

VieVie La Fontaine

PROLOGUE

EXODUS

“Exiled” is a word which my people, the Jewish descendants of Abraham, know well. We have experienced expulsion from Egypt, Babylon, and Rome as well as many other places during various periods throughout history. One of the most significant exiles wasn't from the *land* we inhabited but from this world. It began in March of 1933 when the German Reichstag elected the Nazi party. At that time, no party could form a majority parliamentary coalition to support a chancellor so the prominent statesman and diplomat, Franz von Papen, persuaded President Paul von Hindenburg to appoint Adolf Hitler on 30 of January in 1933. Hence, the transformation of the *Weiman Republic* into Nazi Germany quietly began. This republic eventually became a one-party dictatorship based on National Socialism. The new dictator desired to establish a “New Order” which would abolish what he saw as injustices as a result of the first world war and the victor's regulations from Britain and France. As a result of Hitler's leadership, the first six years of his “reign” created a massive economic recovery from the Great Depression. The people of Germany were ecstatic. Once again, they experienced pride in their country and believed their new leader could propel them to greatness as Hitler annexed territories which were home to millions of ethnic Germans. The support which he received was unmeasured. As former residents of Germany were united, the dictator's popularity soared.

The history of Adolf Hitler is vital to the relevance of this story of VieVie La Fontaine. Although her story is fiction, there are many historical facts sprinkled into this tale. Quickly, the reader becomes aware of the progression of a maniac in Europe and the hell which he inflicted on anyone resisting him. Maybe, the fascination with this period is the desire to prevent such evil actions from ever occurring again, or perhaps we seemed riveted to this time because it was fearful

and represented one of the most depraved periods of history. Adolf Hitler determined in his delusional mind his country was the "master race" while defiling and murdering millions of innocent men, women, and children. This tale combines his story with the actions of VieVie La Fontaine who represents a point of view held by many in France at the time. Mark Lichter, a young Jewish man exiled from his home to escape the persecution and rage of a madman, honestly tells this story. The irony of innocence in France, before their world changed forever, is compared to the same simplicity in Germany which silently changed without anyone lifting a hand to help.

As I look back, the year 1931 became a marker for those who were wise enough to imagine the worst. One hundred thousand Jews poured into Eretz Israel while Englebert Dollfuss, Chancellor of Austria, persuaded the president to appoint him as the dictator. He may have persecuted the Nazis, but he considered all Jews communists and also treated them with disdain. Hence, there was a mass exodus to Eretz. Many of these displaced souls came from Germany when my race realized our world was about to change. I thank God each day my father, Hans, had the foresight to demand I leave my post as a student at Hamburg University in Berlin during this time. He could sense the winds were changing once again for us. Never, would it enter my mind, insanity could ever reign down again on innocent members of the German population. As Jews, we paid taxes and worked hard for all we obtained. There were no handouts for us. Still, that old hatred which seemed to follow us as the Jewish people, once again received stirring with the spoon of lies and accusations from a man who filled with evil and hate. A man named Adolf Hitler.

CHAPTER ONE: EXILED

On that day, long ago, when I entered my house laughing and happy from an average day of study, I knew. Something was very wrong. Mother's eyes were swollen and red. She appeared haggard and tired. Father never greeted me in the early afternoon like this. He worked each weekday right up until the dinner hour.

"Mark, please sit down. We need to talk."

At once, I realized pressing news waited for me. Sadly, Papa began to tell me about the rising star in the German party. Of course, I had heard of this man but didn't think Adolf Hitler would amount to much. Politics did not interest me. I didn't keep abreast of the latest news. Law was the subject with which I struggled. It was difficult for me to keep my marks high in this perplexing study of precedents and old facts. Already, I realized although my father and grandfather thrived in this field, it made no sense to me. Aware I had made a terrible decision ever following in my father's big shoes, I struggled with how I might explain to him, I hated the subject which he loved. You see, I desired to paint. I loved art as my mother. She was a well-known artist in a small area of Berlin. A good day for me was painting in her bright studio for the entire day. I never thought of myself as weak or feminine even though my father may have. As the sun streamed into the paradise which she made for herself, I stood at one of her easels in the gaily painted red room and expressed my very soul. Mother loved color stroked with a heavy hand onto the canvases which stood in abundance inside her studio. She also loved laughter. Oh, the endless hours we enjoyed together inside her hallowed, red walls. How could painting come to me effortlessly while I struggled with the expected career of law? During the early fall of 1933 in Germany, my world was content as we struggled to return to life before World War 1. My family progressed as well as any at our recovery. Life appeared pleasant enough at last.

My mind raced over these facts as Father outlined his fears, hard times may once again call for us, "The people of persecution." I laughed.

