

The Message

A Reading A-Z Level Z Leveled Book

Word Count: 2,500



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The Message



Written by Joan Linck • Illustrated by Marcy Ramsey

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Correlation

LEVEL Z	
Fountas & Pinnell	U-V
Reading Recovery	N/A
DRA	50



Caen (KAHN), France [located in the Normandy region of northwestern France, about 16 kilometers (10 miles) inland from the English Channel], 1944

Secret Meeting

“Red lanterns burn brightly in Suez.” Aimee whispered the password into the barn.

“Mostly when it rains.” The stranger murmured his portion of the password from behind the heavy wooden door as he creaked it open, glimpsing Aimee and her companion. Day was fading into night, and in the feeble light she guessed he was maybe 18 or 19. She wished he would hurry because each time the cold February wind rustled the trees, she thought a soldier was approaching. He hesitated; then he **warily** opened the door.

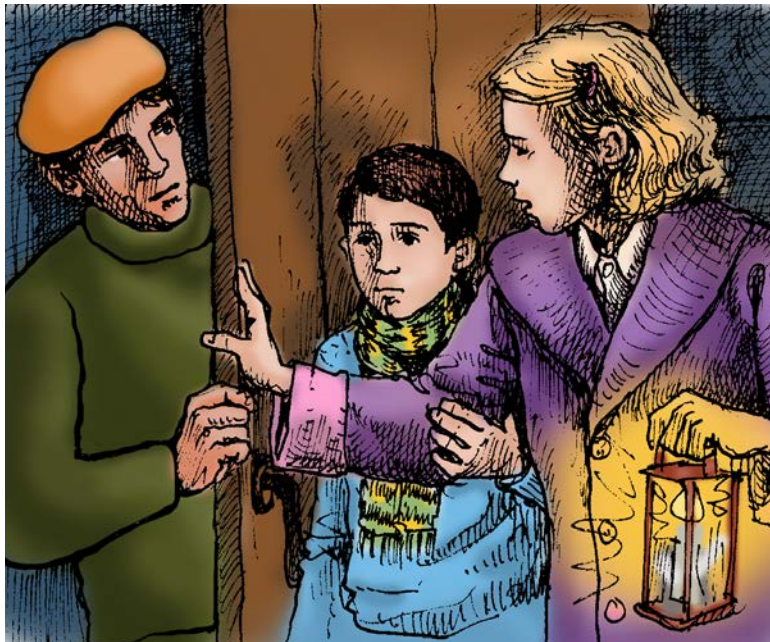
“Come in,” he said in a voice as stiff and cold as the onshore breeze. Aimee stepped over the threshold into the old brick barn, carefully holding her elbow **askew** so young Jacques could follow her. Behind them the stranger slid a wooden plank through metal brackets on each side of the door.

“Why did you bring your little brother? I was not told two people were coming tonight.”

“Jacques is not my brother, but he is the one with news and he needed help finding you.”

Table of Contents

Secret Meeting	4
Jacques’ Mission.....	10
German Patrol.....	13
Radio Broadcast	18
Dangerous Return	22
Author’s Note.....	23
Glossary.....	24



Fifteen-year-old Aimee and the stranger worked for the French Resistance, a secret group of ordinary citizens living in German-occupied France. They did whatever they could to help England, the United States, and other Allied countries stop the German **dictator** Adolf Hitler from taking over Europe during World War II. Aimee's contact in the Resistance had requested that she meet Jacques near Caen's railway station this afternoon and escort him to this barn. She had been given only vital information: the barn's location and the password to enter. She watched as the stranger **scrutinized** Jacques' appearance, but when he noticed the **vacant** look in Jacques' eyes, he relaxed.

"Oh, of course." His voice softened. "We haven't been properly introduced. I'm Pierre."

"Pleased to meet you. I'm Jacques La—"

"Ah-ah-ah," interrupted Pierre. "First names only to keep us all safer." He offered the visitors a comforting smile as he invited them to sit down in a horse stall, vacant except for bales of hay and a picnic basket.

A single lightbulb hung from the low rafters, its light only bright enough to hint at what lay in the barn's corners. As ordered by the Germans, **blackout** material covered the windows to prevent light from shining out, but the French counted on it to prevent German soldiers from spying in.

Straw from the animal stalls spilled onto the stone floor, and the sweet aroma of hay mixed with the **pungent** smell of cattle. As she'd been taught to do, Aimee scanned the interior of the barn for potential hiding spots in case the German soldiers should appear. Getting caught sending information to the enemy meant prison, or worse. But the three in the barn were willing to take that risk if it helped free their beloved France from Hitler's grip.



