The fence

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The fence

The wheel, the pedals and the needle keep whining, cackling and pecking. What I don't hear anymore is the deep voice that used to embroider words on a ribbon of doleful tunes.

"Papa, where is he?"

"The Police summoned him, because his papers… We're foreigners. Since the war started… You'll understand when you grow up. They keep him in a camp, near Paris.

Now, Mama does the sewing with the machine. She must also take care of the baby. She sings lullabies to put him to sleep. *Shlof shoin, mein feigele*… Papa's friends used to come visit him. They wore caps. They all spoke at the same time. They laughed like children. They smoked. The kettle smoked. Mama poured tea into their glasses. They stuck a lump of sugar in their mouth to sweeten the tea they sipped. They do not come anymore. My brother knows where they are.

"In camps, like Papa. The krauts want to kill al the Jews."

Mama frowns.

"What are you talking about? There's a war. He is working. People in the camp work in farms. When the war is over, they'll let him go. He'll come back, of course. Step down from the machine, Lisechè. I have to sew the dress for the concierge."

My brother sniggers.

"Quite ugly."

"The concierge?" I ask.

"The dress."

Mama protests.

"Don't you like these wild flowers? The colors are pretty. I should take you to the countryside, children. The concierge brought the fabric, Papa sewed the dress. Now she wants me to loosen the waist a bit. I'm lucky I had a piece of fabric left. I wonder where she finds food to grow so plump."

Mama goes to the countryside once a week, a place called Pithiviers. On that day, she leaves me early morning at Aunt Erna's. Our home is 8, rue de Turenne. Aunt Erna lives across the street, at number 11. Mama comes back in the evening. She seems sad. Her eyes are red.

The fence

"We fled Poland, where they hated and persecuted the Jews. We chose France, the land of freedom…"

"Did you see Papa?" my brother asks. "How is he?"

"At least he breathes fresh air. He works in the fields. He isn't used to it. He has blisters on his hands. The peasants complain that these city dwellers can't reap properly. They make them work from dawn to night, feeding them a small loaf of bread. Oh, he is so skinny… I bring him food, but it's not enough. He is still there, that's the good news. Trains carry people eastward, nobody knows whereto. There are rumors about Jewish settlements over there… Erna heard that they are preparing new roundups."

"What is it, Mama, roundup?"

My brother knows everything.

"They're emptying this camp in Pithivers to fill up their settlements in the East, in Gemany or Poland. Then they round up more Jews to put them in the Pithiviers camp. Then they'll send them to the settlements in the East, and this will go on forever… But then, tell me, why didn't they summon Erna's husband?"

"He arrived from Poland many years before we did. He became French when it was still possible. They only summon or round up foreigners. Until now, men only, but Erna says they may begin to take women and children soon."

"We'll have to reap the fields for the peasants?"

"From now on, children, we'll sleep in the attic above the workshop."

"The storage room? There are beds, up there?"

"We'll put mattresses on the floor."

"It's full of spider webs, Gosh."

We push furniture against the door of the storage room every night, to prevent the rounders from entering and catching us. We also hide there during the day, sometimes. The baby doesn't understand what it's all about. Mama sings so he stops crying. *Shlof shoin, mein feigele*. She doesn't go to Pithiviers anymore, because they've sent Papa to an eastern settlement. We escape the big roundup in July, 1942. I am six years old, so I must wear a yellow star. I don't want to. Every day, when I go to Place des Vosges to play hopscotch and jump rope with other girls, I cut the thread and remove the star. Every evening, Mama sews it on again.

I am sick. Docteur Thibault comes to our home.

"Look, Lisette, I'll listen to your breast with this object. It is cold, but it doesn't hurt."

The fence

"Is it a telephone?"

"Sort of. It is called a stethoscope. Don't move… Breathe deeply… Cough, Lisette… Cough again… It is a mild case of bronchitis. I'll give you some sirup. She shouldn't catch bronchitis in summer. She is underfed. She has to eat, at her age. You should send them to a safe place, Madam. The roundups are going on."

"A safe place? Where do I find a safe place, doctor?"

