

The
Thought
of High
Windows

Lynne Kositsky

Kids Can Press

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For Roger:

My dearest Elephant,
My far-away yet close companion,
My little brother,
My always friend.

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Rather than words comes the thought of high windows:
The sun-comprehending glass,
And beyond it, the deep blue air, that shows
Nothing, and is nowhere, and is endless.

Philip Larkin

Chapter One

I jump out of windows.

I don't do it out of bravery or stupidity but with a kind of compulsion when things aren't going my way. Once it saved me, once it almost got me killed, but more of that later.

I've been jumping, or trying to, since I was tiny. My mama — I can't stop thinking of her all the time, though it makes me sad — told me that, once, while she was talking to a neighbor in the yard she saw me about to launch myself from a second-floor window. I was around eighteen months old and must have scrambled out of my crib. Apparently, I was belly down and already half over the sill.

“No, Esther!” she screamed.

She ran upstairs, her heart pounding, and managed to catch a corner of my smock as I wriggled out. Perhaps the neighbor stood underneath the window to catch me. Perhaps she walked away. Mama never told that part of the story, so I'm not sure.

Come to think of it, it's amazing how much you have to rely on other people for versions of your early life. I hardly remember anything before I was five, except the park, and the smell of new bread in our apartment and the bluish-red

pattern of the living-room rug. And the snow. It cleansed my world each winter, drifting over the trees and grass, the roads and the sharp roofs of the city, leaving its icy calling card on our windowpanes. It also obliterated the swastikas like deformed spiders chalked on the pavement. I remember them, the swastikas. I just didn't know their power. But those swastikas are the reason I'm here now, standing outside a ramshackle barn next to a French castle.

The castle is huge. It glimmers in the noon sun as though it might melt. Mountains, almost transparent with heat, are ranged behind it. This is France, the south of France, and like the Israelites wandering in the desert, about sixty of us Jewish kids have arrived here after what seems like forty years. First we traveled to Belgium by train when the Nazis started persecuting the Jews in Germany, thinking we would make a home there; but after they invaded Brussels, our Red Cross directors packed us into cattle cars and brought us here. If Belgium seemed like the promised land, flowing with milk and honey — or at least half-decent food — France is strange, brooding, a giant and alien presence pressing down on all us outcasts. The war has begun. The second great war. You'd think that would make us friends, comrades in arms, because we're all escapees; but until about three days ago we'd been fighting our own dirty little war. I always seemed to get the worst of it.

That's partly because I'm fat, but mostly because I'm what the other girls call "Old Jewish." They say it snottily, tossing their heads. That means I lived in the Jewish quarter, ate *knaidlech* and *lokshen*, went to *shul* and listened to my parents speak to each other in Yiddish,

even though they talked to my little brother and me in German. To the girls, being Old Jewish is shameful, as if I deserve to be persecuted by Hitler.

Of course, they don't deserve to be persecuted at all. They just can't understand what's happening — or why it's happening to *them*. They're new, modern Jews. They lived in apartments in the gentile part of town, ate gentile food, dressed like gentiles, spoke only German. Some even celebrated Christmas. They thought they'd crossed over. They thought they were safe. Their problem is that Hitler disagreed, and to their minds it's Jews like me that made Hitler hate us all.

"We don't get the castle. We get to sleep in the barn." This is Rose, one of the counselors, her face creased with exhaustion.

"The barn. And we're supposed to live there." Eva, my number-one enemy, isn't asking a question. She is making an observation. Wrinkling her tiny nose with disgust, she raises her hands defensively against the open door as if it's an enormous mouth intent on swallowing her. Eva is petite and pretty, with china-blue eyes and blond curly hair. She looks so Aryan I can almost imagine her in the Hitler youth. A tiny bead of perspiration (Eva doesn't sweat) runs down her nose, and she wipes it away daintily. She is not speaking to me so I don't respond. Eva despises anyone who is plain or lumpy. Since I am both, she usually ignores me but calls me "the baker's fat daughter" when she calls me anything at all.