"Father, don't be so dramatic. Have you seen him? Hitler is a joke. Not to be taken seriously!"

My parents lowered their eyes. As they clasped hands, a jolt of shock ran up my spine:

What do they know they aren't sharing? Something is wrong.

Before I could question them, Hans sadly stated,

"Mark, you must leave university and Berlin immediately! Your mother and I will remain here, in the city, until things improve. Then, we will bring you back home. You must do as instructed. There is no room for discussion on this. You must trust us."

Morosely, they glanced at each other. I could tell, my parents attempted to smile but were unable. Again the question raised itself:

What do my parents know that I don't?

As I prepared to protest, the magnitude of his words became apparent. They were offering me a way of escaping a world in which I did not belong. Never would I be an excellent attorney like father and grandfather. Then, he spoke the words which rang in my mind as "honey to the bees."

"We are sending you to Paris. There, you will live with old family friends who reside close to the Eiffel Tower. You will love them and the great city which makes artists. We are providing you a way to start a new life. One of which we know you have dreamed. I realize you do not enjoy the study of law. We made a mistake, didn't we?"

Casually, he playfully ruffled my hair. After those words, nothing else mattered. Call me selfish; I was. This very action was what I prayed for each night. A way to save face at the university while living in a city which intrigued me:

Can this be happening?

It was like manna falling from Heaven. Without any action on my part, my most profound dream, no, my wildest infatuation was realized. Instantly, the sad, mundane words of my beloved father drowned into oblivion by my thoughts of living in Paris. Gay, exciting Paris, where

freedom was grabbed with relish by those fortunate enough to claim it. Perhaps, a gorgeous girlfriend with long, blonde hair would stroll on my arm by the River Seine? A smile the size of one of Father's law books spread across my face. Nothing else mattered! My dreams were coming true! All of this nonsense which Papa sadly spoke could never happen. Once they sent me to Paris, I would never return to Berlin. Not because of that weak man whom they feared, Hitler, but because in Paris, I could obtain my desires. No, they must visit me in my swanky apartment in the city of my dreams someday soon. At that point, I had no idea of the validity of my thoughts as my mind bounded forward into my new world. I would never return to the home which I adored and the people who gave their lives to save me. The unthinkable would not occur because of my actions but those of a group of evil men who were out of control!

The rest of that day filled with sadness for my parents. Maybe, they understood our eyes would never meet again at least not in this world. As Mother cried, I gaily packed large cases with my clothes. When Father entered my room sometime later, he became aghast at the volume of my luggage.

"No, son, we must not call attention to your departure. As Jews, we are still able to leave, but soon, this will not be the case."

Again, I laughed at the words of a paranoid old man. Still, I quickly packed only necessary items as Father explained he wanted me to purchase new clothes when I arrived in Paris. It was important I not "stand out" there. He told me it was vital I fit into the Parisian life. I laughed:

What an easy assignment!

I thought as vivid plans began to form for my new life as a famous artist:

What great fortune all of this is for me!

Maybe my parents were delusional and paranoid, but they were establishing my deepest desire. Someday, they would witness my success as a great artist, or so I believed at that point.

At dinner that evening, few words were spoken. Mother occasionally dabbed her eyes which remained lowered. She appeared unable to look at me. It seemed Father's stare never left my face. Was he trying to remember me? I shook my head at my silly thoughts:

Am I becoming as sensitive and fearful as they?

Almost as though scheduled, as soon as the meal ended, someone knocked on our door.

"Ah, he is a little early. Abi, welcome Franz while I talk with Mark a moment."

Sadly, Mother walked from the room with her head down. I realized she might be considering the fact she would never see me again. Her walk was of a doomed person. I smiled at her theatrics. After all of this Hitler madness passed, I would take her to a lovely Parisian dinner when they visited me.

"Mark, you will be driven to Paris by this man, Franz Heldman. He will drive you to General La Fontaine's home. General La Fontaine is an old friend of your grandfather. You will like him and his wife, VieVie. Be careful of VieVie; she is a great beauty. This exotic creature destroyed the heart of many men who fell in love with her."

His eyes told me, he was one of her victims. What was happening? My entire world was changing, and Father was confessing once, he loved another woman? Who were these La Fontaine people? The breath left my lungs as I tried to breathe normally:

Things are coming at me too quickly!

After taking several deep breaths, I relaxed a little. All of these things were frightening to me.

I could not understand the power of his words about using caution around the beautiful VieVie La Fontaine. I later wondered had he not said those things if I may have withstood her ways, but I will never know.

