

*Ami, entends-tu?*

(Friend, do you hear?)

I'm safe in the cellar. The Nazi SD officers won't find me here, under the trapdoor, under the rug, under the dining room table. The elderly couple said that soon the Resistance will smuggle me away from the Charente. Until then, I must wait in their farmhouse.

I've lost track of time since the big silence. There's no window in the cellar. At the beginning, a cock crowed faintly and I would cut a notch into the shelves of bottled preserves to mark the passage of time. Before I reached the end of the first shelf, his signals died. I haven't heard him again. Perhaps the couple were hungry. I'm never hungry these days. Since the candles burnt out, the rows of potted duck, ratatouille, patés and jams no longer tempt me. I sit on the cellar stairs in the dark, wearing my coat and velvet hat and waiting for the trapdoor to open.

I can't hear much from my cellar. At first, strains of Edith Piaf's records floated through the cobwebby ceiling, and I would sway with an imaginary partner. Sometimes it was Tino Rossi singing 'Paquita' or that absurd Charles Trenet. Then the couple replaced my favourites with others I didn't recognise. They haven't put anything on the gramophone lately.

I play tunes in my head, now. I mustn't make too much noise, but I do whistle '*Le Chant des Partisans*' under my breath. It boosts my morale.

I hear voices as well as music in my head. My father and brother call me. They sound real, but I know it's my imagination because the SD have captured them and taken them away. I saw it happen.

I'd just left the larder, where I was typing Papa's article for *La Vie Ouvrière*. It's the only contribution Papa lets me make to the cause. He doesn't know about Gaston.

I was heading for Gaston's printing press to pick up the leaflets for delivery, when I spied Papa and Bernard. They were with their FTP friends. The previous week they'd sabotaged the RN10, and now they planned to blow up the Angoulême railway.

They did manage to derail the train before the SD surrounded them. That's when I ran away. I raced to warn Gaston, and he sent me here. He told me that Papa and Bernard would be all right, that they are survivors. But I know the SD will torture them. They'll accuse them of terrorism and shoot them at the Butte de Biard or La Braconne.

Thinking of Papa and Bernard has made me restless. I want to walk further than the twelve steps around the black cellar. There used to be twenty steps. Since the big silence I've skirted the corner where a chest of drawers conceals the pallet. I want to go up into the house. Water has seeped through the earthen floor down here, and I mustn't ruin my shoes. I may have to walk for miles when my *Maquis* liberators arrive.

I was frightened the first time the water appeared. I sat on the top step, drew my legs up under my skirt and fingered the ladders in my stockings. I could sense it rising to fill the gloomy cavity around me and within me. Nowadays, I don't mind the water. It enters like a visiting friend and never mounts any higher than my ankles.

Everything is peaceful above me. It should be safe to wander around the house. I like the attic best. If it's daytime, I contemplate the gay sunflowers from the window. They cheer

me up. When I think about saving France, I see a field of smiling sunflowers and I know we're not terrorists.

It's dark up here in the dining room. I often discover it's nighttime when I come out. The sky is empty tonight, and the moon silhouettes a bare oak tree in the ploughed field. There are no sunflowers. The garden wall has crumbled into a mound of stones since I last came for a walkabout. The animals must be asleep in the barn. Or was there a raid?

The couple aren't in their bed. Perhaps they have gone to meet the *Maquis*. I whistle:

*'Ami, entends-tu*

*le vol noir des corbeaux*

*sur nos plaines? '*

The staircase creaks as I climb up to the attic. An aeroplane passes overhead. I pause. It's a big one. It could be a drop. I turn around, glide back down the stairs and retreat to my cellar.

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Waiting makes me sleepy. Something has woken me. I can hear movement above: footsteps, quick and light; the scraping of heavy furniture; a deep voice, laughing. The SD officers don't laugh. It must be the *Maquis*. I stand up and smooth down my coat. I'm ready.

Time passes. The couple may be serving the *Maquis* members a meal before they come to release me. I settle back down on the stairs and listen for the sound of the trapdoor grinding open. The atmosphere above has changed. I can feel it through the bricks and beams and tiles that separate us and hold us together. There are voices, bursts of music, voices again. It sounds like a radio, but it can't be: it's too dangerous to listen openly to a radio. Only the Nazis would dare.

As soon as they open the trapdoor, they will see me. There's nowhere to hide, apart from the pallet behind the chest of drawers. I go to the opposite corner and crouch beside the shelves of bottled preserves. The water caresses the hem of my skirt and waits with me like a sleeping lover.

Nobody enters. I feel myself slip away and disperse into the darkness like a memory.

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I jerk back into the present. There's a commotion above. The house is being torn apart. It's a Nazi raid. The floor of the dining room above my head shudders under repeated blows.

A chink of daylight appears. Sounds are no longer muffled. I can hear a man's voice. He speaks in German. I cower beside my shelves.

"Hey Chloe! Look what I've found," I hear him say. "It's a trapdoor. It was bricked over."

The trapdoor groans open. A square of brilliance invades my cellar, overpowering the obscurity and blinding me. Human shapes loom up from the centre of the white light.

"My God! It's a cellar," says a woman. "It wasn't on the house plans. Just look at all those jars of food."

The man places a foot on the staircase. He descends gingerly, one step at a time. A child with long hair peers around his leg. It's a boy: he's wearing trousers. He looks straight at me, and points.

"Look, Daddy. There's a lady."

I stand up and move towards them. The water is still asleep. It doesn't ripple with my footsteps. Who are these people? They seem friendly. I try to greet them, but my words have lain dormant for too long.

"Don't be silly, Angelica," the man replies. "There's no one here."

He reaches the chest of drawers and peers behind it. "Chloe! Take Angelica back up."

I follow his gaze and see the skeleton on the pallet for the first time. It's wearing my clothes.

The man's lips move. I can't hear him because Papa and Bernard are calling me. I look up and see them standing in the light behind the trapdoor. They're waiting for me.

I smooth down my coat and join them.