I glance inside. Our new home is a filthy, cobwebby building, dirty straw strewn across the floor. No furniture, not so much as a chair. Much as I dislike her, Eva is right for

once. The barn looks horrible, smells of decay and mold. Why has the Red Cross brought us here, of all places?

“Come on.” Heinz, a tall boy with bright orange hair motions us inside. “If we go in perhaps they’ll feed us. I’m starving.”

“And it can’t be worse than what we’ve already been through,” says Inge. She strides in, sits on the filthy floor, leans her back against the dirty gray wall and crosses her legs. Pulling her skirt down over her knees, she grins at all of us.

Inge is my heroine, even though she’s New Jewish and dresses and speaks like the others. I can’t help admiring her. She wasn’t supposed to be with us, but she can outwit or outtalk anybody. When we got to the station in Belgium months ago, her name wasn’t on any Red Cross list. She’d simply got on the train and stayed there. A black-coated woman, who seemed to be in charge, wanted to send her back to Germany. Inge straightened her back and said very solemnly, “I can’t be sent back. I have nowhere to be sent back *to*.”

Her little suitcase appeared quite bereft, standing in the middle of the platform while ours were piled on buses, and she looked very vulnerable, which she really is not.

Everyone was looking at her — the chaperones, the other girls in our group, the station workers — but she just stared ahead defiantly as the rain soaked us.

“Everybody comes from somewhere, mademoiselle, so you might as well give us your address.” The woman in the black coat clicked her teeth with impatience.

“I’ve forgotten. The long journey has exhausted it

out of me, but I’ll be glad to go wherever the other girls are going.”

“Tell me where you come from, mademoiselle, if you’d be so kind. We can’t stand here in the pouring rain all day.”

Inge gave her a wide, glittering smile but said nothing, wouldn’t tell her name or show her passport; so in the end, the woman gave up and put her in the children’s home with the rest of us. Inge hadn’t gone through the process — hadn’t asked the Cultural Society to help her leave Germany, didn’t have the right papers. She wasn’t even wearing the little red tag we’d all been given to show we belonged to the group. I’d have been sent back to Berlin in a minute, but Inge has some magical quality. I can’t define it — I just know I don’t have it. Yet she’s the only girl who is passably kind to me.

Greta is speaking, pulling me back to the present. “Look at that castle. A *château*, they call it. Looks like something out of Transylvania. Whew! Six days crammed in a boxcar with too many clothes on, a bomb, that little village of falling-down houses, that horrible man with the stinking coat who shouted at us all the way down the road — just to get to this scabby barn next to a vampire castle. I think I need a rest.” She pushes back her dark hair, which is so lank and greasy it’s sticking together, and goes to sit by Inge. They’ve never been really friendly. Maybe the old enmities are breaking down a bit, I think hopefully. No one has been particularly nasty to me for at least three days, not since our train was bombed. The last car was a charred ruin. People were killed. Death can happen to anyone, and fast. That terrifies me. It’s horrible to

think that my good luck might arise from the tragedy of others, but since that happened I find myself breathing a bit easier.

Others are pushing by me: Werner, Karl, Manfred, Naomi, and Lisel. Eva follows reluctantly, picking through the straw with her delicate feet as though it might rear up and bite her. Walter, my best friend — well, actually, my only friend — is still standing on the threshold. He whispers a few words in Eva's ear as she enters. I can't catch what he's saying, but even though she ducks away, sticks her nose in the air and doesn't respond, I feel almost crushed by envy. "Fool," I whisper. Myself or him? Maybe both. My feelings are too confused to sort out.

A crowd of littler children and counselors come tramping over the hill and follow the older boys and girls inside. Our directeur and directrice from the Belgian children's homes are last. Walter and I remain standing in the heat. A threadbare peaked cap, slung low over his forehead, hides his eyes. His mouth, though, is visible, turned down, sulky. He doesn't say a word, just stands there, kicking at the path till clouds of dirt permeate the rusty, burning air.