My drive with Franz lasted about nine hours and fifty minutes during which we exchanged few words. My driver appeared nervous as he frequently checked the rearview mirror and made little grunting sounds. This small man had delicate features. His advancement into older age left him with receded mostly gray hair. He drove huddled over the steering wheel as though he could not see well. His actions made me uncomfortable. I had never seen him before. In fact, I would never again recognize another person in this new world which claimed to be mine. Later, I would wonder about the degree of worry and concern among the German citizens of which I had no idea. Of course, I could not know of any approaching danger, but many of my people seemed to feel the threat growing!

Our departure from Berlin occurred immediately after dinner around 8:30 pm. Arrival time, at the home of the La Fontaine's, was in the early morning about 6:30 am. The general opened the door with a startled gaze. General La Fontaine was a large man in midlife. His hair was blonde and very shiny as were his teeth. His startled look surprised me and placed my nerves even more on edge. Had he hoped I might not come? If he had, there was no hesitation once he saw me. I reluctantly offered my hand which had not been washed all evening even after several stops in the woods to relieve ourselves. I thought about telling him he may not want to shake my hand but figured a general in the French Army would not care. Still, our new relationship started in a most loaded condition. Already, I felt like a beggar taking such hospitality from this stranger. Why would he offer to allow me to invade his home? What services would I be expected to perform for this grand family? I desperately wished I had questioned my father as to our relationship

with these people. Racking my brain, I could not remember ever hearing of them. Already, my nerves caused me to perspire and tremble a little. During my life, I had never felt subservient to another:

Now, I do.

General La Fontaine smiled as he walked away from the door. I entered uninvited and followed him with trepidation as I carried my small, brown satchel down a long, winding hall. The house was exquisite and gigantic. I felt small and alone. Never had I seen such wealth and lavishness. At last, we walked into a brightly painted yellow room. The decor appeared polished and shined beautifully. Did Madame La Fontaine decorate this palatial home? A dark maid worked quietly behind the counter. She nodded at me but did not smile or speak. Without inquiring, the General motioned for me to sit as he read the morning paper. He never even looked at me. I felt like a nonentity. Anne-Laure, the maid, placed a generous, piping hot cup of black coffee before me which soon was followed by a delicious looking croissant with a small container of French butter and fresh cream. My shaking hands finally resulted in the General looking at me. All I could think was I had made a terrible mistake in my dreams of being an artist in France. Was there no place or craft in which I could hope to find joy? It seemed I did not belong anywhere. Admittedly, here in this city of Paris where everyone appeared welcomed, I might discover acceptance but maybe not? I almost cried but swallowed loudly instead. This action caused the vague host to look at me as though seeing me for the first time. He put his paper aside and began to speak to me. To my surprise, the General spoke in fluent English which eradicated one of my fears. My English, surprisingly, was better than my French. At least, if anyone decided to converse with me, I could respond. My parents and I had often spoken fluently in this language which we enjoyed.

"I was excellent friends with your grandfather and deeply respect your father. Most of the other Germans are swine. You don't need to be concerned here. Think of this as your 'new university.' My wife has your quarters ready which include a large, bright studio. There is no need to

be fearful or feel subservient. This place is your new home. Here, you may live your life as long as necessary. You are a man now so feel free to come and go as you please. In fact, we hope you stay here forever. You see, my wife could not have children. This fact has been a great cause of pain for her. I hate to tell you, but you are her ‘new son,’ at least in *her* mind. Try to accept the love she desires to lavish upon you. Such action will make her happy. Anything which pleases VieVie will also delight me. You see, she is my life. My wife will work with you to soften that heavy accent which you carry. All signs of the German man must go!”

He smiled the grandest smile which I still remember. His face was broad and pleasant with large green eyes. His skin was tanned and creased by the sun.

Returning his smile, I took a large gulp of coffee and devoured my roll. Immediately, the maid placed another of each in front of me:

Yes, if only my studio waits, painted in a bright French red as Mamas?

This had always been my dream. All worry dissipated as I studied my new home after finally receiving the welcome which I craved. Quietly, my host studied me for a few seconds. Even though I was intimidated by the large man, I liked his spontaneous nature and easy smile.

The General excused himself for a few moments while I breathed deeply. Finally, I began to relax as my mind thought back over the past fourteen hours. From the time I walked into my home so innocently after classes until this moment, my entire world changed. For a brief moment, I thought back over the past few hours as I remembered exactly the way I felt before I became a Parisian.

During the early fall of 1933 in Germany, my world was perfect although my family was still recovering from the effects of the First World War. In Berlin, our family received great respect and were well

liked even by a few Germans although we were definitely Jewish. Success came quickly for my kind and gentle folks.

