

The French Resistance

I take a bite into a piece of burnt toast for the twenty-fourth time this month. Excluding the ten days after May started, before the Germans took over, I've been keeping count, because what really is there better to do than count how many pieces of burnt toast I've consumed.

A few days ago, my brother Thomas had mentioned that I should apply for a job to earn some more money to support the family. I'd been thinking about it and decided that something in the government offices would be suitable. I lean back in my chair and look out the window. From our house on the corner, we have a pretty good vantage point of the lines of soldiers patrolling the area outside.

I stand up and decide to do something productive. I check the bread bin and realise we were running low on bread. I wipe imaginary dust off my skirt, grab the key and peek out the door cautiously.

And there is my bicycle, right where I left it. I'd been saving up since November last year to get it, blue, elegant and extremely second hand. I remember purchasing it early March and spending the last two months cycling around the streets without a care in the world. I craved the electric thrill I got whenever I rode this bicycle. I didn't feel on edge or stressed, just like I could keep cycling until the day's end. Now I have to be careful. I have lots of cares and worries and I constantly feel like, with one tiny tap, my whole world will break into pieces.

Still, I jump on enthusiastically. I cycle to the local bakery and park my bicycle in front of the window. I abandon my bicycle and dash to the door. The bell tinkles merrily as I walk in, and I smile at the lady behind the counter.

"Good morning, Jacqueline." She says. She seems distracted.

"You too, Mrs Margo." I answer. I check the notice board with my fingers crossed. Among all the usual, one poster stands out.

Position vacant! Work as a tea lady in the government offices, no experience required! Apply today!
Ask for Mr Laurent at 52 Courtwork Square, Pantin.

This is exactly what I need! I unpin the advertisement and wave it at Mrs Margo. "Can I take this?" I ask.

"Sure sweetie." She smiles but it doesn't reach her eyes. She has never been the same since her husband left to join the French Forces of the Interior, a group of resistance fighters that my brother belongs to.

I rush out the door in my excitement, forget the bread, and leap on my bicycle. I squint and mutter the address to myself. I cycle until I'm out of breath, which just so happens to be 52 Courtwork Square. They've got posters here too. I take some down discreetly. I don't want anyone else sniping this position. I stuff the papers in my pocket and start to walk inside but then stop. *What am I*

thinking?! Walking inside in my everyday clothes! I need to change into something presentable! Polish my shoes!

I whip around throw myself at my bicycle and start pedalling like my life depends on it. Back at the house I push the key in the lock roughly. Inside. I redress, assemble myself and I'm ready. Back on the road, I push down every pedal until, once again, I'm at 52 Courtwork Square.

I open the door and peek inside. It's a small reception room with a desk and a lady in a pink dress and circular glasses sitting behind it. A pot plant that looks like it needs attention. A broken air vent that has a small line of spiders streaming out. Dusty portraits of long dead ministers just barely managing to cling to the walls.

I walk up to the reception desk and the lady behind it. "Hi," I say awkwardly.

"Hi sweetheart, what do you need?"

"Um," I pull out a crumpled poster from my pocket and ask for Mr Laurent. The lady gives me a set of directions and I follow, getting lost a few times. Finally I make it to my destination and breathe a sigh of relief. A man in a business shirt, trousers, and a plain looking brown hat glares at me when I look up. I expect he's Mr Laurent. Obviously he had a few difficult customers.

I edge inside cautiously and squeak out an explanation for my presence. He nods grudgingly and I inch further into the room. He grills me for fifteen minutes straight about my life, past jobs and other things like that. After about the eight-millionth question, he relents and says:

"The job's yours. Start tomorrow, noon." I let out a little shriek of excitement and Mr Laurent narrows his eyes at me in disgust. I'm too thrilled to care. I walk out the door with a smile on my face. This will work.

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The next day at noon I'm standing, once again, in front of the government offices -also known as 52 Courtwork Square. I'm toying nervously with a loose bit of fabric in the pocket of my finest dress. It had been rubbed so loose that one day it was hanging literally by a thread and I just straight up yanked it off. Even though my dress now has a large hole in the middle it's still one of the finest clothing items I have.