"I've have been told of a boarding school, near Orléans: Collège Jeanne d'Arc. The tuition cost is not very high, and they'll get a good education."

"Why not? You're old enough to begin school, Lisette. I've noticed you know your letters, already. You'll learn to read and write."

My brother doesn't like this idea.

– Me, I won't change school. Rue de Sévigné, I have all my buddies.

– I also want to go to the school on rue de Sévigné. Boarding school is for naughty children.

The baby stays with Mama. He is too young to begin school.

They put me with the nuns, my brother with the priests. I see him afar, in the chapel during mass. We have to sing: "*Nearer, my God to thee*." Gee, I don't see him anymore. Where is he? The priest speaks in mumbo-jumbo.

"Hey, Liseshé…"

"Is it you? What are you doing here?"

"I came across the chapel on all fours. I hope they haven't spotted me. You know the vegetable garden? There's a fence in the middle of it that separates the boys from the girls. You could come in the evening, when they ring the Vespers. It's dark already, nobody will see you."

"I am in the study room, doing my sewing."

"Tell them you need to go pee."

We have to sing: "*Marshall, here we come, in front of you, the saviour of France.*" Raising our right arm high and straight. It is Marshall Pétain, the oldest man in France.

Wow, the evening is chilly. The door of the vegetable garden creaks and whines, reminding me of a wheel somewhere, long ago. Gee, I walked on something. I can't see, goddam. I feel my way with my hands in front of me, like a blind person.

"Here, Liseshé. You see, you made it."

The fence

"I crushed some salads. If they find out, they'll punish me.

"Do they punish you?"

"You bet. Every evening, we must kneel by our bed and say: 'my fault, my most grievous fault.' I asked sister Saint-François why it was my fault. She sent me to the corner. On my knees, facing the wall, without moving, for two hours."

"Two hours?"

"Well, I don't know how many hours."

"They hit our fingers with their iron rulers, they slap our ears, this hurts like hell, they kick our ass. They punished me, I had to copy one thousand words, because I kept my cap on my head while standing in row, nobody had told me I was supposed to take it off. There's a fellow, father Bullshit tore out a tuft of his hair, you should see his bald spot!"

"His name is really Bullshit?"

"His real name is father Buchy."

"Will you come and see me during mass?"

"The risk is too big. I like it better here."

"The smell in the church makes me sick. I'll pass out."

"Incense? I like that smell. I think mass is beautiful, with all the candles."

"There's a girl, she says they waste so many candles, it's a scandle. The priest, I don't understand a word of what he says."

"He speaks Latin. Once, I went to the *shul* with Papa. The rabbi, you couldn't understand anything either. He spoke Hebrew."

"We have to wash without removing our night-gown."

"What are you talking about?"

"With a wash cloth, under our night-gown, and then we dry ourselves with a small towel under the night-gown, and then we put our undies on before we remove our night-gown. It is because man and woman, I don't know, after eating some fruit, they were ashamed of being naked."

I go to the vegetable garden every evening. I hope they won't hear the creaking door. Speaking to a boy is a sin. To my brother, maybe not.

"You didn't come yesterday."

"They punished me. I was in the dark room. No window. Bread and water."

"Why did they punish you?"

The fence

"I peed in my bed. In the dark room, I had to sleep on the stinking wet bedsheet."

"Don't drink in the evening. Even during the dinner, don't drink anything at all."

"Is Papa in heaven?"

"Why, no. He is in a colony somewhere in the east. At least, I hope so."

"Then why do we say: 'Our father who art in heaven?'"

"This means God."

"I understand nothing. Where is this heaven? I don't remember Papa. How old was I when he went away?"

"Four."

"Did he sing?"

"Of course. He sang all the time. *Wenn der Rebbe tanzt… Tanzen die Hassidim…*"

"He didn't sing in French?"

"Of course not. This is Yiddish. Don't you remember? You spoke Yiddish. It is your *mamaloshen*, your mother tongue."

"Not true. Me, I speak French. Another thing I don't understand is: 'And lead us not into the train station.'"

