

*“Forget us
forget our generation
live like humans
forget us”*
-Tadeusz Różewicz

Luminitza - 1941

“Aishe?” I whisper, gently nudging my sister. Her eyes are closed, but her breathing has not yet become deep and steady. She doesn’t respond, just turns her shoulder away. I wonder whether she is still angry at me for ripping her shawl yesterday or if she is simply trying to sleep. We shouldn’t be awake, in any case, but I haven’t slept well in days. And although Aishe sleeps like a log, I know that she has had trouble falling asleep lately as well. “Will you tell me a story?”

“Go to sleep,” she mumbles. Her mouth sounds like it’s filled with marbles, her words jumbled and slurring into each other.

I lie back onto my mat. The faint droning of insects outside has become a comforting noise for me in these silent times. Once, there would have been music - bright, vivid music - and dancing throughout the night. The only dance I see tonight is a fly buzzing near the roof, weaving between two spiderwebs, an exquisite performance of survival. Trapped, it heads for the window, where a sliver of moonlight shines through, but it is closed. Desperate, the fly tries again and again. *What a stupid creature*, I think. It will be dead by morning.

Soon, my eyes begin to weigh down and the fly drifts out of my vision. A dream begins, one that I have had for weeks. It fills me with terror, but I cannot elude my sleep. Tonight, I fear, my thoughts will be painted with blood.

It is late and Aishe has snuck out to see a boy she likes very much. I hear her leave and follow her. I do not know why; perhaps to catch her in the act, perhaps to see what she does with him. But I follow her. I like it very much, sneaking out. The tension, the silence, the stifled breathing. I am very good at this, Aishe does not hear me at all. Neither do our parents.

She meets him near a very large tree. He sees her and smiles widely. I am hiding, and so they do not see me. They touch each other, carefully, lovingly. I see him do what my father does with my mother sometimes, run his fingers gently down her cheeks as if she is the prettiest girl he has ever seen. He should- my sister is very beautiful.

It is dark and quiet, as all nights are, but there is something else in the air, something I can only sense with the growing lump in my chest. It is the feeling I get when I know my mother is about to find that I have done something very wrong. Aishe and the boy she likes do not seem to be nervous, but I am.

I don't know how long I stay crouched in my hiding space. Aishe seems to want to stay out with the boy forever. I grow tired and weary of watching them, but I fight to stay awake. It is a long time before I hear the men.

They come from a distance and at first, all I hear are boots. Aishe hears them too, but the boy shushes her, caresses her hair. I want to leave, go back to the safety of my bed, but if I do now, they will seem me. I do not want to get in trouble. When the men come closer and their distinct marching is now clear, I am terrified. But my feet are frozen. As it seems, so are Aishe's and the boy's. Together, they kneel behind the tree, hoping it can conceal them from the oncoming men.

Within seconds, they are even closer and now, everyone is awake, and fires are blazing, people screaming, yelling, angry, scared, all mixed together. Everything is loud and suddenly, I hear gunshots, short bursts of fury, ring out. Then another. Then another and they are everywhere.

I am still crouching.

This feels like a game I play with the other children. We pretend to shoot each other, see who can outlive the rest. In our imaginations, it is a very vivid game. Are we playing now? Is this all in my mind? I see Aishe, still behind the tree. She looks as if she is going to run somewhere. I decide to join her.

"Aishe!" I yell, running towards her. Around me, it seems as if the world is ending. We are near the forest, and the flames seem to be coming closer, the gunshots louder. This is not a game. Not a game! A man stumbles near me, his face distorted and bloodied. I can't tell who he is. I scream and run faster. "Aishe!"

She turns, surprised.

"Hide!" she cries, fear streaked across her face. "Run!"

The boy lies beside her, a single bullet hole through his head. His eyes are open and his arm outstretched to Aishe. I look back to the man; he is dead. So are many others.

Aishe is crying, but she takes my hand, sprinting for the trees. I am hard to drag though, for I keep looking over my shoulder for my mother. Where is she? Nothing seems real.

Someone has spotted us. They are beckoning to others, screaming angrily. Bullets fly precariously at our heads, but they only hit the trees. They seem to be poor shots, but perhaps only because it is dark and the branches curve and protect us.

I am so scared, but we are disappearing into the woods and then we are flying, flying....

We are angel-children, descending from the skies. We find an empty barn. It is worn and looks like it'll fall down upon us, but we are so tired.... And my mother asks, "Where did you go?"

Marko - 1942

Everything went to hell in January of 1933 when Adolf Hitler came into power. After the Jews, he began to persecute my people to the ends of the earth. People went missing, people I used to know, the windows of their homes boxed up and the doors locked and shut. With what was seemingly all of Germany under Hitler, there was almost no one and nowhere we could turn to for help. Passage out of Europe was expensive and the cheapest ways out were always the most dangerous. There was no one to trust but ourselves.

My family moved from the city to the countryside not so many years later. It'd be safer for all of us, my mother believed. But no matter where we lived, we knew it was a brutal time. We lived in fear of everyone and everything. During the nights, we would be glued to the one rickety radio we owned, trying to see what was happening. Sometimes, we would receive news about old friends or acquaintances whom had disappeared without a word. We knew what had happened, but for us to be taken from our homes? The idea seemed so unreal - something that couldn't possibly happen. Until 1942.