Aimee stepped forward and Jacques followed, his hand still resting in the crook of her arm for guidance and peace of mind. "Promise to keep me away from the cow pies," Jacques joked.

"Yes, of course," Aimee laughed. "But how did you know there were cow droppings? I thought you couldn't see anything."

"My eyes may be useless, but my nose works just fine," he smiled. Each of them sat calmly on

a bale of hay, but their tense faces revealed that they all anticipated a more serious turn in the conversation.

"You must be hungry after your journey. Would you like some cider and pastries?" asked Pierre quietly.

"Pastries?" Jacques snapped to attention.

"Where did you find flour to make pastries?" asked Aimee. "You must have saved **ration** coupons for months."

Do You Know?

In 1824, a fifteen-year-old blind French boy, Louis Braille, invented a reading and writing system of raised dots on paper. People around the world who are blind or visually impaired still use his system, Braille, today.



"Maybe I shouldn't call them pastries," Pierre replied. "Mama makes them with mashed potatoes, not flour, but they're tasty." He pulled a bundle from the basket and handed Aimee and Jacques a pastry each.

"What would we do without potatoes? I think we eat them at virtually every meal," Aimee complained.

Jacques eagerly ate his portion. "Mmmm . . . I haven't had these since the war began."



Jacques' Mission

"Do you remember much from before the war?" Pierre asked. "The Germans have been here for almost four years now, so you must have been very young when it all began."

"I was five when France surrendered," Jacques said between mouthfuls. "But good tastes I remember."

"And long for, if you are like me," Pierre agreed as he drank his cider and then brought the subject around to the night's mission. "So it must be you, Jacques, who lives on the coast."

"Yes, my family's farm is high on a cliff above the English Channel, less than 10 kilometers from this barn. We raise cattle and grow corn and barley." Jacques hesitated. "At least we used to, until the Germans built **bunkers** on our land."

"Bunkers?" Pierre looked intensely interested.

"That's why Papa sent me to you. He's furious that the German soldiers took over a whole section of our farm, and he couldn't do anything to stop it," Jacques said loudly.

"Shhh, my friend," Pierre interrupted. "These walls are thick, but we cannot risk loud noises

when the German patrol might be lurking nearby like hawks ready to swoop down on three mice."

"Sorry," Jacques mumbled. "Papa says the Germans are hiding four huge guns. They built shelters and surrounded them with dirt; then they hung nets above them. Every few nights we hear Allied planes flying overhead, which Papa assumes are taking **aerial** photographs, trying to figure out what the Germans are doing. But the guns are too well camouflaged to be spotted from the air."

"Your father is probably right," Pierre agreed. "And since your land overlooks the water, the guns must be waiting to sink any Allied boat that tries to come ashore!"



Nighttime view of occupied French farmlands as seen from an Allied spy plane.

Aimee's pulse quickened. This information could save hundreds or thousands of lives when the Allies arrive, but if the Germans discovered they were sending messages to England . . .

Jacques nodded, satisfied that Pierre now grasped the gravity of the situation. "There is a tall observation pole on our land that the Allies will need to know about. I counted the number of steps it takes to walk from the pole to the westernmost bunker, from bunker to bunker, and from the edge of the cliff to the bunkers."

"Excellent," Pierre whispered excitedly. "Did you write it down?"

"No! If I were caught with that information . . ." Jacques shuddered.

"But I count steps every day—how many steps across a room, or to the barn—I can remember any number of steps."

"You're certainly brave," Aimee remarked.

"The Germans don't suspect a blind kid of doing anything important."

Try It!

In an open field, count the number of steps it takes you to walk between two spots. Try it several times. Now repeat the walk with your eyes closed. Did you reach the same spot?

German Patrol

"How will you send this information to England?" Aimee asked Pierre.

"By radio," he replied, with a spark of excitement in his eyes.

"Radio? But how will we—" Jacques froze.

Then Aimee heard it too—voices. She glanced at her companions; Jacques was a statue, and even Pierre showed concern with a crouched posture and clenched fists.

"The German patrol," Pierre whispered. "Follow me—quickly!"



Grabbing Jacques' wrist, he bolted from the stall. Aimee followed them to a triple-wide stall—almost running into a cow's large backside—and saw Pierre pointing to a stack of hay bales. Aimee nodded in understanding, wordlessly guiding Jacques through a narrow entrance into the hay cave and following close on his heels. Pierre placed another bale over the opening and then darted to his own hiding spot, completely out of Aimee's field of vision. Now the girl could experience the barn as Jacques did.