"'Into temptation.' It means: 'Don't let us want to do foolish things.' It does not make sense, anyway. Why should the Good Lord lead you into temptation? Unless he is a vicious bastard."

"One of the girls says: 'Our father who art in heaven, just stay there.' Sister Saint-François sent her to the corner with her hands on her head."

"Oh yeah? Do you know: 'Hail Mary, full of grease'?"

Mary is the mother of Jesus. She was a virgin, I don't know what it means.

I'm always hungry. They just give us lentils and beans and black bread. The salads in the vegetable garden are for the sisters only. I remember a feast in our home in Paris. The baby wasn't born yet. We ate chicken and cheesecake. I tried a sip of wine, but it tingled and I spat it. Everybody laughed.

"Here's a carrot. Just one, they won't notice."

"Thank you, Liseshé. I can't eat it now, with the dirt. I'll wash it. I've received a letter from Mama. Things are fine. She has lots of work. Since they've arrested all the Jewish tailors, people don't know where to sew and mend their clothes. She also makes fabric

slippers, with cardboard soles. She says hello to you. She says the baby is fine. Now he walks and talks. She says you should learn how to read."

"I know my letters: a-b-c-d-e-f-g-h-i-k-j-l…"

"I-j-k-l…"

"M-n-o-p-q-r-s-t-u-v-w-x-y-z."

"I must not answer. She's afraid the concierge might open the letter and find where we are."

"They say the Jews killed Jesus."

"Baloney! Jesus was Jewish. The Romans killed him. Theses priests and nuns are too stupid. I can't bear them anymore."

"Me, I never know which way the sign of the cross goes."

"Are you there? You weren't there yesterday."

Another voice, creaking like the gate.

"Hey, you Jewess, you don't need to come anymore. Your brother scrammed."

"No he didn't."

"Didn't? They even called the police."

"He wouldn't have gone without me."

"If the police catch him, Bullshit will lock him in the pen until the summer vacation. You won't see him soon."

Me, I still walk across the vegetable garden every evening.

"Are you there? I don't see you, but I know you are there… I've learned my multiplication tables. I'm just not sure about six times seven and seven times eight. I've read a book, nearly all the words, *Arlette the farmgirl*: 'Arlette gets up at dawn. She goes to the henhouse to pick up the eggs.' Two gees in eggs. I didn't like soft-boiled eggs when the egg white was undercooked and slimy, but now I could eat ten of them. I would dip slivers of black bread into them. We had beans again for lunch. In my dorm, there's a girl named Suzanne. She receives parcels—cakes and dry sausages and even oranges. She gives some to her friends. Me, I have no friend. I don't care. The Jesus child has three papas. Number one is Jospeh, number two is the Holy Ghost, number three is God himself. Mama will send me a parcel. I won't give any of it to anybody. If you say shit, it is a venial sin, you say one *Our Father* in your head, you go to the Purgatory to be

purged, then in the end you climb to Paradise and sit at the right of Jesus. *Nearer, my God to thee.* Shit, shit and shit. Well, I have to leave. I need to study my tables. Six times seven is forty-seven, no that's wrong. I'll drink a gallon of water, then I'll pee in my bed and they'll send me to the dark room and no one will bother me anymore. Jesus, good Jesus, please protect Mama and my brothers. When she peels her oranges, the Suzanne, there are girls who eat the peels, they are so hungry."

I grip the fence. Why didn't you take me with you? What brings me solace, I wouldn't have believed it, is the daily mass. I'm getting used to the whispering light of the candles, the music that dances under the vault, the liquid sounds of Latin. *Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccata mundi.* But I still can't stand the smell of incense.

I come back under the glance of the stars. The other day, a girl told me they are the souls of dead babies and you can hear them laugh if you listen well. A shooting star, the soul of a baby ascending to Heaven. They glimmer and snigger: "Have you seen this poor girl amongst the salads?" Dogs yelp in the night to silence them.

I've been here six months, I think. Maybe more. Sister Saint-François calls one morning: "Lisette Gremec, to the visiting room!" My heart jumps in my breast. Shit, aunt Erna.

"I've come for you, Lisette."

"Why hasn't Mama come?"

