

Genevieve's War

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Holiday House / New York



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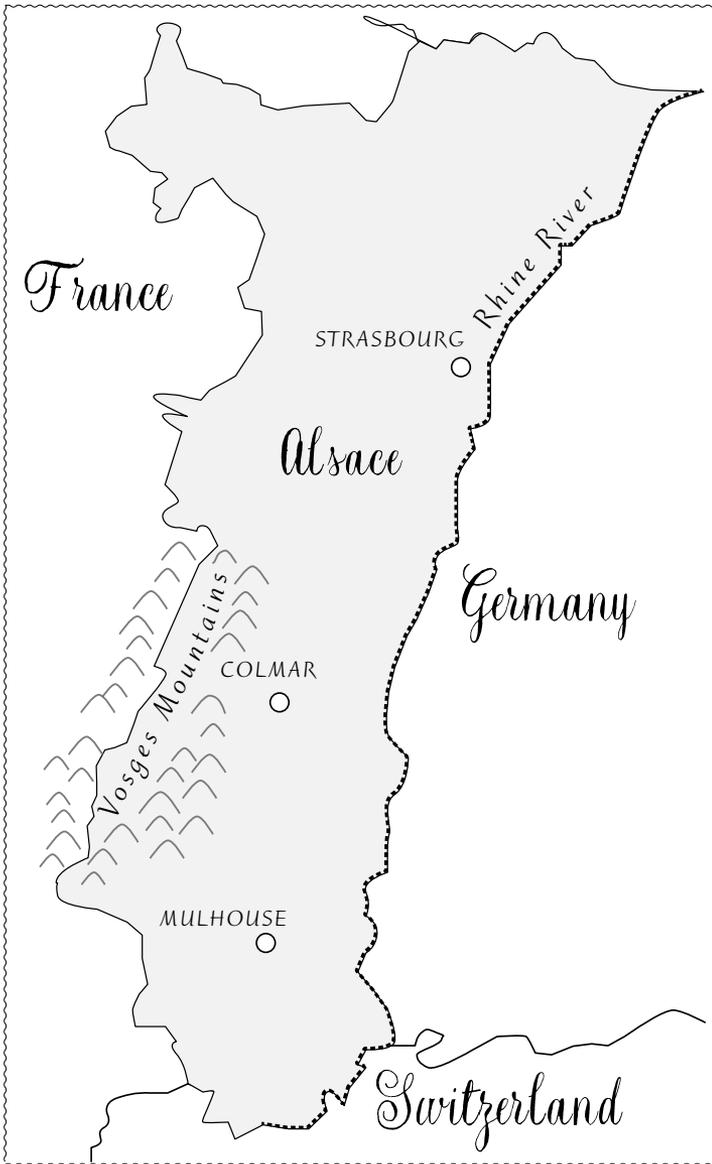
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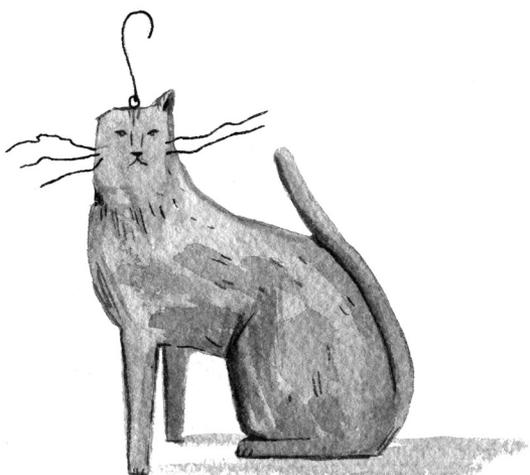
For George Nicholson, beloved friend.

For James Matthew Giff, beloved son.

Alsace, France



THE END



My heart drummed against my chest, my throat so dry I couldn't swallow.

Mémé and I crouched on the dirt floor of the farmhouse cellar, our dog, Louis, huddled beside us. The sounds of the mortar and bursts of artillery seemed to go on forever. We were trapped in the middle: the Americans on one side of us, the Germans on the other.

It was freezing without heat, and dark! I'd burned our only candle down to a nub; then it had sputtered and died.

"I have to go upstairs," I told Mémé. "We need quilts and sweaters."

I felt her reach out. "Don't, Genevieve. I'll go."

My grandmother, braver than I!

"It's all right." I stood and ran my hands along the wall to find my way to the stairs.

A tremendous boom. The house shook.

