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IN THE FLAT ABOVE THE BAKERY

Stephanie Waxman

Jeanette is suddenly awake, staring at the shadows on the ceiling. She turns on a light and looks at her wristwatch. Three o'clock. She opens the window, breathing in the cool night air. Her hands rest on her swollen belly as she stares out into the cobblestone street below. It is so quiet. The streets are not yet bustling; the girls are not yet awake, hungry and restless; her worries of what might happen to Phillippe have not yet crowded out all other thought. Then she realizes, she is thinking about him...how he would scoop her up in his arms, carry her to the bed...the way he touched her face, the way he moved his mouth down the length of her body. It has been months since their sheets were slippery with the juices of their loving. When will she feel his touch again? How much longer until he returns?

She reaches out to close the window, but pulls back when she sees a troop of SS soldiers. Her heart bolts into her throat. Then her fear turns to repugnance. They disgust her with their air of superiority—the way they swagger around her beloved Montauban.

She goes into the kitchen, puts on the kettle, and pours milk into the saucepan. It is only a thimbleful; her week's allotment is almost gone and the girls will need some this morning. She grows annoyed—again—at the thought of Eloise and Marie. It was Phillippe's idea to bring them here. He had insisted it was the right thing to do. After all, they were being hunted like animals and their only crime was being Jews. She had argued fiercely against it. Their flat was too small, rations were tight, and there was a baby on the way. More importantly, what if they got caught? It was too dangerous.

But Phillipe, pacing back and forth, had said, “Their parents are gone, taken away to God only knows where. The family on the farm believes that they have been discovered.” Then stopping to light his pipe, “Chérie, someone else must hide them.”

“But why must it be us?”

“But why not?”

No sooner had they appeared with their pitiful bundles, no sooner had they sat at the table to share a bowl of onion soup, but Phillipe was off to join the Resistance, leaving her to tend to them alone.

Ahhh, she thinks, how did I let these strangers with their miserable little fates become my burden? She reaches for the tea, pulls down a cup, wishes she had some sugar.

Not that she has anything against Jews. But, besides the inconvenience and danger of being crammed together in this flat, she simply does not know what to do with them. She is generous with her rations, but they pick at their food. She washes and irons their clothes, but they seem not to notice. She feels self-conscious singing when she sits at her sewing machine. They bother her with their silence, the way the two of them cower together like frightened mice, their eyes wide with the horror of all they’ve seen. Is it her fault what they’ve gone through?

And then, there’s the fear that someone will find out. The people coming in and out of the bakery downstairs. Monsieur Corbet himself, giving her an extra bun from time to time. Does he suspect something? These troubled thoughts play havoc with her nerves. How many times have the girls had to scurry to hide in the armoire when there’s been a knock at the door? This constant worry cannot be good for the baby.

Suddenly, she feels a strong urge to shit. She starts toward the toilet but the cramping stops. And then, a bucket of water gushes out

of her. She stares at the puddle by her feet. Has she lost control of her bladder? Then, it hits her! But, it cannot be. The baby isn’t due for another two weeks. Slowly, her predicament dawns on her. Her mother is in Toulouse and won’t be arriving with the midwife until next Tuesday!

With water dripping down her thighs, she hurries into the living room. The velvet draperies make it difficult to see them, curled up together on the divan, the satin quilt crumpled on the floor.

“Eloise, Marie! Get up!”

On shaky legs she makes her way back to her room. She sits on the bed, drawing in her breath slowly, trying to devise a plan. Eloise and Marie come quickly into the room, hair mussed but alert to the urgency in her voice.

“The baby is coming. You must go find a midwife.”

A look of anguish warps their childish features. “But, Madame,” the older girl says, “we cannot go out into the streets.”

How quickly she has forgotten their plight. “Then go to Monsieur Corbet’s flat. He will let you use the telephone. You must call my mother. The phone number is in my handbag. Hurry!” Then she realizes that when Monsieur Corbet sees the children, he will know that Jeanette has been harboring them. “No, wait!” she says, pushing herself to her feet. “I will go.”

Another contraction rips through her. “Ohhh...” she moans, collapsing onto the bed. Her breath comes in short spurts. Finally, it is over. How can she ever manage all those stairs with these pains? Surely Monsieur Corbet can be trusted. “Go, now! Quickly!” she cries.