"You can't stay here. It costs too much."

"And my brother, where is he?"

"I've found a woman who'll take care of you. Madame Santini. She's Corsican. She lives in Aubervilliers. You'll be in good hands."

"I want to go home. I want to see Mama and my brother."

"I can't take care of you. We do not live on rue de Turenne anymore. We have to hide."

"Is Mama hiding too?"

"Go get your things. We must take a bus, then the train in Orléans."

Madame Santini is nice. I don't know whether my aunt gives her money. She doesn't do it for money. She thinks it's the right thing to do. She guesses I'm Jewish, I am sure. She bakes bread in her oven.

The fence

Sometimes, at night, she enters my bedroom, she wraps me in a blanket and she hides me in a shack at the end of the garden. I wake up in the shack. It reminds me of the dark room and the storage room above the workshop. This is when her son comes visit her. I look through the window, trying to stay in the dark so nobody sees me. He wears a heavy leather coat. He brings good things to eat: ham, sausages, pâté, jams.

"Last night, when I carried you, Lisette, you cried. You called 'mama!' and you said words I didn't understand."

"I don't remember."

"Of course. You didn't even wake up. So now she's crying again!"

In the garden, there are snails. They never change house.

The Germans are gone. I have seen American soldiers. Once again, my aunt Erna comes for me. We take the subway.

"You've grown. I'll have to fix up your clothes. Did the Corsican patch up your dress to lengthen it? The fabric she chose is too thin. You'd think someone with the shakes sewed it. She can be forgiven, though: they shot her son for collaborating with the jerries. You look like a scarecrow, my poor Lisette. I'll teach you to sew."

"The war is over, so they'll come back."

"The war isn't over yet. France is free, but the Americans and the Russians are still fighting Hitler. In the meantime, you'll live with me. We've been able to get our old apartment on rue de Turenne. We've been lucky. I know people who returned and found new birds in the coop."

"Will I go to school on rue de Sévigné?"

"If they accept you. We're in March. The school year is nearly finished."

I look at our windows on the other side of rue de Turenne. There are new birds in the coop. Sometimes I see a man wearing a uniform, sometimes a pregnant woman. It's not your coop, it's our coop. They'll come back. My brother is clever. He went away from the school to protect Mama and the baby. He isn't afraid of anything. In the colony, in the East, he'll defend them. He would not take me with him, I was too young. It's cold, over there, so Mama will bring back a fur coat. You'll have to move out presto.

I spend a few months in the school on rue de Sévigné, then my aunt gets rid of me.

The fence

"If you stay so thin, Lisette, you'll stop growing. I've been told of a Red Cross program for Jewish children. They send them to Denmark to fatten them."

"I don't want to go to Denmark. I don't want to be fattened."

"You can't stay all summer in Paris. The Danes behaved better than the others. They saved all their Jews. You'll come back in September."

She puts me in a truck full of children. It takes us to the railway station. The train has to go across Germany. The rails are broken because of the bombings. We stop all the time. At night, we get off and sleep in barracks. A girl knows me.

"You were in collège Jeanne d'Arc. Your name is Lisette."

"Were you there too?"

"What do you think? Maybe you didn't know me, as I was two grades above you. Say, are you Jewish?"

"Well, yes. What about you?"

"I thought I was the only Jewish girl in the damn nunnery."

"Same here. I believed there were no other Jews."

"So maybe all the girls were Jewish."

"What is this place? It is not a school."

"It is a *Stalag*, a former prisoners' camp. I hope their schools are more comfortable. My father was a soldier, at the beginning of the war, and he was caught by the Jerries and he stayed in a Stalag. He says that sleeping on straw like here is very bad for your skin. You catch a rash that never goes away. He escaped. Then, since they were Jewish, they left me with the nuns and they went to Spain and even Morocco. When they came to fetch me in the collège, they didn't recognize me. When we were in the study room, you always went out at Vespers time."

"I had to pee."

"Sister Saint-François told us you went to see your brother on the other side, but he was gone. You waited for him every evening. She said it was a beautiful example of fidelity. I remember her eyes were shining."

