

Ingrid

Screaming. Screaming and screeching is all I hear as I'm filed in to a train, along with hundreds of other Jews. We're pushed and tossed like rats, crammed together in such a tight space for all of us to fit comfortably. I stand silently in a corner as everyone else wails and shoves against the other.

All noise is muted to my ears. I see the moving bodies pushing against one another; twisting torsos, shaking hands, wild heads, fearful eyes. My own conscience; drifting to a cabin in the hills with a man's arms wrapped around me...

I open my eyes. There is a warm glow in the room, radiating from a single candle. It's light creating a shadow of blended concentric circles on the ceiling, from a bright centre to gradually fading into darkness. A feather-bed covers me up to my waist and his arm lays strewn across my bosom, his hand resting under my left armpit. He is still sleeping, breathing softly. I gently remove him from me and get out of bed. I drape a silk dressing gown round my shoulders, feeling the sensation of the satin against my naked skin. Tying it closed, I walk towards the window and draw the thin taffeta curtains. A moderate amount of light streams in, even though the sun has not risen yet. I stare into the landscape before my eyes. A small field surrounds the perimeter of the cabin, skirted with a coniferous forest, and blue mountains far beyond, seemingly conjoined with the sky. How I long to be there. To stand upon one of those magnificent peaks and let the wind blow through me; fill my senses with a soothing peace as nature wraps me in her wing. Instead, I am trapped in this cabin, in this world of suffering, deceit and loneliness. This landscape is barren. Silent. A lone bird whistles an eerie tune that carries via a chill morning breeze. I am still waiting for the fog to lift.

I hear him stir in bed. I go back, taking off my dressing gown, and join him.

He's awake now. He puts his arms around me once again and holds me. He rolls on top of me and fucks me again. My cheeks suddenly feel wet. When did I start crying? Why am I crying? I don't feel anything at all. I'm just like the barren landscape; misty and muted.

I close my eyes to stop the tears from leaking, and when I open them again I'm back in the train of writhing bodies; squirming like tortured worms.

With my back to the wall, I slide down onto the hard, cold floor. How did we ever become so worthless? I bury my face in my knees. When I look up again, I see a view from a dirt-smearred window of children playing in the street. They wear smiles. They have no idea what the world has come to. They don't see the dead bodies laying at the side of the road. They don't notice the smirking soldier with a rifle, dragging a man by the collar of his shirt to a wall and beating him to the ground just because the man's a Jew, and he's wearing an arm band with an image of a swastika on it. They aren't woken in the middle of the night to raids of shooting and screaming.

When will this end? I wonder. Will it ever end? Will we ever get through this dark tunnel?

Just as I'm thinking if this could get any worse, I'm brought back to the train. It's pitch black. We must be going through a tunnel. I can't recall when the train started moving. Everyone has calmed down now. They are muttering quietly amongst each other.

I close my eyes again. The minute I open them, I know exactly where I am.

I'm standing in the shadow of the main entrance at the S-Bahn station, in Berlin. A man in a dark grey suit and tie walks hurriedly out through the doors. He is also wearing a hat atop his newly trimmed mid-brown hair. Our eyes connect for a second. I blink. He's gone. I look about, trying to find him again, but he's lost to the crowd, hat and all. There's no use searching any longer. He'll always be nothing more than a stranger to me.

In the train, tears are streaming down my face as I remember his hazel-brown eyes. How our eyes connected for that one second, before he was swept away by the crowd. An eternity rested in that second. Then it passed by without a thought; lost in that moment forever. It is buried in a future that will never exist.

Nobody notices me crying. They have their own concerns. We are all in this train together, but the only thing we have in common is that we're all Jewish.

Another memory comes to the forefront of my vision. We all have to queue and give our names to 'the Germans'. There are hundreds of us, all crowded in what used to be the old market square. All the empty -stalls have been flung over to the side and broken, but all I see are white bands with the faded blue star of David that they make us wear.

There is unintelligible chatter in every direction. Many are frightened. Others timid. There are a few men uttering angry curses towards the Nazis, and some boisterous people who get shot alongside the wall. One man was shot for trying to protect his daughter.