My ancestors had come to live in this place of changing political expectations back in 1671 after being allowed to resettle in a city which expelled them in 1573 due to political issues. According to history, in 1510 some Jews were accused of desecrating and stealing from a church inside a village near Berlin. The arrest of one hundred and eleven Jews subjected them to examination. Unfairly, fifty-one souls received sentences of death. Thirty-eight of these people witnessed the agony of burning at the stake in the New Market Square. A Christian, at the same time, was also arrested. Later, evidence proved he was the only person guilty. Before this knowledge could be confirmed, all of the remaining Jews had been rounded up and expelled from the entire electorate of Brandenburg. Once again, the Jewish people were unfairly exiled from homes they loved. Years later, these innocents received complete exoneration at the Diet of Frankfurt in 1539 through the efforts of Joseph Gershom of Rosheim and Philipp Melanchthon. In 1535–71 authorities allowed many Jews to return and resettle in the town of Brandenburg. Jews were also permitted to reside in Berlin once more in 1543 despite the opposition of some of the townspeople. In 1571, when the Jews again were expelled from Brandenburg, the Jews of Berlin were expelled "forever." For the next one hundred years, a few Jewish people appeared at widely scattered intervals. About 1663, the Court Jew Israel Aaron, a supplier to the army and the electoral court, quietly received permission to return. That was the time my family's presence flowered in a place which seemed to possess a love/hate relationship with the Jewish people, my people. Never could I understand why my relatives chose to return to this place which had mistreated them and where many still harbored hatred toward us.

My father, Hans Lichter, worked diligently as an attorney in the law practice which his father, Abram, had established over seventy years earlier. Hans was a giant of a man but very kind and generous as was my grandfather. Father frequently told me, his only child, intriguing stories of this great man, named Abraham, whose attributes became legendary

in the world of Berlin law. Both of these were my role models, and I loved them beyond words.

My mother, Abigail, had many friends in the town which my small family loved despite unfair treatment of many of our people. Mother was gorgeous with long dark hair and eyes. Her hair was always braided perfectly and pinned on the base of her head. She loved beautiful things and dressed with a lovely flair. My father doted on Abi, his spouse. He believed a wife should be loved and respected like a princess. The love which shined from their eyes captivated me. My dream became one that someday, I would experience the special bond which they seemed to possess with a lovely woman of *my* choosing.

Many evenings as a young boy, I found myself alone with Hannah, our maid, while my parents enjoyed the opera or ballet. Both of them read voraciously and enjoyed the finer things in life. Never did I realize my time, compared to most of the other Jews in Germany, was unique. The few friends whom I knew appeared to have the same circumstances as I. It would be years before I came to appreciate what my parents did to ensure my future and safety. If only I could have thanked them for the love and security with which they sheltered me, but I did not have the time. When I became aware of their selfless actions, it was too late. The maniacal hatred of one, Adolf Hitler, needlessly ripped them from my outstretched hands. The nightmares, which consumed my world for years, were a side effect of the ignorance of a generation of bigoted, evil thugs who destroyed the dreams of so many gentle and loving people. Much worse than bad dreams waited for millions, including my parents as this monster gained a foothold in our world.

This time in 1933 was my first year of university study. I loved my new freedom. My parents had sheltered me all of my childhood. Never did I experience bigoted or hateful treatment because they rejected such actions. Many Jewish friends at the university lulled me into believing I had a right to enjoy life like the Germans who often stared at us and made insulting, rude remarks.

"What is their problem? Um?"

My friends and I dared to stare back at the Germans who faced us. Frederich laughed as he told me secrets of his German girlfriend. These bullies did not frighten or even interest us. Sure, we were aware of the hatred which seemed to surround us as a people but what specifically had *we* done? My family taught me always to be fair to others and treat all with respect. How could I understand this unfair, bigoted treatment? I could not.

Hitler's rise in Germany started in 1933. At that time, few people considered him much of a threat, but the constant increase in his popularity and of the Nazis allowed him to raise the Nazi State. Slowly and meticulously, he denounced individual freedoms and created a Volk community. These actions transcended class and religious differences. Carefully, he worked while his actions went almost unnoticed by most. The Third Reich soon became a police state as the SS guards controlled the police. Maybe, a few people in Germany took notice at this stage, but still, nothing was done to stop him. It didn't take long for the SS to begin their intimidation and harassment of those they had targeted, mainly the Jews. The Civil Service Law of April 1933 started eliminating the Jewish people from state positions and governmental agencies. Ever so slowly, the Nazis abolished the trade unions. In mid-July 1933, only the Nazi party remained. All others had been efficiently banned or disbarred themselves due to pressure or intimidation of these SS guards. We Jews began to despise the thugs who arrogantly acted as though they were superior to us. Most German people believed they were biologically destined for expansion Eastward while they pushed the belief they were a master race and should establish permanent rule in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. Hitler began to encourage the "pure" German women to bear as many pure "Aryan" children as possible. With this, the framework was established to eliminate the "lesser" races such as the Jews and Gypsies as well as a few others. Our nervous stares at each passing Jew penetrated the streets. It was as though we looked at each other with a question:

What can we do?