Early that summer, we were taken to the Warsaw Ghetto. Dragged out from our lives, packed into a truck like fish in a can. Resistance was not an option, but how we wished it was. Under the warm sun in the ghetto, people starved on the streets, others succumbing to the brutal fate of disease. Some were slaughtered cold-heartedly by the Nazis. So many pleaded for a miracle, but there came no mercy.

Thousands of the Jews were sent off over the months I lived there. Nothing good could come of that- they would surely suffer a similar fate of those who remained. I saw men, women, children... all massacred. Hiding made no difference; the Nazis shot upon sight. My friends, my neighbors- innocent men and women, girls and boys. How to describe to gruesome deaths, the resounding gunshots? The final cries of the dead? It all haunted me, followed my dreams in the night, my thoughts in the day. And who would be next? There was no way to be sure. Perhaps it would be all of us.

Maybe there was hope, contained in the minds of the young and innocent, but not nearly enough for anyone to live on. We were fenced in with no way out, facing an inevitable end. Survival meant so much, yet there was so much death. I believed our lives would never be the same again.

It was not long before we had been moved once more. This time, however, we were certain we'd never come out alive.

Aishe - 1941

I am older than Luminitza. I am stronger, I am smarter. I should have protected her. My sweet, precious sister. How could I have failed so badly?

They found us and took us to a train. They brought us to a camp that I can barely think of without becoming sick. The Nazis took our clothes when we arrived, stripping us naked. All the things they did... it was like they thought were animals. Worse than animals! So many people looked half-dead, some brutalized, others like they could barely stand to live a few more moments.

Luminitza was terrified. She had never been around death and despair like this. She always thought she'd be next. I tried so hard to tell her that everything would be okay, even when I couldn't believe it myself. My mother taught me never to lie, but also to never hurt my sister. I wish I never had to make the choice between the two.

Jili - 1943

They brought us to Auschwitz in the early days of 1943. It was a new year, but no one was celebrating. When we arrived at the camp, they put us in a special area with the other Roma families. Within months, our numbers had reached tens of thousands. But at the same time, exhaustion, disease, and starvation rained down upon us.

My mother remained hopeful to the end. She would whisper comforting words to me at night, saying one day, we would be free and unpersecuted. She died that spring. I sat by her side, clutching her hand. It was limp, barely more than skin and bones. She had stopped eating, those last few weeks. Selfless, she had sacrificed her rations to those she knew would outlive her.

I remember on my fifteenth birthday, my mother made me a beautiful skirt with her own hands, working day and night to finish it in time for the celebration. It was so lovely, I dared not wear it in fear that I would tear or stain it. When I told her this, she laughed at my ridiculousness, but I could see the sadness behind her eyes. And now, I know why. Something so elegant, that she had worked so hard on-never to be worn.

My mother died in imprisonment, knowing she would never see her freedom again. And so I believed, no matter what happened next, that neither would I.

Marko - 1942

Many of us were separated at Treblinka. Most were taken across the camp but some of those around me were marched into an old, decrepit building. We were told to stand still. There was a round of shots, all fired at once. Then again, then again, and again. I watched as each fell to the ground, the smell of blood filling the air, until it was my turn. There was no one who could have survived.

Jili - 1944

The Nazis had put us to work for a long time, yet they did not give us sustenance. Death was rampant, but many were able to stay strong for those they loved who had perished.

One day, however, the Nazis came again. Although almost autumn, it was a dark, cloudy day. Or perhaps, it only seemed so. Months ago, they had arrived, trying to take us out of the camp. They were fought off with sticks and stones that we had found lying in the dirt. We knew they would swear revenge and swear revenge they did.

Everyone was forced into trucks, huddling masses of crying men, women, and children. We all knew what we would face.

My only comfort was knowing that perhaps I would see my mother again.

Aishe - 1944

With each year, we lost more hope. I wished to stay strong only for Luminitza, but I did not know how. I knew we could only leave this awful place in God's arms.

Late in the summer, the Nazis took me to a building where a man in a white coat stood. I did not know that he was such an evil man. For days, he would not give us food or drink, only water that had a strange taste. My throat burned and longed for more water; I could not resist even from trying to drink the water from the freshly-mopped floors, but to no avail.

I believe that I went crazy in those last few days. I could barely walk without my head spinning or pounding. I was weak and tired. Sometimes, my legs would give out and I would fall to the ground without warning. I longed for everything to stop- and in the end, my wish was granted.

Luminitza - 1945

Aishe died a year ago, too weak to even whisper her last words. I cried for her everyday, wished to have her back by my side. But perhaps I was being selfish, for she surely would have suffered more if she had stayed alive.

In early spring, however, they made the remainder of us walk. Walk! when we could barely stand, when we were famished, when we were dying. We walked for days, but it seemed an eternity. There were many who couldn't go on, who died on the path, were left behind. And we kept walking.

On the fourth day, I stumbled and fell.

“Get up!” they yelled. “Get up or you die here!”

My arms felt weak, my legs numb. I struggled to get to my feet, but met the ground once more. Pain radiated throughout my body. I was kicked to the side and I heard what seemed like an explosion above before all went dark.

There are no good people in this world.