I shift from foot to foot, put down my suitcase, which is making my arm ache. I wish I had muscles, but I'm weak. Naomi says that's because I ate too many Yiddish cookies. I know that's not true. I had lots of strength in Berlin — I used to hoist myself onto the roof — but the food they gave us at the orphanage has drained it out of me.

Although I don't want to look as though I'm waiting for Walter, I am, because there's a void in me if I move too far away. It's as if I'm tied to him with invisible elastic. I can't

go inside without him. "Are you coming?" I ask at last, as casually as I can. I'm trying to look as though I'm not really there, but it's hard because I'm so huge.

He doesn't respond.

"I'm sorry. Are you upset because Eva didn't answer you? She's like that to most people, not just you."

"What do you know, Mouse?" His nickname for me.

"More than you think."

He leaps forward so suddenly that I recoil. Scooping up his case, leaving mine on the path, he strides into the barn. His eyes glitter like brilliant yellow stones, cold and sharp and hard, and I want to kick myself for speaking out, for having made him angry with me. Walter is often angry, though. I accept that in him and shrug. It's part of the cost of being his friend.

Chapter Two

It's evening at last. I go over everything in my mind, everything since we left Germany, months and months ago. There is a sour taste in my mouth, but I force myself to push back into the past, if only to try to figure out why I can't do anything right, even with Walter. I spend a lot of time in the past — now I try to relive my first sighting of him at the children's home in Belgium. The girls and the boys lived in separate orphanages there, but we had a party to get introduced before we started school together. I felt more alone than ever as first two boys, then three, then a few girls crossed the great divide of the dining hall to congregate in the middle. The hall was enormous with all its chairs and tables cleared away. I didn't dare walk across that vast space, propping myself against a wall instead. Everyone seemed to be talking and laughing — everyone except me.

No, that's not true. There was one boy as silent as I was. About two years older than me, I guessed, with straight, tawny hair that fell across his forehead and a bony stoop as if he hadn't quite grown into his body. He skulked around the edges of the celebration, scowling at the revelers, until suddenly he was standing close to me. I didn't like his angry amber eyes, the curve of his upper

lip, but couldn't help feeling a strange comradeship, kinship almost — probably because we were both alone and gloomy. A scrap of paper crammed with Hebrew writing fell from his pocket. He picked it up with a snort, scrunched it in his hand.

"*Gott im Himmel*," I heard him mutter, as he looked around, God in heaven, even though we weren't supposed to speak German, only the French we were learning with such difficulty. But the supervisors were on the other side of the hall, and everyone broke the language rule with a studied carelessness when they could. It went too much against nature to speak all the time in a foreign tongue, with its soft dark syllables.

"Shut up, Walter," one of the boys hissed. "Relax. Enjoy yourself for once."

Walter glowered, stared down his straight, narrow nose at the floor. *Gott im Himmel*, I found myself repeating, wrapping my tongue around the words, imitating his tone. He looked German, with his light hair and eyes and arrogant mouth, but there was something about him that reminded me suddenly of Yossi, a grinning yeshiva boy who had lived on our street in Berlin, although they look nothing alike and Walter hardly ever grins. I wanted to risk everything that evening, move across the small space that separated us and talk to him. I wanted to smile because we were so different yet so similar — he must be Old Jewish, too. But I didn't have the courage to speak to him, and soon he went back to the boys' orphanage with the others.

Since then, of course, I've become friends with him. Or allowed him to befriend me. Or imagined we are friends. Can anyone really be friends with Walter? He's so

unpredictable, so somewhere *else*, most of the time. Come to think of it, why would anyone be friends with *me*? I'm unattractive and unclever. He calls me Mouse because I once made a stupid mistake in French translation back in Belgium. That's a long story.

All this thinking hasn't helped — I still don't understand anything. Listening to the crickets' fitful song, I fall asleep on the scratchy hay.

Chapter Three

We've been here two weeks, and every day is worse than the last — much worse than in Belgium. I've developed horrid, pus-filled blisters in my mouth that burn when I eat, and painful sores on my legs. Now my head is itching like crazy, too. There's blood under my fingernails when I awake one morning — I must have scratched my head raw during the night. There's no longer any way to avoid seeing Rose, who looks after our medical needs.