Immediately after “elections” in March of 1933, the Nazis began their systemic release of anger and hatred against the Jewish people. Many of the Jews were molested or killed; some Jewish business destroyed. Now, this changing tide in Germany had progressed too far as all of Europe continued to live as though they would be safe. This blank process was denial which waited for many other countries as well:

Just wait France, you are not safe!

No one suspected how effortlessly France would fall. Maybe, for all time, people will question the French officials who handed a city so beautiful as Paris to a tyrant without a fight. These things still cause me distress. Of course, I had no idea at this time of the horrors waiting for a man so young and totally alone in this new world of French customs and styles. Forever, I will think of my dear parents with love and awe for all they did to protect me while sacrificing themselves. Although my story fills with horror beyond words, so many others were annihilated. Their stories are left untold. The only crime they committed was they were born Jewish. Eventually, I found joy again and peace in my world of a new land which welcomed one such as I. May the others never be forgotten!

CHAPTER TWO: MY NEW HOME

Four cups of coffee; two more croissants; and a full breakfast later, which was prepared by Anne-Laure, the General had returned to the table. Together, we stood laughing by the door leading into the kitchen. I felt as if I had known this man who was larger than life for eternity. It became clear to me, General La Fontaine was a kind and fair man. Maybe, my earlier fears were unfounded, and life *could* be as I had always dreamed. While I stood there, I quickly studied the magnificent mansion, now my home:

Can this be?

I felt a tinge of nostalgia for my sad parents and the needless worry they felt over this strange, little man named Adolf Hitler. Did they think one as insignificant as he could achieve a stable position in Germany? I almost laughed at the concept. Suddenly, I remembered their faces and the fear which glared at me with large eyes of dread. Perhaps, I should have stayed and at least tried to convince them of their folly. They were old and vulnerable now:

How could I have just left them?

As my happiness grew, so did the ancient enemy, guilt.

The General freely talked as though we were old friends. Monsieur La Fontaine was easy to like. In great detail, he outlined his noble career in the *Armée de Terre* or the “land army” in France. Casually, the General removed his shirt to show me his latest scar which was a massive gash on his chest. Without bragging, he recounted many of his battles. General La Fontaine was a legend in the army of France. Although the General was in his late forties, maybe early fifties, he appeared to be in great shape. His robust size only made his booming voice more appealing. I thought of my beloved Father and his quiet nature. Father was a large man too but not as loud. The two men appeared as parallel opposites.

While my eyes took in the opulence of this exquisite mansion, I spied a piece of furniture which obviously was different from all of the others. A small cupboard stood in one of the corners of the grand yellow room. All other pieces were gigantic to fit the scale of such a large, open floor plan. This small cupboard did not belong. Although the article did not produce the same effect the showier pieces elicited, this small, green cupboard had an unusual charm. My eyes stared at it without any desire for such on my part. Later, I wondered if God was directing things for the hell which waited for me? I would wonder if *He* was speaking to me at that time as *He* caused me to notice something which would later save my life. The little cabinet reflected the same pale green as the dishes and

trim of the sunny yellow space surrounding me. The light green cabinet's expertly trimmed edges looked at me in a darker green color with fluted lines on the sides and small flower reliefs all around the top. It was very French. The doors had an open space with thin metal mesh allowing the expensive glassware prominently to show as if peeking from a "hidden" space. This small article seemed to cry, "You don't need to be grand to be beautiful. Notice me! Remember me! I have a secret!" I loved it as I identified with it. It represented *me* at least in my mind. Without meaning to be rude, I felt mysteriously drawn to it. Lovingly, I walked to it and carefully rubbed the fluted edge.

"Yes, everyone loves it. This armoire belonged to my great-grandmother. My grandparents were very wealthy. *Arrière grand-mère* possessed excellent taste. This little cabinet was discarded by my Mother when she and Father suddenly found themselves living the 'grand life' in the home where mes grands-parents lived and died. My two parents had inherited all of my grandparent's furniture, but this little object was not grand enough for *my* mother. Mark, this cabinet hides a secret. Remember it in the future; it may save your life. He repeated, 'there is a secret contained inside. Don't forget.'"

The look from his large eyes seemed to demand my attention as though a warning:

How strange, what is he trying to tell me? I don't understand.