We knew the cellar was the safest place in the bombardment, but suppose the house came down? We'd be buried under stone and timber with no one to help us.

Was that happening right now to the shops in the

village, the school, the farmhouses along the way? I stumbled over something that rolled and clattered, and then I went up into the daylight, blinking.

Everything looked so normal. I passed the hall table with my father's picture, the living room chairs.

But nothing was normal. In the kitchen, windows were shattered; shards of glass that must have been a hundred years old covered the wide sills. My feet crunched against pieces on the stone floor.

The three-colored cat, half hidden under the table, peered out at me. She hissed when I tried to pick her up, and backed away. Poor thing, as frightened as we were. I'd have to leave her for now.

Another boom.

No time!

I yanked open the drawer for candles, glancing outside quickly. The gravel driveway was torn up, a tree split, the winter fields gray with patches of snow.

Head down, the candles in my pocket, I ran to pull the quilt off the bed, sweaters off hooks, the sounds of the battle so much louder than they had been in the cellar.

I threw the quilt and sweaters down the stairs to

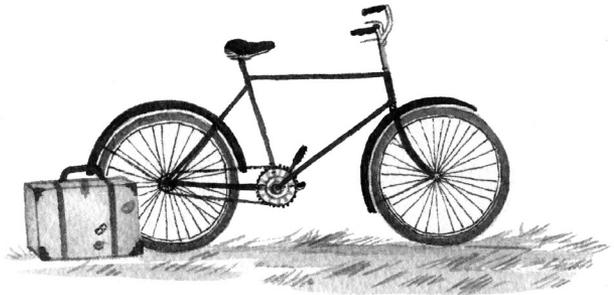
*free my hands. Then I lighted a candle with shaking
fingers as the cat dived ahead of me.*

Who'd said the war would be over someday?

*We'd all said it! It would be over and there'd be
peace.*

Someday would never come.

BEFORE



one

ALSACE, FRANCE

“Gen?” André’s voice was loud.

I leaned over the hall table to peer out the window; one elbow knocked my father’s picture to the floor.

André beckoned from the barn. “Look what I found. Hurry.”

I put the picture back on the table, wiping off imaginary dust with one sleeve. Who was he anyway, my father with his grim face, his hands balled into fists?

My wooden sabots clattered on the stone floor as I sped through the kitchen.

“Don’t slam—” Mémé began over her shoulder.

I caught the door just in time, hopped over the three-colored cat on the stone step, then crossed the gravel path to the barn, with its sweet smell of hay.

Inside, André pointed: two ancient bicycles leaned against each other in one of the stalls. Bits of hay

covered the seats and cobwebs stretched across the spokes.

Bicycles! We could pump the tires with air and ride away from the farm, pedaling up one hill and coasting down the next, arms out. I smiled, remembering when André had taught me to ride. *“You’ll speed along as if you’ve been doing this forever, Gen,”* he’d said.

For the first time in days, I’d stop thinking of him sailing home to New York, leaving me with our disagreeable grandmother, Mémé, to weed rows of cabbages and pick bugs off the beans, to speak Alsatian or French every minute, and never hear a word in English.

I’d be here for another two weeks!

And then, home. But not to Aunt Marie, not to our house in Springfield Gardens, not to my old school in September. I brushed my hair away, determined to brush my thoughts away too.

André was filling the tires, so I wiped off a few dried spiders, as old as the bikes. Then, zigzagging along the path, the gravel spitting out from under the wheels, we called to Mémé. *“Going for a ride.”*

We didn’t wait to hear what she’d say.

We flew! André led the way, going east, past farms and woods filled with evergreens.

Someone was yelling at us!

I glanced over my shoulder and slowed down. Rémy, younger than André, a couple of years older than me, pedaled toward us, waving.

Rémy had been the best part of this summer. Rémy with blue eyes and curly hair! Rémy who towered over me and made my heart beat faster!

“Some bikes!” he called.

His wasn’t much better; I had to laugh. “Race you to the top of the hill,” I called back.

André pulled to one side, watching. I rode past with Rémy behind me, letting me win.

André caught up, and later, we stopped at a grassy meadow to see an ancient stone tower. A messy storks’ nest rested precariously on top. “The white storks of Alsace,” André said. “With long legs like yours, Gen.”

Rémy grinned at me, a tiny scar at the corner of his mouth dimpling. He made me smile too. If only he lived in New York!

I shaded my eyes to see the mother bird’s head and a hint of her folded black wings, but her babies were hidden deep in the nest.

“If I were here this winter,” André said, “I’d climb the tower and see the world.”