"He left to help my mother and the baby. They haven't come back yet, but they will come back. You remember, we had to wash under our night-gown."

We travel for a full week to reach Denmark. I sleep on straw several times. It pricks, but I don't get a rash.

The fence

I live with Danes who do not speak French. This is even worse than aunt Erna—at least I understand what she says. In my bed at night, I talk to my brother.

"You know what? They eat herring for breakfast, here. They give me so much butter, cream and cheese that I am quite fed up. I had to learn Danish, *Ikke tak, Jeg er ikke hungrig mere*, it means thanks I'm not hungry anymore, otherwise I would become as fat as their cows. There's something wrong with the Sun: it doesn't want to sleep."

At the school on rue de Sévigné, I don't tell them that my parents haven't come back yet.

"My father, he is a policeman. You see the police station on rue des Minimes? He is a policeman. He wears a uniform with a kepi. His gun, I wanted to handle it once to see how heavy it was. He slapped me across the ears, gee, believe me, it hurts like hell! My mother is a nurse in the Hôtel-Dieu hospital. She works the night shift, that's why she never comes to get me after class."

"What kind of a name is it, Gremec? It's not a French name, is it?"

"My parents come from Brittany. You've heard of Perros-Guirec. It is a city in Brittany."

"Hey, you just made it up. Isn't she your aunt, the seamstress? She speaks with a foreign accent."

"And also Guilvinec. You just look up a map of Brittany. My grandmother, she wears a headdress that looks like a big chalk stick. She makes buckwheat pancakes on a special frying pan."

"Aren't they catholic, in Brittany? Why don't you ever come to catechism class?"

"*Our father who art in heaven hallowed be thy name thy kingdom come thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our traespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us and lead us not into the train station but deliver us from evil amen*. You see, I am as catholic as you are, but my parents, they don't want me to go to catechism class. This is because they are communist. My father, he says that priests are beasts."

The teacher says I am a good reader.

"Do you have books at home, Lisette?"

"Well…"

The fence

"You should get a library card. It is free. You know where the library is? In the 4th arrondissement city hall, on rue de Rivoli."

I spend time in the "Our beautiful provinces" section to read books about Brittany. I collect city names: Carantec, Bannalec, Gouarec, Cléguérec, Locquirec, Plouézec, Plouhinec, Ploubazlanec. I study headdresses and pancake receipes. I'd like to eat buckwheat pancakes. I wonder what they taste like.

Toward the end of the month, my aunt makes rolled pancakes with a potato stuffing that fill your stomach for good. This is when she is saving to pay the rent. Her husband is a riveter. For a long time, I couldn't figure out what kind of a job "rivta" was. He sticks rivets into handbags, to hold pieces of leather together. He says that good riveters don't crowd the streets. I imagine crowds of riveters in the streets. His colleagues are not as skillful as he is.

"Finkelman, he works like a pig. If the rivet isn't adjisted right, it sticks out like the nose in the middle of your face."

When riveted handbags are in fashion, he works day and night and we eat chicken. When the fashion turns to glued handbags, his boss kicks him out. He begs for work here and there. My aunt becomes quite nervous when the end of the month is in sight.

She is unhappy because she has no child. Sometimes she talks in a low voice with her husband. He brings her to the Hôtel-Dieu hospital. He comes back alone.

"Another miscarriage," he says.

I don't know what it means. She returns the next day. She cries.

"It is too late, now. But during the war, we couldn't…"

They'll get off the train at Gare de l'est. They'll take the subway to the Saint-Paul station. I'm lucky that there's only one exit. I stand at the top of the stairs and I stare at the people who emerge from the earth's bowels. They'll carry suitcases for sure. My brother looks like an adult already, I guess, and the baby comes to my shoulder, but I'll recognize mama.

My classmates are preparing for their first communion. One day, I enter the big Saint Paul church to see the candles. I sit down in a booth. There's a wire netting. The burden

of my heavy secret. Confess my sorrow. Father, I lied. It is my fault, my most grievious fault.

Someone behind the wire mesh.

"I'm listening, my child."