"This sat on the street one day many years ago waiting for the garbage when VieVie noticed it on a Sunday visit with my family. My beloved wife did not identify with my selfish parents. She demanded we rescue this small cupboard which of course, we did. It appeared etched in history to us. Almost everyone who visits us now falls in love with it. Perhaps, it contains a magical spell? Eh?"

He hit me on the back almost knocking me into the "charming piece of history." History fascinated me. It still does. I desperately wished I had received more education on this subject. Perhaps, I should have studied

that at university. Then, maybe, I would not have been in such a hurry to leave Berlin and all I loved.

"How old is this thing?"

He didn't respond. Most likely, the general didn't have a clue as to the age of this perplexing cabinet. Although the paint was broken and etched with age, the General explained his wife would not have it painted. She loved the rawness.

I stared with apparent interest at this seven-foot beauty. At that moment, the phone shrilly began to ring.

"Anne-Laure, please show our guest to his new home."

Smiling, he walked briskly toward the squawking phone as he waved us away. I followed the maid with surprise as she exited the nearest door:

So, what now? Are they going to make me sleep outdoors?

Outside, on this glorious early winter day, the heavens were as blue as summer. Wispy, thin white clouds moved sporadically across the sky. A gentle wind softly moved the massive trees and perfectly manicured shrubs which graced the estate. Away in the distance, the Eiffel Tower stood majestically. How fortunate was I?

What is she doing? Maybe Anne-Laure is confused? Where is she taking me?

Slowly, we walked toward a small house located only feet from the primary residence.

Together, we traipsed across a lawn of thick, dark green grass mowed to perfection. As far as the eye could see, there were extensive grounds of turf. In the middle of all of this was a significant stone fountain which sprayed a mass of water. The statue was very tall. Peaceful sounds of

falling spray reminded me how tired I suddenly felt from my travels. The gentle winds carried the spray from the fountain onto my face. It felt divine. I stood mesmerized by the soothing beauty surrounding me. I longed to remove my shoes and run! I desired freedom. Freedom from the fears of what was happening all around me in a world of which I had no control. Running through the soft grasses as I darted among the graceful topiaries would be thrilling to me. Like all other young people at this time, I wanted all of the fears and threats to end:

Why can't we be allowed to live normally? Why does the risk of another war wait for us so soon?

This place, my new home, must be heaven on earth. How could any average person live like this?

Oh, if only times were different and I could simply live! Without a doubt, I could be happy here.

Our location was smack dab in the middle of one of the greatest cities on the planet. In fact, we were only a few miles from the hub of Paris. But of course, these were not ordinary times or people. I resided with a famous general and his beautiful wife. Anticipation at finally meeting the beautiful VieVie La Fontaine caused my heart to race with excitement and fear.

"Monsieur Mark, did you hear me?"

Anne-Laure had a thick accent. One which I could not define. She was not French. Her sweet smile shook away the shackles from my obsessive thoughts of the lovely VieVie.

The small, ebony woman opened a thick, ancient, hazel-colored wooden door into a stone, cream painted cottage with a black slate roof. My spirits soared as I realized I had received my own little house. This situation was perfect! I followed the tiny woman into this mystical space. The inside appeared much smaller than the ornate outside. We

stood briefly in a nice-sized sitting area which once again was furnished entirely with proportions professionally designed. The stained linen walls housed Arabic arches over all of the burnished, old, brown wooden doors. In the middle of the room, a moderate fireplace allowed me to view the fire from the foyer as well as the pale gray damask sofas in the main salon. The back of this space housed a galley-sized kitchen. All of the appliances were the best French brands and displayed the cobalt blue which the French seemed to love. My dishes and accessories also were the darkest of blues. The glowing walls of glossy paint were mostly beautiful soft gray colors. The effect was masculine and appealing to me.

Anne-Laure moved effortlessly into the one bedroom. It was about the same size as the main room, but the walls were a *bright French red*. Such a different place than my dank German home which I previously rated as beautiful. Now, my old house seemed dark and dull except for Mama's beautiful red studio. Briefly, I experienced a tinge of guilt. I dared to think of my parents in any negative way?

I now have my own red room, what colors the French love! These people are not afraid to bare their souls with the brightest of hues. Surely, Mama and Papa are well. I, too, am being paranoid.

My heart sang loudly in my chest! All of this was more than my mind could digest. So many changes were coming to me at a rapid pace. I couldn't get a grasp of things.

Then, I almost dropped to my knees in adulation as Anne-Laure opened yet another door. Fear assailed me. I must be dreaming. All of this was too good to be true:

Will I awake back in Germany dreading class tomorrow on a subject I hate as friends around me cry with desolation about this Hitler character?