Rémy said, “Sure,” and I sputtered, “Really!”

But André could do almost anything. He was my best friend and a great cook. Now he was going home ahead of me. He’d spent the summer here working in the village bistro. Last summer he’d been in Basel, the summer before in Strasbourg and Colmar, working in restaurants. Now he’d study business in college so he could open his own restaurant someday. “I’ll call it Genevieve’s Place,” he always said. “And you’ll be the star.”

“Some star, with skinny brown braids,” I always said.

But now, I bit my lip: my brother, skinny, with coal-black hair, leaving. André, who laughed at everything, who cared about me.

He read my mind. “I’ll visit you at Cousin Ellen’s. And I’ll bring you a red parasol to make you happy.” He stopped when he saw my face. He knew what I was thinking. Cousin Ellen! My mother’s friend. I hardly knew her.

Aunt Marie, my mother as long as I could remember, was teaching in Canada, so far north that even letters would be hard to get.

No choice, she’d said, I have to work in this little

village for the book I'm writing. It'll make all the difference to us. But we'll be together by Christmas, I promise.

Did I say something aloud? Rémy looked at me with sympathy. "Don't go back, Gen. Stay."

Stay with Mémé, who complained about everything? I shook my head.

We rode along and passed a half-timbered house, a chestnut tree shading its windows. It was blue-gray, a beautiful color. Then a farm filled with vegetables and plum trees. Rémy pointed. "I wish it were mine," he said. "Someday I'll farm."

"What about your parents' pharmacy?" André asked.

Rémy grinned. "I'll leave that to my little sister, Céline. She's three. On her way to growing up."

We stopped too far away from the Rhine to see the water, but I knew it was there. And beyond that, Germany!

"They're coming, Gen," Rémy said. "The Germans will run right over us."

I felt a quick tightening in my chest. André's face was serious. "They want to take Alsace back and gobble up the rest of Europe."

He reached over and touched my hand on the

handlebar. “You’ll get out before they come.” He frowned. I knew he was thinking about our father and grandparents, who were born here. “I hate to desert Mémé,” he said.

I thought of her stern face, the lines that crisscrossed her forehead. Born in 1876, she was in her sixties but seemed like a hundred. And what I knew of my father would fit in a thimble. I thought of his picture: Gérard Michel, a stern man glaring into the camera.

I didn’t care one bit that we were leaving Mémé and Alsace. It couldn’t be soon enough for me.

At that moment, the sky turned from blue to charcoal gray. Lightning streaked across the sky and a clap of thunder followed. “Let’s go!” Rémy shouted.

Rain beat on our heads and shoulders. Heads down, we pedaled along the way we’d come. At last, Mémé’s farm was ahead of us. We waved as Rémy kept going toward his parents’ pharmacy in the village square.

We were soaked, our clothes dripping. We wheeled the bicycles into the barn, dried them off, and covered them with old drop cloths, and again, I thought of André leaving.

I put my hand on his arm, but before I could say anything, he glanced toward the kitchen window, where

Mémé stared out at the rain. “She’ll be alone without us,” he said.

“She’s been alone for years. She’ll be glad when I’m gone.”

And I’d be glad too, more than glad.

two

①Mémé and I pulled weeds, our nails broken and lined with soil. How strong I'd become this summer. In the field, at first, my face had blistered, but then I tanned until I could spend long hours in the sun. My arms and legs had new muscles.

Mémé stretched, one hand rubbing her back. "The Germans are coming soon," she said, almost echoing André's words before he'd left, hugging me to him.

"But not yet."

And not for me. I'd be on the *Normandie* traveling west. At the railing, I'd watch the rolling sea, and in the dining room, I'd order petits fours thick with fondant icing.

If only I hadn't dreamed about Cousin Ellen last night. She was kind and friendly and when Aunt Marie asked if I could stay with her, she'd said, "*I'd love it.*"

But I wouldn't know one person in Flushing, wouldn't have one friend, instead of being home in Springfield Gardens, where I knew everyone. Now I'd even be leaving my new friend, Katrin, who lived on the next farm, the best friend I'd ever had.

And Rémy. Oh, Rémy!

This was my last day. My ticket lay on the edge of the bed upstairs. Madame Thierry, who was a neighbor at home, and almost as old as Mémé, would meet me at the train station.

"You can't go alone," Aunt Marie had said in June after André had left, her face worried. *"Madame Thierry is going to Alsace for the summer too. She'll take care of you both ways."*

I had to smile. Madame Thierry was the one who needed care!