From inside the barn, the soldiers' voices were too muffled to be understood. Did they suspect **clandestine** activity or was this their routine patrol? Aimee wondered whether Jacques realized how precarious their situation was. If the Germans found a radio transmitter in this barn, they would all be labeled as spies, no matter what story they **fabricated**. All three of them would be hauled away tonight—just disappear—without their families knowing what had happened to them.

Aimee felt like a mouse hiding from a cat. The soldiers called back and forth to one another but never tried the barn door. The three young Resistance workers waited silent and still like stalked rabbits—long after the soldiers' voices died away—before emerging from their burrows.



"They've moved on by now," Pierre whispered confidently when he reappeared.

"Wouldn't it be foolish to use a radio transmitter now?" asked Aimee as Pierre moved a bale and helped her exit the cave first.

"Perhaps, but I think we must," Pierre answered. Now he helped Jacques back to his feet, pulled loose straw from the boy's collar, and guided him back to the other stall.

"But what if the patrol is still around?" Aimee persisted, while peering toward the door.

"I doubt they would have been so loud if they had suspected anything. Still, we will have to be careful to avoid sending too long of a message. The Germans constantly listen for radio broadcasts, and when they detect one, they need just ten minutes to pinpoint its origin."

"And swoop in to arrest the broadcaster and his helpers . . ." Aimee gulped.

"That is why our broadcast to the Allies *must* be under nine minutes; it is too risky to go longer."

"How will we know if the Allies have received the message?" Jacques asked.

"That, my friends, is a good story," Pierre chuckled. He knelt beside the basket and pulled out a small tin can with a torn label. "Jacques, I am holding what looks like an ordinary tin can, but inside . . ." Opening it slowly, he dumped out a few dried beans and showed Aimee the hidden contents of the tin can.

"A radio!" she gasped.



"I thought radios were banned," Jacques said.
"We had to give ours to the Germans."

"I made it myself," Pierre answered proudly.
"The microphone, transmitter, and headset are hidden nearby, so after we send the message tonight, I can listen to the British radio station—the BBC—nightly. They read the news in French three times a day." Pierre put the radio back and stepped into the corner of the stall to rummage through a pile of hay, continuing his explanation.
"At the end of those broadcasts the announcer says, ' . . . and here are some personal messages.' These are coded messages for Resistance workers. When we send messages we each use an **alias**, and when the British receive a message, they reply to the aliases we used."

Pierre removed a small steel box with black knobs and dials, and two black rubber hoses flopping around behind it. He set the transmitter on the ground and extended the antenna. He handed a pocket watch to Aimee, who was on pins and needles.

"Your job is to keep track of time. As each minute passes, hold up another finger." Aimee set the watch face-up on her lap and nodded.
"We cannot, under any circumstances, go past nine minutes."

Radio Broadcast

Pierre untangled the two tubes, which he connected to the headset and microphone. He adjusted the beret covering his short-cropped hair, placed the headset over his ears, and turned a knob, making the transmitter crackle to life.

"This is Victor Hugo with a message for . . ." Pierre began. "The tunnel extends from the officers' quarters to . . ." Pierre droned into the microphone. As he talked, Aimee became overwhelmed with dread; Pierre had more to relay in nine minutes than Jacques' information alone. While holding up one finger, she imagined what would happen if they were discovered.

"Railcars loaded with steel **reinforcements** were seen heading toward . . ." Two fingers . . . three. Aimee struggled to keep her hand from shaking. She **steeled** herself against the fear rising inside of her; if soldiers could face battle, the least she could do is help send them information. Two more minutes ticked past. Would they send it all before the Germans could detect the source of the radio transmission?

Finally, Pierre tapped Jacques' knee and whispered, "Ready when you are, friend."

Aimee allowed herself a calming sigh. Jacques recited his information as Pierre repeated it into the microphone: types of guns, the location of each bunker—Aimee held up two more fingers—and a description of the bunkers. Aimee rapidly shook eight fingers at Pierre.

“Jacques,” she whispered, “don’t forget the location of the observation pole. But make it quick—we have less than a minute!”

“Oh . . . right,” stammered Jacques. He nervously rubbed his hands together, giving Aimee a sinking feeling that he couldn’t remember this essential piece of information.



“Forty seconds,” Aimee cried out, unable to hide the alarm she felt. “Thirty . . .” Did she hear footsteps or was that blood pulsing in her ears?

Jacques took a deep breath.

“Twenty seconds!”