I get up, I run away, I go back to the subway's exit. My brother will come. I'll tell him everything, he'll understand.

This time, I spend the summer with peasants in the Auvergne mountains. The Red Cross program again. When I step off the bus, the peasants take me to church for a funeral. I haven't forgotten how to cross myself, thank God. The priest talks too much. He says death is even better than birth, since you are born to eternal life. Yeah, I am in no hurry to be born in that manner. I am bored. I need to pee. Some people cry and some laugh. Me, neither.

Their house has no floor, just the bare ground. No water. I must wash in the stream outside. The peasant woman takes away my toothbrush.

"We don't use these."

I watch over pigs. They groan as if they wanted to tell me something. I'm afraid they'll attack me. The peasant kills a pig with a huge knife. That will teach you to be polite, you beast. We eat pork three times a day.

"At least they didn't send us a Jew like last year. The kid refused to eat ham and sausages."

"He was picky?"

"Jews don't eat pork."

"Why don't they eat pork?"

"They are pigs themselves, so they don't want to eat their brothers. It would be cannibalism."

I know nothing about Jews, except they must hide in shacks and storage rooms.

I am thirteen. I am finishing elementary school. The teacher says I could go to high school. My aunt says I'd better become an apprentice somewhere and earn money.

A friend of aunt Erna comes visit her. They drink tea while eating cookies. I'm doing my homework in a corner. They speak yiddish. Me, I speak French, but I understand everything they say. *Mamaloschen*.

The fence

"Who's the girl?"

"My sister's daughter."

"Your sister who was sent to the concentration camp?"

"Her husband vanished too. The worst thing is that her son, my nephew… She had put the two kids in a boarding school, but he ran away. I don't even know how he came back home. They lived across the street. There's a police station in the very next block! I told her it was dangerous. She should have changed her name and moved to a quiet suburb. They came for her in February, 1944. She also had a baby. The police from rue des Minimes. She had furnished a closet above the ceiling, a good place to hide, with mattresses and food for weeks, but it didn't help: the concierge denounced her. This *kurvè* owed her money, I guess, for dresses. So then she didn't have to pay. She grabbed a few chairs, too, and the sewing machine. Over there, a mother with a child and a baby went to the gas chamber right away, of course.

I don't know this word, *Kurvè*. I stand up and I put on my coat.

"Where are you going, Lisette?"

I don't answer. I run to the end of rue de Turenne, then on at random. Good riveters don't crowd the streets. I walk hours in the night. Nobody notices me. They have other fish to fry. Their family didn't fry. I'll never come back, so there. That will teach you. I'll vanish. My parents come from Brittany. Shit, shit and shit. Our father who art in heaven, just stay there. Arlette gets up at dawn. She goes to the henhouse to pick up the eggs, with two gees. Did you wash the carrot? She has to eat, at her age. So now she's crying again. A shooting star is a shooting star. The soul of the baby didn't ascend to Heaven. No baby, no soul.

I sit under a porch. I could bark like a dog. So you want me to become a seamstress? You and your fat husband, I hate you. I won't hide in a closet above the ceiling. I'll earn lots of money, I'll buy an atomic bomb and I'll kill all the krauts.

I'll soon celebrate my seventy-fifth birthday. I learned my mother tongue all over again and I know that *kurvè* means whore. I suppose I came back rue de Turenne after I had wandered around Paris, but I don't remember. My aunt never mentioned my mother. Never. I think she despised her for trusting the concierge and letting the police catch her.

As I refused to become a seamstress, she found me a job cleaning offices. Then I studied in the evening and became an accountant. I left her home at twenty-two in order

The fence

to get married. My husband had lost his parents in a camp just like me. He was the first person I told everything to. He could understand me. He was like a twin, so I wasn't ashamed.

I used to wake up at night to check that the Germans hadn't taken our two boys away. Looking at them was painful, because I thought about my two brothers. I've never left them with a baby-sitter or sent them to summer camp.

I spoke with my aunt a few months before she died. She gave me papers, disapperance certificates. I know the dates, the train numbers.

Even today, I haven't forgiven my brother. He didn't say goodbye. Why did you leave me behind? Why?