"You have less than an hour," Mémé said. *"This ship may be the last to cross before the war. If you miss the train you may not reach it in time."*

War! That was all anyone talked about. "Less than an hour," I repeated to Mémé, as if it didn't matter one way or the other. I could be as tough as this old woman, who, bent and limping, still managed to run the farm alone.

Lines pleated themselves above her lips. “Finish packing, Genevieve. We’ll take the cart to the railroad station. Your holiday is over.”

Holiday. I pursed my lips the way she did. Holiday was Jones Beach on Long Island, the waves smashing onto the shore. It wasn’t digging in Mémé’s fields, all the way across the Atlantic, stuffing sausages, or boiling jars to hold beans and plums.

It certainly wasn’t sleeping in the upstairs bedroom where my father had spent his childhood. The ceiling sloped low over my head, and the straw mattress crackled when I moved.

Most of all, it wasn’t spending a summer with Mémé.

But what had Aunt Marie said? *“You and André know about your mother, but what about your father? Your grandmother? The farm that will be yours someday?”*

She’d told me that she and my mother had gone to Alsace, that Mom had seen my father in the village. *The two of us with French parents, able to speak French ourselves*, she’d said. *Your mother fell in love.*

I knew so much about my mother. She’d been skinny like André and tall like me. She wore Evening in Paris perfume and loved to dance with me in her arms.

I could almost see her.

But all I could see of my father was a face that looked as if he'd eaten a lemon!

How different everything would have been if they hadn't taken the train to the mountains when I was a baby. If the train hadn't jumped the tracks. If they still lived.

I threw a bunch of weeds toward the wheelbarrow but missed. Mémé muttered something behind me. *Clumsiness*, probably. I had a quick thought of Aunt Marie, who called me Flyaway Girl. *Things just fly away from you and are lost*, she'd say, and laugh.

I walked across the field, wanting to dance across. *Last time*, I told myself. Dozens of cabbages would be ready to harvest soon. But not by me!

The three-colored cat was sunning herself on the path; she reached out with one paw to give me a little scratch as I passed.

Inside, I trailed my fingers over the massive kitchen table. The room was dark, with a huge fireplace; copper pots hung on hooks, and vegetables simmered on the stove, almost ready for the jars on the counter. A crusty loaf of bread covered with a tea towel was on the table, and I cut myself a slice to munch on.

Louis, the shepherd dog, padded in behind me.

“He’s a watchdog,” Mémé had told me a dozen times. “Meant to be kept outside at night.”

I’d forgotten to close the door again, but it wasn’t night! I bent to hug him, his rough fur against my cheek. “Good dog.” I slipped him a chunk of bread too.

After I walked him outside, I climbed the stairs, my hand raised over the banister, which bristled with splinters, and scooped up one of my knee socks from the top step.

It didn’t take long to fold everything into my suitcase: underwear and socks, skirts and blouses. I stared at the books I’d brought with me. I’d read them over and over, myths and folktales, and a French book about a lost dog, from my friend, Katrin. Aunt Marie, who loved to read, had taught me to read too, when I was only three. I’d have to carry the books in the string bag I’d made this summer, a bit of a mess.

I changed into Sunday clothes, sliding into patent leather shoes and leaving the wooden sabots under the bed.

Did I have everything? The dresser drawers were warped and so hard to open that I hadn’t used them. But just in case, I checked.

They were empty, except for the bottom one. It held an old photo of Mémé. How pretty she'd been, young and smiling a little. How different from the sour old woman she was now. I turned the picture over. *Miel* was written on the back. Honey! More like vinegar, if you asked me.

No one would have written *Miel* on the back of my father's picture.

I pulled my things down the stairs and outside.

Sister, the horse, was tethered to the cart. I rested my hand on her chocolate side. Her skin rippled under my hand, and she looked back at me as if she knew I was leaving. Mémé stood on the other side of the cart, leaning against it. A surprise. She never leaned against anything.

"*The poor horse doesn't even have a name yet,*" André had said in June. "*How old is she, Mémé?*"

"*Twelve.*"

"*I christen her Sister,*" he'd said, "*in honor of my sister.*"

"*Me?*"

"*Her legs are long. And her huge brown eyes are like yours.*"

"*Mine are gray.*"

He'd grinned. "Doesn't matter. Her feet clop just like yours."

I'd looked quickly at Mémé, at her faint smile. No one could resist André.