Before me stretched a space of brightest *white*. It wasn't painted red as I once dreamed my own studio someday might, but my *bedroom* was that lovely deep red which the French adored. My studio glowed in the early afternoon sunlight with shining hard glossy walls which reflected the swirling light onto large canvases. These graced three different easels as well as numerous huge canvasses which sprawled around the floor. Palates smeared with old paint created indescribable happiness for me as I noticed them haphazardly laying around the ample space. The odor, which I loved more than any other, pulled at my olfactory senses. Oil paint was it possible I could identify each color by the smell? It seemed most plausible on this day of new beginnings. Many different sizes of boar bristle brushes waited to dry in a bright porcelain pot of blue. Heavy, white shelves held books about art as well as additional art supplies. A small porcelain red vase sat among the shelves holding a tiny group of flowers:

Did VieVie place them here for me? This vision has been my dream for all of my life. Have I always been destined to come here?

It sure felt like I had. I became acutely aware; I now faced my future. It was up to no one but me to make it great! Now, without the harshness of Father, I could proudly work in the profession where I seemed to excel. My love of art did not appear weak or feminine in this city of writers and artists. No longer did I feel unworthy or different in this land of free thinking and colorful characters. I belonged here! Maybe, I now lived with strangers, but my destiny as a great artist awaited. Never had I known such happiness which again stirred my guilt:

What are my parents doing at this moment; if only I could speak with them? Surely, I will be able to return to my German home soon. Hans and Abi will laugh with me at our fears and foolish obsession with this Hitler character.

CHAPTER THREE: IF ONLY I KNEW

My little house was small but spacious if that makes sense. How I relished the freedom to take a deep breath and not feel hurried. No class schedules pulled my mind. Only the privilege of doing what I chose. I wondered:

How many people in the world are allowed this luxury?

My life soared from mildly depressive to joyous! I would merely refuse to think of the panic around me. Anne-Laure smiled broadly and patted my shoulder. She turned and silently left my presence.

The next thing I did was enter "my" studio. The late afternoon light filtered through the massive platanes outside which showily displayed their white blooms. The French loved *les platanes*. For a few moments, I caught my breath as I watched the beautiful light gracefully hide and then burst through onto my white walls. My entire studio resembled a vast canvas of unblemished perfection. I briefly considered painting on the wall:

Maybe, I should draw giant platanes to match those outside which face my window? I shall paint the leaves broad and extra green with a deep sheen!

As I continued to loiter there, suddenly, sadness flowed through my body. It was at *that* point when I accepted the fact something was very wrong in my beloved Germany. It would take longer for the acceptance of the possible annihilation of my new prosperity to take seed. Life had been hectic since I left treasured Berlin. I remained unaware of the preparations being made all around me in my new land. Now, I finally had time to consider the situation. My parents were not irrational people. No, they possessed a profound intellect. Both had received educations at excellent institutions of higher learning. I faced the fact, at that moment, something was very wrong in the country of my birth. Paris no longer glowed quite the same after such a realization. Even here in Paris, something stirred in the wind. It was a feeling of dread and suspicion. Although I experienced great joy at my new location, an uneasiness

crept into my core. How could I appear giddy if my loved ones were in danger? *Were* my parents safe? What about our ancestral home and all they owned? It was a great deal. Nausea overcame me as I faced the fact:

I ran from them. How could I abandon my parents? What sort of selfish man leaves his family when they are old and fearful? I should have stayed with them and faced the doom which they projected.

Did I do so because a sense of doom demanded I get away? As a young man, of course, I wanted to live free and happy. Was I selfish? Forced to face the fact, life may no longer be as I wished caused me to lie down on the shinning wrap of silk the color of butter waiting for me on my bed. I pulled myself into a fetal position and slept on the luxurious down feathers.

As the intoxicating pleasure of release from the treacheries of life overtook me, I dreamed. Horrible images of my people: Jewish men, women, and children who suffered so many times throughout history paraded in my mind's eye. Cries of pity softly tugged at my consciousness. Was that I who cried? My heart broke under the realization, my people were a persecuted lot:

If only I could help them.

At one point, I felt someone gently shake me, but I refused to wake. I could not leave my hell behind. To do so would be unkind and unfair to those who suffered in my dream:

What are they trying to tell me?

Later, I awakened with a start. The wetness on my face attested to the fact, I had cried. Even the silk covering of my grand bed of soft silk the color of butter felt damp.

No longer did the shining light dance on the white walls which resembled canvases. Now, impenetrable darkness covered "my" home.