But the girls do not move. Eloise is biting her lip. Marie, the little one, says boldly, “Monsieur Phillipe said we must stay here and never leave.” Only nine and eleven, they

are holding hands as if they were cueing up for the cinema.

“What will I do?” she covers her face with her hands, flooded with panic.

“Do not worry, Madame, we will bring the baby.”

She looks up. Eloise addresses her sister with the authority of a head nurse. “Go get some towels.” Marie stares at her blankly. “It is just like with the little calves, Marie, remember? Go on. The towels are in the trunk next to the armoire.” Obediently, Marie goes to the trunk.

Jeanette looks at them helplessly, bewildered by all that is going on inside her body, the force of it. She whimpers, “Maman...” Another pain overtakes her and this time she lets out a wail.

Eloise says in a stern voice, “You must not shout, Madame.” Marie climbs up on the bed and pats her shoulder. “Do not be scared, Madame.” Eloise hands her a pillow. “Scream into this.”

When another spasm makes her wince, she grabs Eloise’s hand and squeezes hard, peering intently into the girl’s face. Though only a child, she has already seen so much. It is as if she possesses the wisdom of a grandmother, the determination of a soldier.

Jeanette leans back on the pillow and tries to settle into the rhythm of what is happening. Eloise spreads towels under her legs, humming softly. The sound of her voice has a calming effect and for a moment she drifts off, thinking of her brother Jacques and Claire and their darling children. Children...yes, yes, this pain is about children.

Time separates into chunks of pain, helpless screams into the pillow, and moments of rest. The intense contractions leave her breathless. She perspires heavily; her black hair is plastered to her forehead. She feels a cool damp

cloth on her brow and opens her eyes to see Marie’s little moon face smiling into her own.

She cannot tell how long it has been. She wonders if it will ever end. She would give anything to be able to sleep. But the pains keep coming. The sound of a clarinet floats in from somewhere. She is sucking on a wet rag, which keeps her mouth from going dry. Did Eloise give it to her? She hears the morning chatter of the sparrows. The aroma of fresh bread drifts up from the bakery, making her nauseous. As if reading her mind, Eloise closes the window. She learns how to work with the contractions, not fighting each time; rather, if she concentrates and pants evenly, they don’t leave her so spent. She opens her eyes and finds Marie sitting on the edge of the bed nibbling on a crust of bread, the sun streaming in the window forming a soft glow around her.

Her bedclothes are sweat-soaked, her neck and chest, clammy. The light outside the window slowly fades. The pale moon is caught between the branches of the poplar tree. She notices that the lamp is on and Marie is lighting candles everywhere. Eloise is putting a pan of water on the windowsill. She senses the baby has shifted position. Perhaps it has begun its journey down the birth canal because a new sensation engulfs her, not the sharp jabs of the last hours but a bigger, harder, and yet somehow more manageable pain. By pushing hard, she can withstand its power.

Eloise is between her legs, calling out to Marie, “The flannel sheet!” Another sharp stab slices through Jeanette. As if from a long way off, she hears Eloise say, “Push hard, Madame!” She exhales, feels the thundering pain again, takes a deep breath, and pushes with all her might. It feels like she might break something if she pushes so hard, but she cannot do otherwise.

The girls are talking in excited whispers. Marie’s pigtails swing to and fro. Eloise rolls

up the sleeves of her white blouse—the same blouse Jeanette ironed just yesterday—and reaches inside Jeanette with serious concentration. When she pulls her arm out, she cries, “I can feel it! The little head!”

Several more pushes and the torment is replaced by a sweeping sense of relief.

The cry of a baby! Eloise holds it up. A boy! A son with large balls and sticky, black hair. How happy Philippe will be! The first glow of motherhood illuminates her face. His hair is dark like mine, she thinks, and reaches out for him. He is as long as a baguette, his body warm through the flannel sheet. She holds him against her breast, tears wetting her flushed cheeks.

The baby opens his little mouth and a rush of short, shrill cries pierces the air. Jeanette pulls him close, touches his face, smooths the hair on his tiny head. They all stare at him in awed silence.