"You've got head lice. Almost everyone has them in this filthy barn. Pah." She goes over to a table and picks up a comb saturated with kerosene. Dust flies off the tabletop. A pungent, chemical smell makes me choke.

"There's no other way," she says, fetching a pair of scissors and a razor after combing through my hair several times. "Your head is so badly infested I'm going to have to shave it."

"No!"

"Come on, Esther. You're not the only one. Most of the girls will have to be clipped or shaved. It's this awful place, God help us." She crosses herself with the scissors.

"No!" I screech again, flinging my hands up to protect my hair. I can still hear the softness in Walter's voice when he once spoke of all the light brown hair falling

around my face. He hugged me another time he talked of it and made me laugh, saying I looked more like a bunny than a mouse, a little round bunny with a button nose. I once had a book called *Button Nose, the Puppy* that my mother had made for me. The puppy had a real gray button where his nose should have been. Mama used to read the book to me and I turned over the fabric pages. I was really small, and she cuddled me when she finished and tucked me into bed. I still need to be hugged. Mama's not here, and Walter, who can be affectionate when he wants to be, won't ever hug me again if I'm bald. Rose just doesn't understand.

"All right, we'll leave it for now," she says at last. "But you'll be sorry and cause me a lot more grief in the long run. Come back if ... no, *when* it gets worse."

It does get worse but I don't go back. I will myself not to scratch as I go about my work, helping cook the horrible turnip soup that is almost our only food, building a bonfire to heat water to wash ourselves and clean our filthy clothes. They're piled in heaps, as there are no cupboards. No one ever changes the straw on the floor, and I blame it for my lice. But the itching crescendos into such revolting pain that I can't concentrate on anything. I'm sure I can actually feel the horrid creatures dancing on my head, their microscopic louse boots banging on my brain. When I sleep, if I sleep, I dream of bugs doing American square dances:

Swing your partner
As we go
Side to side
And do-si-do.

One day breakfast is more awful than usual. There is a white worm spiraling in my soup. I all but vomit at its fleshy, revolting segments, its slow circular movement in the bowl, but I have only a few minutes to eat. I gag down the soup, avoiding the worm, which I can't bear to fish out, but something snaps in me. The barn smells of sweaty turnips, long-gone horses, and diapers, and the bugs are still dancing on my head — even my arms and legs itch madly. I begin to moan, scratching my scalp until clots of blood and torn-out hair clog my fingernails. "Where's Mama?" I wonder. "She'd fix this. She'd give me chicken soup and chopped liver." The absurdity almost makes me giggle. Inge finds me in a corner.

"You crying or laughing?"

I'm not sure.

"Come on." She grins. "We've all been through it." She drags me to Rose, and I smell the horrible stink of kerosene. The other girls have had their hair cut very short, but I have to be shaved. Afterwards, Rose hands me a mirror. Inge is biting at her top lip as if to stop herself from crying out. You'd think it was her being shaved, not me.

"See," Rose barks at me, without a tinge of sympathy. "Look what happens when you won't do as you're told."

I stare at my reflection. The lice have burrowed into my scalp, and my head's a mass of bloody sores. I wince. Before, I was plain. Now I'm grotesque. I can't bear to look at myself. Inge can't either, apparently. She is carefully examining the wooden beams that support the roof.

Applying some greasy medicine that smells like pork fat, Rose tells me sternly not to scratch.

“You don’t need to worry.”

“I’m not worried. I’m just very, very tired.” She goes back to the kitchen area.



It’s evening at last. “Poor Mouse.” Walter smiles sadly at my bald head, its helmet of ointment shining like a beacon. “Never mind. You’ll heal up nicely and your lovely brown mouse fur will soon grow back.” It’s the first time he’s spoken to me in days. It’s almost worth losing my hair for.

“What are you doing?” I ask. There’s a piece of paper on his lap crammed with numbers and Hebrew and Greek letters.

