all I heard through the silence.

"This hiding place is so secret that I cannot even divulge it to you so that it can remain hidden."

I nodded.

"It's for your safety. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Monsieur."

I sensed from his tight jaw how uncomfortable he felt asking. The car slowed and we pulled over to the side of the road where he tied some cloth over my eyes.

“Now sit down low in your seat.”

My world became dark and we travelled for the longest time, following a dizzying route of lefts and rights and rights and lefts, until we finally came to a stop.

A door opened, and the weight of the car shifted. Then the door closed. My door opened and the commissioner held my hand as he guided me from the car. A few paces, then some steps down. Even though I was no longer in the closed-in car, the space beyond my body closed in on me as I half expected to stumble or walk into a wall. Even with the blindfold, I knew that wherever we were was darker than before.

Then a warm musty smell rushed to my face and my breathing became laboured with every step. I tore the blindfold from my eyes, freeing the tears that had been trapped like breath underwater and saw that I was being hurried along a passage between stone walls. The commissioner whispered soothingly to me as we went, but I heard only sounds as the darkness enclosed me, weighing me down.

We went through a large door and stopped abruptly.

“Here we are.”

Here we are?

I looked up and he was smiling down at me. Where were we? Was I to stay in this smelly dark room? All the courage, all the heroic fantasies of martyrdom, failed me. I clung to the commissioner and wept.

Yet, there I was. In a large, windowless room, divided by row after row of wooden bookshelves as high as the ceiling with a few naked electric light bulbs glowing feebly between the rows.

We walked past a heavy, musty odour, rancid.

“The lavatory,” he said, pointing to a door.

Further into the room was a grey blanket hanging suspended between two rows of bookshelves. He pulled it aside, and we walked through to an area with a small metal bed and a stool.

The commissioner sat on the edge of the bed and drew me towards him onto his lap, and he held me to his chest, where his heart thumped against my ear. He stroked my head, just like Papa, smoothing my hair and tucking it behind my ear. He kissed me on both cheeks with such gentleness until my sobbing slowed beneath his warm lips. His warm hands moved from my head to my neck. They radiated down my shoulders to my waist.

His kisses became firmer, then covered my lips. *I can't breathe. What was he doing? My saviour, my protector.*

His hands were on my thighs, grasping at my clothes, and he lifted my pretty dress. It felt familiar, commanding. *My saviour, my protector.* I pushed his hands off my thighs but he was too strong and I didn't know what else to do. Perhaps this is how you repaid a knight.