“Oh!” He jumped up. “I remember . . . it is 2.7 kilometers west of the fishing boat harbor.”

Pierre rapidly **dispatched** this last tidbit of information and signed out. He clicked off the transmitter, stood up, and congratulated Jacques. “Good work, my friend. Tomorrow I will have good news to share at church.”

The visitors asked in unison, “At church?”

“Every morning at 6:30,” Pierre chuckled. “My contact and I attend, and during the service we switch prayer books. His contains questions or describes an assignment—like meeting you here tonight—and mine has answers to his older questions or news of completing an assignment.

“You may have saved many lives tonight. Hopefully, before the troops storm the beaches near Jacques’ farm, they will knock out the Germans’ guns and help **liberate** France!”

“I am glad I could help,” Jacques replied.



"Now I must send you home for the night—it may not be safe here for long," Pierre said as he **concealed** the radio in its bag. When he returned, the three gathered their belongings, headed for the door and listened. Pierre lit a lantern and scanned the darkness. Satisfied, he signaled Aimee and Jacques, who scampered down the gravel road leading away from the barn, every step putting more distance between them and the illegal transmitter. In the darkness, Pierre waved goodbye to his new friends.

Dangerous Return

"We're almost there," Jacques said excitedly, "and Marie has soup waiting for us."

"That sounds wonder—" He stopped suddenly. "What is it, Jacques?"

"Someone's coming," he whispered.

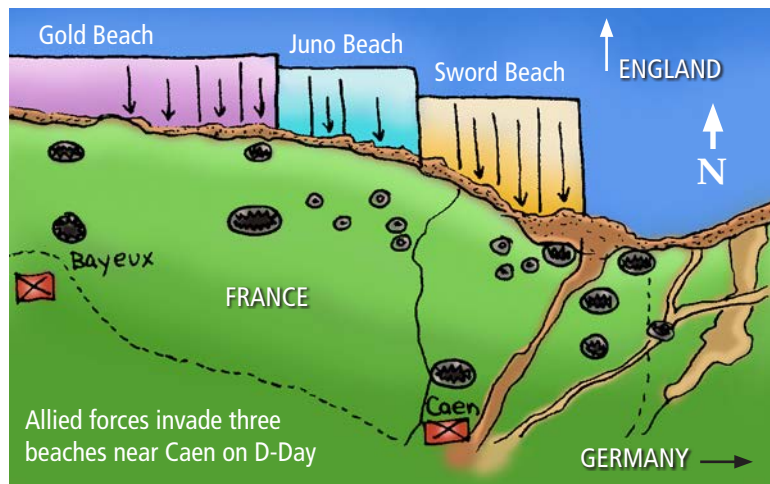
"I don't hear any—" Aimee gasped, as two intimidating German soldiers suddenly emerged from the darkness with their guns drawn. She was sure that "guilty" was written across her face. A light blinded her eyes then moved on to Jacques. She flinched as it blinded her again and then returned to Jacques. She felt Jacques clutch her arm like a steel trap, but she was already protecting him as best she could. Jacques put up his own defense: look as helpless as possible by reaching out into space with his free hand. Would the men fall for this well-rehearsed act?



One soldier grumbled in German, "It's only the blind kid," which made the other one nod in agreement, and the two of them moved on.

"Nice work," Aimee whispered, now a safe distance from the threat.

Jacques smiled, his head held high. "If they only knew."



Author's Note

The characters and events in this story are fictional, but Jacques and Pierre are based on real people. In February 1944, an eight- or nine-year-old blind boy made his way to Caen, France, to tell Andre Heintz, a French Resistance worker, about the bunkers Nazi soldiers had erected on his family's farm. This information was sent to England so that on D-Day — June 6, 1944, the day the Allies invaded Germany-occupied France—the guns were targeted and eliminated.

Glossary

aerial	taking place in the air (p. 11)
alias	a name used instead of one's real name (p. 17)
askew	off to one side (p. 4)
blackout	accidental or intentional shutting of all lights (p. 6)
bunkers	protective underground forts (p. 10)
clandestine	secret or undercover (p. 14)
concealed	hid from view (p. 21)
dictator	a leader who rules with unquestioned power, usually by force (p. 5)
dispatched	sent off (p. 20)
fabricated	came up with a lie (p. 14)
liberate	to set free (p. 20)
pungent	having a strong smell (p. 6)
reinforcements	extra military troops or supplies (p. 18)
scrutinized	examined carefully (p. 5)
steeled	made oneself tougher or stronger (p. 18)
vacant	empty (p. 5)
warily	carefully; cautiously (p. 4)