I had a clear view of the whole scene through a frame of heads in the crowd. A man in Nazi uniform was hassling a young girl of sixteen or seventeen. He had her against a wall, running his hands up her skirt and groping her. It was sickening to watch, yet I couldn't turn my head and look the other way. How can nobody else notice? I find myself wondering. Then again, even if there were others that saw what was happening, what could they do about it? The Nazis would simply shoot whoever intervened, just like they have done to countless others, and then they'd continue what they had previously been doing.

Despite that, the girl's Father ran to her aid and pulled the soldier off her, but before he could do anything more, the man pulled out his gun and shot him straight through the head. The girl screeched one high pitched frightening scream, causing everyone to temporarily turn their heads in that direction for a moment. Then they went back to worrying about themselves and their own families. Before the girl could scream again, the soldier covers her mouth with his hand and defiles her.

It was horrendous how he raped her. He devoured her. She couldn't even struggle or cry out against him. She had to just let him do her as he pleased. And still, I couldn't look away. Not even after he left her lying on the ground, ravished. Her simply-made dress was torn. Her hair was now matted and falling across her face as she cried silently on the street. She was so young. I couldn't believe my eyes. Just when I thought I'd seen the worst of it, I recoiled in shock. Only when I was

called forward to give my name, did I finally look away.

“Ingrid Bernstein.” I certified.

This is what the war has come to. We are in a train, being sent somewhere we only heard of in rumours. They say it's some kind of 'concentration camp' where they work us intensely. Who knows what that means? They treated us bad enough in the Ghetto. They beat us and shot us, overworked us. I don't see how much worse these 'camps' could be. Apart from the rumours I've heard of gas showers. Apparently, they cut your hair and make you undress. Then they send you into a shower room. At least that's what they tell you. When we are all in there, they lock the doors and turn on the showers. Only, it's not water that comes out. It's gas. That is the most terrifying story I've heard. I hope to God it's not true.

This brings me back to a time before the war, before all this began, when I was still living in my apartment in Berlin. I was in the shower, the water shooting down on me. I stood under the shower head for a couple of minutes and let the hot water saturate my body. It was such a sensational feeling. It captivated me. Closing my eyes, I raised my head towards the ceiling, feeling each droplet fall on my face. I never knew that would be the last time I'd feel that way. Or indeed, feel anything at all.

That was also the day Johann came home. He didn't even call to let me know he was coming. He let himself in when I didn't come to the door and surprised me in the shower.

As I let the water fall down on my face, I felt another body brush mine. I jumped in alarm, and opened my eyes to see Johann standing naked before me. He looked happy to see me. Every muscle in his body proved it to be true. Even his blue eyes gleamed.

I didn't join him in this feeling. I just said, matter-of-fact, “You're home early.”

He nods his head.

“Why didn't you let me know?” I asked.

“I wanted to surprise you.”

“Well, you certainly succeeded.”

He closes the gap between us then, hugging me tight. The shower is still turned on, and so is he. He kisses me passionately, as the water falls upon us. The next thing I know, I'm up against the shower wall with him inside me. I feel him and am overwhelmed with sensuality. I can feel the heat between my thighs getting hotter.

When we have finished, he lets me down from the wall and kisses me one last time, uttering an “I love you,” before leaving me to finish washing myself. That's when I realised. I couldn't feel a thing. Sure, I could feel the fiery pleasure of the sex we had, but I couldn't feel anything emotionally. I didn't love Johann. I didn't hate him. I didn't even like him. I didn't feel anything for him at all. That's when I realised I was empty of all emotions. Somewhere along the way I became a void.

The last real feeling I had, was standing under the shower with the water splashing on to my face. It was bliss.

I watch the other women in the train, in the dim light. They each have their own story to tell.

A mother with two young daughters, of the ages of five and eight, clinging to either side of her, stands near me. They are thin, half-starved and scared. Frightened like mice. Their mother is much the same. She is trying to be strong for them, but is struggling to stand herself. She has so much responsibility. I realise how lucky I am. I have no one but myself to look after. Yet, I can't help but feel sad for myself. I'll never get a chance to have children of my own, or marry someone I truly love. I'll never be able to feel again.

I look to my right, where a woman of fifty-eight stands holding her button-less coat closed, trying to keep warm in this crowded car. I imagine that coat once had brass buttons and a fur collar. I imagine how she could have had a glamorous life before all this. How she could have lived, before her life was taken from her. Going to balls... Dancing with eligible bachelors, in an intricately designed ball gown. Two danced. The girl twirled. The skirt swished. The orchestra played until the

night ended...