What am I doing? I think, shaking myself. *I need to get inside.* I walk in slowly. Where has all my past excitement gone? Why am I feeling like the pot plant I'd seen in the reception room? I take a deep breath, hold my head high and walk inside with not even a slither of confidence whatsoever.

I tell the reception lady, who is currently looking at a list of grocery items, that I am here to start my job as a tea lady and she smiles and points me over to a white door with the words 'Kitchen' inscribed on it.

I walk over cautiously, glancing back at the lady multiple times for support, but she has gone back to her list. Whew! All I was doing was serving tea! Why was this so nerve racking? I push open the door.

As soon as I open the door the sound of slapping dough and chattering voices assaults my ears. Everyone stops. I stare at the scene. About fifteen sets of eyes stare back at me. The kitchen is cluttered, with dirty pots and pans leaking their contents onto clean ones, kitchen utensils are scattered around haphazardly and everything and everyone in the room has a fine coating of flour covering them from head to toe.

“Hi,” I start awkwardly “uh, I’m the new tea lady... I... erm, the receptionist pointed me down here...

so...” one of the kitchen people whispered something to a girl on their left and she nods and whisks away. The silence stretches out and I am about to say something to break the stillness when the girl comes back with a precarious tray of teas, sugars and milk. I take the tea laden tray and directions to ‘Meeting Room One’ from her gratefully and rush out of the room as fast as I can while holding a tray full of tea and tea accessories. I use the directions and sound of muffled voices to lead me as I hurry to ‘Meeting Room One’ and stand outside indecisively trying to figure out whether to knock or just barge straight in. I decide knocking is much more polite, and almost drop the tea tray when trying to do so. The voices stop.

“Um.. can I come in?”

“Yes.” A gruff voice answers. I shove open the door with my shoulder expecting the minister to rush out of their seats to help me, but no such luck. They all sat, staring at me struggle to make it through the door and then went on with their conversation.

“Hey, Jean Pierre,” one of the ministers in a plain black hat muses. “When is that shipment supposed to arrive? The extra weapons?” I drop a tea cup in surprise and it smashes into tiny pieces on the wooden floor. I stoop to pick it up, crouching to clean up the mess. They ignore the interruption. “1.30 am, Sunday morning, on the train from Frankfurt. Why?” I’m frozen in the motion of sweeping up the broken china into my free hand.

“We need them fast. The English are advancing.” They trail off into boring military conversation and I start to tune out as I scoop up the cup shards, and serve them the rest of their tea. I leave the room without hearing even one thank you. I dash back through the confusing halls, drop the tray off at reception with a quick ‘bye’ and leap on my bicycle. I pedal for my life hoping against hope that Thomas would be home. When I reach home, I park my bicycle on the pavement, whip out the key and burst through the door.

Thomas is lounging on a kitchen chair and I fall on my knees and blurt out everything I heard from the ministers. When I finish, he looks at me like I just told him that loaves of bread were going to rain from the home, sky tomorrow; incredulous, worried for my sanity but intrigued altogether.

“I don’t know, Jacqueline...” he trails off, staring into space. “What if you got the wrong information? What if I tell General Dupont and he puts all his work and best soldiers out there for nothing? What if-”

“What if maybe I was right? I heard correctly?” I retort indignantly. Thomas considers this for a minute.

“Please?” I whisper. “I want to help.” Thomas kicks the table with frustration. “Fine.” He huffs “I’ll tell the General.”

I'm staring at the door, waiting for my brother to come home to tell me that General Dupont didn't completely fly with my idea. Why would he trust a girl who had just got her first job and might have incorrect information? Even I am starting to second guess myself.

The door flew open and Thomas burst in.

"WHAT HAPPENED?!" I shriek "WHAT DID HE SAY?!" Thomas grins and tells me a long story about how they had exploded the bridge, the train driver had jumped free of his carriage at the last minute, and all the weapons fell in the water and were destroyed.

"So," he finishes "General Dupont has asked you if you would like more involved role in The French Resistance. To help make France a free country." I pretend to think, like it's a huge decision that I need time to digest, but I had my answer the moment he began talking. "Um... YES!" I throw my arms around him. "Thanks so much!" I laugh.

"No problem." Thomas answers. "Do we have any bread left?" Oops. I must have forgot. I look away with a smile.

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