Slowly, I stood. Never would I be the same. Horrible images of suffering would not leave me. Loudly, I screamed as I remembered the hollow look in the eyes of my beloved parents which assailed me during my short respite. In reality, I had left them without remorse. In my dream, Abi and Hans had walked on a long road littered with corpses of the innocents. It may have been a dream, but the realness shook me:

I must return to Germany! What was I thinking when I left them without even questioning why they were sure things were about to change?

What I witnessed in my dream would never escape my consciousness. Forever, I would carry the scars of my selfishness. No amount of bargaining could erase the vision. Yes, I was young, but so were the youth who walked holding the hand of a parent with the trust of a child. These sad, little creatures walked forward with only the belief nothing bad could happen as long as mama and papa walked by their side:

Why is Mommy crying?

The little girl must have asked, but as a lamb for slaughter, she did not question. What good would it do? There was no way to revolt against the considerable number of guards and cruelly trained dogs which penned them. Those dogs would rip the innocents apart. Instead, in my dream, they walked to a large building:

What is there?

My vision would not allow me access inside that dingy place. The thought was absurd; it all appeared ridiculous in my awakened state.

When I walked to the window, the large platanes which stood nobly outside were barely visible in the penetrating blackness. How could they be free when suffering surrounded my beloved people? Briefly, I turned on the lamp of gold which sat on the antique table by my bed, but realized, I was too tired to do anything. My longing was to complete the horrible dream:

What is in the awful structure to which those people walked so freely yet sadly?

I feared the vision might *indeed* return. I wanted to visit that wretched place but feared to return there. With great haste, I washed my face, showered, and returned to my bed of down. Sleep gently washed over me, but my dream refused to reappear. Instead, I tossed and turned for the remaining hours of darkness as I determined tomorrow, somehow, I *would* return to Germany and save my parents from whatever it was they feared. Such a realization provided me peace enough so I could sleep.

Early morning light gently awakened me:
Where am I?

My entire body ached. The webs of sleepiness pulled me back under the covers until I remembered the dream! My return to Germany may be difficult, but I couldn't stand myself if I did not. Pulling on the same attire as yesterday, I walked briskly to the "big house." I spied the General through the window reading his morning paper the same as the day before. Hesitantly, I knocked on the door unsure of how he may receive me:

Is it too early? Am I a bother? It is essential I buy my own groceries so I won't be a bother to the La Fontaines.

Multiple thoughts filled my troubled mind. I felt overwhelmed and lost in a new place. Then, I recalled I was determined to leave at once. Everything may be jumbled and confused in my mind, but I accepted what I must do. La Fontaine looked up and smiled broadly. The maid opened the door with a smile as well. Things were friendlier than on my arrival yesterday.

"Good to see you, old man! Come on inside! You don't need to be cautious; remember, this is *your* home. VieVie was out late last night. She did try to visit you on her return, but you were already asleep. She

mentioned you appeared most upset, but of course you would. No worries, she will find you later in the morning. My wife spends one night each month with three of her model friends. You can't believe how beautiful they all are! Now, what's for breakfast this morning?"

Slowly, I sat in the same chair as the day before:

How can I explain this without sounding a little insane?

"General, something has come up. I must return to Germany as soon as possible. I have funds to cover this. Can you arrange a driver? Please? I must leave at once."

"What? Are you insane? Why would you desire to return to that cesspool? Don't you understand: Hitler is mad? He could do *anything*. Your father instructed me not to allow your return under any conditions. So the answer is an emphatic 'NO!' I am sorry, old man, but I can't allow it."

With no warning, I broke. Screams surprised me as I realized they came from me. My entire body fell to the floor as tears of misery assaulted my eyes. I thought dying would be a great relief. Anger, fear, betrayal, so many emotions cascaded in my mind. Finally, I couldn't cry anymore, and my throat was sore from the yelling:

The General must think of me as weak, pathetic.

"I apologize for this outburst. You must think of me as very weak. Don't you see? Something is wrong if only I can return to my home and tell my parents how much I love them. You see? I must be allowed to return, if only for a short time. Please, I beg for your help."

Naturally, I realized I sounded insane as I repeated my words through spits of saliva and snot.

A sound as soft as an angel spoke. To this day, I remember seeing HER at that moment and hearing the voice which I loved more than any other:

If only I could see her once again and touch her even if briefly, but that may not be.

Caressing my head into her chest was the lovely VieVie. In her arms, I felt the touch of a nurturer. This young woman was someone whom I could trust and not feel weak or foolish in her presence. I raised my eyes to see the most gorgeous face in the world. Her scent was of vanilla. Slowly, I lifted my eyes into her alabaster face. The tears stopped immediately. I held her to my chest with great care as one holds a small child. Deeply, I breathed her scent of vanilla:

This feeling must be the closest thing to Heaven on earth.