I gave the horse another pat. I'd miss her and all the animals, even the cow André had named Elsie. "*Elsie?*" Mémé had echoed.

He'd laughed. "It's a cow's name."

"An American cow," I'd added.

What would happen if I dashed into the barn and said good-bye to the cow, or to the hens that pecked at seed in their pen?

But Mémé was frowning, impatient. No detours!

Her lips chewed on themselves as she stared at the side field with its rows of squash, and beyond them the potato plants with their purple flowers.

Did she care that I was leaving? That she'd be alone this fall, to pull all that from the earth, to fill dozens of jars of food, and store potatoes and apples in the cool cellar? Only one person would eat them all winter.

Louis circled the cart, wanting to come with us. I ran my hand over his head and kissed his gray muzzle. "I'll miss you," I whispered. I climbed up, but Mémé still stood on the other side of the cart.

I saw then how pale she was, her wrinkled face dotted with perspiration.

“What is it?” I asked.

“Nothing.” She held on to the edge of the cart as she climbed up slowly, dragging her left foot.

“What?” I asked again.

“It’s just twisted . . .,” she began, and didn’t finish.

I looked down and saw a line of blood on the hem of her long dress.

“How did you do this?”

“Stop, Genevieve. We’ll miss the train with all your questions.”

She flicked the reins lightly on Sister’s back. Then we were on our way, leaving the house with its red shutters, the cow, the chickens, the pig, the three-colored cat and Louis, whose thick tail wagged uncertainly.

three

Cypress trees lined the road on each side of us. Sister's bells jangled, and with every step she took, I heard, *Summer's over*.

Nearby, the woodcutter was sawing in the forest. Sometimes I'd caught a glimpse of him, straps over his bent shoulders, pulling his cart along, with new wood piled high. He'd raise his hand in a gentle wave, then duck his head.

We passed the Moellers' farmhouse, where Katrin leaned against the window, waving. Yesterday we'd said a long good-bye, crying a little, hugging, promising to write and to be friends forever.

Katrin was funny and warm. Her cheeks were round and covered with freckles, and her hair was a halo of curls. She never stopped talking . . . some of it about America, and all of it mixed up. She'd lean forward:

“Do you see cowboys in New York City all the time?” Or “How about buffaloes? If I’m going to be a writer, I have to know these things.”

I looked back over my shoulder until she and the farm disappeared at the turn of the road.

Next to me, Mémé faced straight ahead, her lips in a thin line, her jaws clenched. What had she done to her foot?

We made our way into the village square. Baskets of red and white geraniums were everywhere. Shop doors and windows in the upstairs apartments were open against the heat.

Three old men in berets sat at a table in front of the bistro. They’d been in the same spot every day since I’d come, voices raised, arguing over one thing or another.

“Let’s stop at the pâtisserie,” I said.

Mémé twitched one narrow shoulder, as if she were asking why.

“I want to say good-bye.”

She pulled on the reins, and I tumbled out of the cart before she could change her mind.

Inside the pâtisserie, I breathed in the smell of plum tarts baking in the oven. My mouth watered as I

glanced at shelves filled with cakes and éclairs plump with whipped cream.

Madame Jacques wiped her floury hands on her apron and reached into the case for a meringue for me. “My favorite,” I said.

“Ah yes. Your father’s favorite too.”

He loved meringues? My father with his grim face?

“So, Genevieve.” Madame Jacques wiped her warm face, her cheeks like soft dough. “Summer is over, and you leave before the Germans come.”

I nodded, the sweet meringue melting on my tongue.

She tilted her head. “I think you will come back. Maybe not soon. It will be a long time.” She tapped the wooden floor with one foot. “The Germans remember that Alsace belonged to them once. They want us back.”

She smiled then. “My son, Claude, is still sleeping upstairs. Lazy boy. Otherwise he’d say good-bye to you too.”

From the window, I saw Mémé frowning at me. Madame Jacques gave me a kiss on each cheek. I went out the door and was barely onto the cart when Mémé snapped the reins again and the horse jolted forward.

On the other side of the square, Monsieur Philippe lounged in the doorway of his shop, books piled up in the small window next to him. He looked at me impassively. His lips were impossibly thick, his teeth nut brown. He was nothing like Madame Jacques, who laughed at everything, touching your shoulder as she did.

As we passed the pharmacy, Rémy stood at the open door. He mouthed something. Was it *I will miss you*? Did he look sad, thinking we wouldn't see each other for a long time?

As the horse labored up the hill, I looked back at the fairy-tale village. The houses were half-timbered, their stone walls painted yellow or pink, or green and the church steeple rose above all of it in a thin point.