I glance down at her frail hands. They are clutching onto something. A photograph? I wonder what is on that photograph. Her husband? Her sister? Whoever it is, they must be close to her heart, for she holds the picture to her breast. Whoever they are, they are giving her strength. Under her faded yellow head scarf, her expression is not of sadness or fear or loneliness, but of strength and courage. Whoever they are, they are giving her reason to hope, or perhaps to have knowledge that a better future awaits. Whoever they are...

I am reminded of my mother.

She is ironing, with the sun shining through the window. Its rays reaching across the room, caressing her face, like spindly fingers. She is so beautiful. She has long brown hair and a petite figure. She is not tall, although, at the time she looked tall to me.

I remember running through fields with her on long, hot summer days. We smiled and laughed to no end. We were so happy then. We danced beneath the sparkling sun. I was always in awe of my Mother's beauty. She looked so free-spirited. I never once saw her down or melancholy. She never let me see her that way.

Only as I grew older did I notice the melancholy in her manner. It was not distinctly obvious, but it was the small things in her movements that she couldn't hide. At least, not from me. Like how with each step she took, even if just from one room to the next, was an effort for her to make. The spring in her step had disappeared a long time ago.

As the years went by, she took her faith more and more seriously. She prayed three times a day; morning, afternoon, evening, and went about her daily duties in the house, looked after me. She prepared for the Sabbath every Friday evening, and visited the synagogue as much as she could. She was extremely dedicated and at times I thought she was unhappy, but then I'd realise, it wasn't her faith that made her so. It was her life. It was losing her husband, my Father, in the war. It was not having many friends, other than myself, to talk to. I was her only friend and daughter. She loved

me. I think I was the reason she was happy when she smiled. I think praying, whether in the synagogue or at home, gave her a sense of importance within herself. She felt closer to God.

I feel like I have disappointed her.

Here I am, now, in this train, because I am Jewish, when I don't even deserve to be *called* a Jew. Not by my Mother's standard. She was not only a good Jew, but the best person she could be, or, in fact, anyone could be.

And I've disgraced her. I have disgraced her death.

Those summers that we danced under the glimmering sun feel like a distant dream. Nothing feels real any more. Not then. Not now. I have become a figment of my own consciousness.

The train comes to a halt. I wonder if we're finally getting off, and where we are. There's commotion in the car, and I know everyone is thinking the same thing.

A few minutes later, everyone is sighing and moaning when the train starts moving again. I let out a sigh of relief. The longer I'm on this train, the longer I have until I face my doom. On second thoughts, how do I know when I see my doom. Maybe I've seen it already. Perhaps my doom is not feeling. Perhaps I met my doom those few years ago in the shower.

I go back to that time again.

I close my eyes. I soak in the spray of water falling upon my flesh. Each droplet contains a different memory. I cherish each one as they fall, whether I'm laughing with my mother, skipping through sunny fields, watching her iron...

A droplet with the face of a man I'd never seen before within it, falls onto my skin. He has hazel-brown eyes under a short black top hat and newly trimmed mid-brown hair.

That's when it hits me. The man I saw that day at the train station had always looked familiar. I just never knew why. Our eyes connected for *one* second. A single second was all it took to wipe away an eternity.

There is a knock on the door. I open my eyes and get water in them. I had forgotten I was in the

shower. I reach for a towel to dry my eyes. I feel the water shower down on me again. The water capturing my heart.

I open my eyes and see Johann, but he isn't naked. He is clothed in Nazi uniform, now saturated from the shower. He isn't smiling. He isn't happy to see me. His blue eyes show no emotion. They're daunting.

The train stops with a sudden jolt, knocking me forward into Johann. There is a knock on the door. The train door slides open. Johann lets himself in. There is bustle in the train as soldiers make us get out, one by one.

As I'm standing in the train's doorway, I see people in every direction. I can no longer distinguish between the different bodies. They're all just people with their own story to tell.

I step out of the train, and into the summit. Everyone has disappeared. I am standing alone on a mountain peak, with the wind cloaking my body and an extraordinary view beneath me.