“The number of the beast is six sixty-six.” His speech is clipped, urgent. He has straw in his hair, which, unfairly, is almost as long as a girl’s.

I shake my head.

“One of the villagers gave me a Bible. Trying to convert me, I expect. The book of Revelation, in the New Testament, says: ‘Those who understand should count the number of the beast, for it is the number of a person, and its number is six sixty-six.’ I’m trying to find a way to get the letters in Hitler’s name to add up to that. Then we’ll be able to beat him.”

“Have you succeeded yet?”

“Are you making fun of me?” His eyes narrow. Like me, Walter hates being made fun of.

“No, of course not,” I say, although maybe I was, a little bit. “I’m just stupid, I guess — don’t know the right questions to ask.”

“Well, of course I haven’t succeeded, Mouse. Look here. All the letters have corresponding numbers in Hebrew and Greek. *H* is eight, *I* is nine, *T* is two hundred, *L* is thirty, *E* is five, *R* is ninety. What does that add up to?”

I think for a minute, or try to. My brain is blank. Walter is talking to me — the Mouse part of me is ecstatic.

“Three hundred and forty-two,” Walter interjects impatiently. “I’m still more than three hundred short. That’s what I’m working on, finding various permutations of his first name. Now do you get it?”

I smile knowledgeably. But actually I can’t figure out how Hitler’s name adding up to six sixty-six will defeat him. I’m also uneasy talking about the New Testament — we’re *Jewish*, after all. But I sweat when anyone mentions numerology, gematria or Kabbalah, the mystical fringes of Judaism that my father, although a scholar as a youth, always avoided. They are too dangerous, they could call down the wrath of God on us. Numbers seem innocuous, just small squiggles on the page, but put together in certain ways they can be deadly, they weave nets of spells and can capture you in them. They’re definitely off limits to me. I believe they should be off limits to Walter, too, and tell him so.

“Mouse, cease,” he says crossly. “There’s an order to ending this Hitler problem, just like there’s an order to everything, and I’m going to find it.”

I snarl inwardly but shut up. Soon he’s back working, a puzzled expression on his face.

“It’s bad luck,” I want to say, “and really stupid, looking for trouble.” But instead I ask, surprising myself: “How’s it going with Eva? Is she being a bit kinder?”

I hope he's going to say he doesn't know what I'm talking about, but instead he glances up, speculatively, if reluctantly. I can see he wants to be busy with his numbers. "It's going very well, I think. I brought her some flowers and berries in my cap, and she thanked me very prettily for them. She's a nice girl, Mouse, and brilliant too. She understands everything I tell her."

Eva, brilliant? Walter really has it bad. But so do I. I can't even feel my head itching because I'm on fire with envy. I can't stand to be near him another minute — he's impossible, he doesn't understand how much he hurts me. I must be driving him mad, too, because he picks up his papers and ambles away, his walk loose, uncoordinated, as if God dropped a few stitches knitting him together.

My stupid eyes are burning. I throw a quick goodnight at his back and rush off to my little box of a bed that's been hastily thrown together by the counselors and older boys. We all have beds now, beds and stools, rickety though they are. Walter might be a whiz at gematria, he might understand the magic of numbers, but he and the others are miserable failures at carpentry. If I sleep on my left side, the way I'm most comfortable, the bed collapses. That could be funny if it wasn't so pathetic.

Something catches my eye, and I glance through the barn window. There's a light on in the castle, and I imagine the moths dancing around it. Only one light in only one room because there's only one occupant — someone lonelier and crazier than I am. Our directrice, who's been over to speak to him and bargain for eggs, says the castle is disgusting, decrepit, full of cobwebs and rats, but I still think we'd be better off there. All that space for

one sorry-faced man. And only this barn for all of us. It doesn't make sense.

My scalp starts to itch again. Pulling my blanket over my head with a groan, I scratch desperately, relishing the sharp, stinging pain. It's an effective, if dangerous, diversion. "You'll get an infection in your brain and it'll kill you," I hear Mama say. At first I block her out because I really, really don't care. But then I let the memories fly in like huge birds, soaring through the giant window of the past.