A loud hammering at the door!

There can be no doubt who would intrude at this hour with such force. She looks quickly at the girls who are paralyzed by fear. “Hurry!” They race to the armoire and climb in.

Two men move into the room with menacing eagerness, bringing with them the stench of cigars. One of them is barely old enough to shave but has a pale moustache. The other, maybe 20, is short and stocky. His eyes are bloodshot, his boots covered with mud. They stand in the doorway, the short one barks, “Madame Rideau?”

Madame Rideau sits before them amid twisted sheets, her face crimson, in her arms a newborn baby still damp with bloody mucus. The air is thick with the struggle and miracle of birth.

Their smugness melts as the meaning of what has happened in this room becomes clear. The younger boy turns away. The other mumbles something in German, then asks, “You are Madame Rideau?”

She nods her head. Her heart throbs wildly.

“We must to have some questions.”

“Please...” Jeanette says weakly. She tries to think of how to say it in German, but her mind is blank. The baby is making little yelping sounds. Jeanette pulls him close.

“Two Jewish girls?” he says.

“No, no...” she manages. “Please... leave...”

The younger boy cannot look at her. He has shoved his hands deep into his pockets and stares at his shoes.

“Who has helped you—with all this?” The short one glances around the room at the armoire, the trunk, Phillippe’s books stacked against the wall. He nudges the tower of books with his boot and they topple to the floor. His friend puts out an arm to restrain him, “Nichts wie raus...”

“Please,” she begs. Then, remembers the German, “Bitte!”

The younger boy offers her a look of apology for this untimely intrusion, as if they had arrived at a party too early, before the hostess was ready to receive her guests. The other one opens the trunk and pokes through the linens, then looks at the armoire.

Jeanette screams, “NO!”

Suddenly, another contraction grips her and she lets out a loud wail. The sound comes from deep within her, from the depths of her empty womb. It fills the small chamber and bounces off the walls. It is the bloodcurdling shriek of a wild hyena. The men stand transfixed. Tearing the sheet from her legs, she allows them to see her push out the placenta. It is a thick, dark, bloody thing. Then, with the same primitive cry, Jeanette, her black eyes boring into them, bellows, “Get out! Get out!” And the men, like terrified children, turn and run from the room.

With trembling hands she touches her son’s face. She begins sobbing. Another sec-

ond and they would have found—“Come out!” she cries.

The girls step out of the armoire whimpering. They stare at the scattered books, the bloody sheet.

Remembering the look of horror on their faces as they left, Jeanette says firmly, “They will not come back, I promise. Eloise, close the door. Marie, bring me a clean towel.”

The girls sniff back their tears and do as they are told.

Jeanette holds up the baby. “Look,” she says. “He needs to have a belly button. Will you help?”

Eloise goes to the sewing table and finds thread and a pair of scissors. Jeanette turns the baby to face the girls, letting him rest with his back against her chest. Marie watches her sister cut a length of thread, double it, and then wind it carefully around the cord close to the baby’s body. She ties it once and, as if it were a bow on a present, Marie presses her finger against it so Eloise can make a knot. Then Eloise snips off the fleshy cord.

“Well done, chérie!” Jeanette says. “Look at him, just look at him!”

Marie climbs up onto the bed and peers into the baby’s face, still red from its difficult journey into this world. Jeanette unbuttons her nightdress, drenched with the sweat of her day’s labor. The baby roots around, then finds her nipple. “Oooooo,” she moans. “He is strong. I’m glad he doesn’t have teeth!”

Marie smiles. Eloise picks up the placenta and starts to wrap it in one of the towels.

“No, not yet,” says Jeanette. “Let’s enjoy our little boy. Come...” she says, pulling her onto the bed.

“His ears are so small,” Eloise says shyly.

Marie takes one of his little hands and holds it while he sucks.

Jeanette thinks about the men again and understands that she has been discovered. Who told on her? She will have to call the number Phillipe gave her. With a pang of regret, she realizes that someone will come for the girls. Someone else will hide them.

Eloise has bowed her head and is mumbling something. Her sister joins in. Jeanette recognizes the guttural sounds of Hebrew, but has no idea what they mean. Still, she knows they are giving a blessing to her son.