I remembered the ancient stone tower with its messy storks' nest. *I hate to desert Mémé*, André had said. Did I say it aloud? She turned to stare at me sharply, but I pretended to glance at the field. We didn't speak for the rest of the way.

At the station, I pulled out my suitcase and the string bag of books. I tucked my purse under my arm, wondering where I'd left my gloves. I jumped down, and with my hand gentling Sister's back, I glanced at

Mémé. “Thank you,” I managed. What else could I say? “The farm is beautiful.” I realized it was true: the field in the morning, green and washed, the Vosges Mountains in the distance.

She leaned forward. “You may come again after the war, Genevieve.”

I blinked in surprise, then glanced down. Her foot turned in and there was a drop of blood on her sock. But before I could say a word, she was turning the cart on her way back to the farm.

four

Dust rose from the cart. I watched until Sister trotted around a curve; then I dragged my heavy suitcase and the books into the station.

Inside, the wooden benches were filled. People leaned against the walls or sat on the cement floor, boxes and bags at their feet. A buzz of voices rose and fell like angry bees.

The four Grossmans, a Jewish family, the mother and father and two children, were pressed together in a far corner. Katrin had told me they were leaving for safety. How terrible that the Germans hated them. And why? I waved but they didn't see me.

Madame Thierry sat on a bench, eyes closed, mouth opened, asleep.

I stood nearby, next to a stanchion. The ceiling was

open to the sky; pigeons flew back and forth, wings whirring, feathers drifting. A cloud changed shapes: an old man, an angel's wing, a giant shoe.

I closed my eyes. *The train to Le Havre, the ship. Then New York. The library, black-and-white ice cream sodas with Aunt Marie!* I swallowed. No! I'd have to find another library near Ellen, Aunt Marie would be far away, and André wouldn't be scrambling eggs on Saturday mornings. *Gen, you're my best customer!*

Next to me, a woman was eating a buttery crêpe. It was folded in four, and sugar dotted her dress. My mouth watered. I had a few francs left, so I went to find one at the shop.

I returned to my place, a warm crêpe in my hand. Katrin had taught me to make crêpes, but she was so busy talking she'd burned the first two. If only she lived in New York. Ah, Katrin!

And Rémy.

I brought the crêpe to my mouth; I smelled the butter, but I didn't taste it.

The first snow in New York. Christmas! Aunt Marie would be home by then, and André for the holidays. And I'd be there.

A family sat on the bench next to Madame Thierry, surrounded by packages and even an empty birdcage. The man's feet rested on a metal trunk. Their daughter, maybe five years old, inched her way closer, her eyes on my crêpe. She held out her hand, but her mother reached for her. "Non."

"It's all right," I said, smiling at the little girl.

The mother leaned down toward her. "She's saving her crêpe for later."

Why couldn't I eat it?

I heard the chug of the train, the shrill whistle. People rushed for bags, for trunks. Someone called, "Where are you, Charles? Hurry."

I tapped Madame Thierry on the shoulder. "Time to go."

She jumped. "I've been looking all over for you."

Sure! "Sorry," I said as I helped her to her feet.

The train pulled in, and pigeons flew up, feathers floating.

I remembered leaving Katrin. "*I've always wanted to see a buffalo. I'm going to write books,*" she'd said. "*Tons of them.*"

And Rémy: "*Don't go back, Gen.*"

But Mémé!

How had she managed to hurt herself before I left? I didn't love her. I didn't even like her. I felt a stab of anger. But could she have broken a bone? That miserable woman would have to harvest the beans, the squash, the cabbages by herself. But suppose she couldn't do all that? What would she eat this winter? I ran one hand over my arm, summer muscles.

Ridiculous.

Suppose there really was a war? I shivered. Maybe, maybe not.

Why didn't I hurry? Why didn't I take those steps as the train door opened?

Aunt Marie! *"It's not always thinking of being happy. Doing the right thing will make you happy."*

I handed my crêpe to the little girl, the lump in my throat choking me.

The train began to fill and the platform emptied. Madame Thierry walked ahead.

Still time.

"Genevieve?" she called.

I waved. "Go ahead. I can't . . ."

She didn't wait to hear the rest. Shaking her head, she stepped onto the train. The doors were closing.

Grab everything, I told myself. Run! I didn't do that; I stood still.

The train began to move slowly, to pick up speed. I put my arms around the stanchion as if it were alive, as if it could comfort me.