4677 words

An Uprising

I am sitting at the head of the table in my grandson's house, visiting for the day. When the sun goes down, he will take me back to the place where my memories are cared for. Where the grounds are fenced in and the doors squeal on you if you try to open them. In the mornings, after I wake and look out the window, I can just make out the razor wire on top of the fence. My grandson says this is just morning cobwebs, but I know a prison camp when I see one.

Here, at my grandson's house, the doors are open and I am permitted to walk around in the back, but they watch me to make sure I do not bolt. Or, rather, wander; I am much too old for bolting. There are moments when I forget why I would want to get away, moments of contentment, possibly even joy. And then I remember the brutality of the camp, and how the

uncertainty of my survival stalked me my entire life, demanding resolution. I remember my suffering, even as my memories of it flee from me over the razor wire.

The air in this house is a warm, damp shroud. I may fall asleep before I have eaten a bite of the *Španělskě ptáčky* and *knedlíky* my grandson's wife has made in my honor. She turns off the TV, ending the pundits' ramblings about whether Bush will win a second term this fall. My great-grandchildren jabber excitedly about one thing or another, while their mother tells me they are going to Lake Hopatcong next week and wouldn't it be nice if I came along. The lake is somewhere in New Jersey, but I do not remember where. My grandson invites me to the quarry in Oxford to see the marble he is cutting, and I wonder if he is fashioning my gravestone. I nod my head and smile: I cannot possibly live much longer.

My family wants me to be happy, but happiness may be too bright a light for eyes that have seen what I have. I will settle for a full stomach and what the comfortable tilt of late afternoon sunlight offers, as it sifts through trees and gauzy curtains to play across the table. My memories shimmer and shift. They cannot be trusted to behave as memories should, strung together as they are with smoke, shifting with no regard for time or the love of my family. They are phantoms that reside less in my mind and more in my hands and belly; in the smell of the earth and in the music of children's voices; in the lateness of the day.

I close my eyes.

#

We are trudging up the 186 steps of the Wiener Graben quarry in Austria with fifty-kilo stones on our backs. If we are not quick enough, the SS will push us over and we will die where we fall. I stumble forward without their help, scraping skin from my knees. Like all the other stones since my capture and internment at Mauthausen last autumn, the one on my back argues

for my death: I can simply set the stone down and sit on it, and I will be its burden for a few moments. I will take in the sweet spring air and rest until an SS guard shoots me and makes it final.

Kowalczyk stops beside me. The granite slab on his back weighs more than he does. His eyes are slits from the beating the guards gave him yesterday. And yet, he is more robust than the dozens of others beetling their way up the steps at the command of the SS.

He shakes his head. "Just like a Czech," he says in passable Czech. "Weak." He manages to gather enough saliva in his mouth to spit on me.

I shift the weight on my back as I stand up. "Fuck yourself, you stupid Pole," I say in passable Polish.

We join the rest of the dung beetles, carrying our deaths up the stairs, putting off the inevitable. Sooner or later, we will not come back down.

#

I am digging large stones from the ground so I can enlarge the garden, then lugging them up the rise behind our house in Hořice, where they will sit like sentries at the edge of our land until I find the time to cement them into a low stone wall.

I have been trying to get my bearings since the war, since Mauthausen. I quit my job in the quarry to work in the bakery making *Hořické trubičky*, slender confections that look like cigarettes. I thought that would be better, but now I rage at ovens instead of stones. It will be my last job in Czechoslovakia before fleeing the communist regime with my family, making our way to Switzerland and then to France, where we will board a ship to America. I will have many jobs there, the last of which will find me working in a machine shop, teaching work-release prisoners how to make levels and clamps and metal yardsticks. I will disappear into blessed

exhaustion by the end of the day, and while the prisoners are bussed back to their cells, I will go home. When I sleep, I will see their faces on the prisoners I buried at Mauthausen.

My father tells me that working the garden will be good for me, that the soil gives back what you put into it, a notion that is less comforting than he knows. I feel forgiveness in the earth but also reprisal. I stop digging stones to kneel in the dirt and pull radishes, finding myself relieved to see that there are radishes attached to the stems. Of course, what else would be? I try not to think about the answer, or it will inhabit my dreams, which seem more real than my waking life.

My wife, heavy with child, is two rows over, picking green beans, squatting like a peasant, a red kerchief channeling the cascade of her chestnut hair. She is no longer the worldly young woman I met at a tavern when I was an unsullied young man willing to shed blood for my country. Or so I would like to think. I have not asked her what she did during the war to survive, and I would not dream of burdening her with what happened to me. The shame each of us buried after the war has blossomed into arguments about nothing. In the garden, she is at peace, and I can imagine her wanting to give birth in it.

I brush dirt from one of the radishes and eat it as I watch her gently separate each bean from its stem and place it in the pot at her feet. The moment seems to hover outside of time, and I feel as though this could be my entire life, watching my wife pick beans as the sun favors us with a pleasant slant. I have nowhere to sow my fleeting joy: I am filled with the hard ground of the past.

#

We are burying torsos and limbs in the nearby woods, underneath tall beech and spruce. We are an odd work crew: a man whose hands shake as he reaches for a leg on the cart, his iron-

grey hair as rampant as the lion tattooed on his right forearm; a pregnant woman who tries to keep the lifelessness from touching her belly; a boy of fifteen or so, sickly, with rheumy eyes and spindly arms, who retches but has nothing in his stomach to bring up. And me. A lone guard supervises us. He is young but still older than me, tall, and well fed. From somewhere above myself, I watch as we dig holes and throw the remains in, then cover them up with dark soil. When we are done, crows eulogize the interred, but no words are spoken.

The guard smiles at us, as if he has accompanied us on a romp. He gestures for us to sit, then leans his Karabiner carelessly against a tree. From inside his tunic, he pulls out something wrapped in a red handkerchief, the red of giving, of want. He unfolds it to reveal a piece of black bread big enough to be shared. Real bread, not the gritty loaves made with sawdust they give to us. He eats it, every crumb, while looking through us into the woods. This casual act crushes me, and I realize how unprepared I am for it. It will not be the worst thing that happens to me at the camps, but somehow it sticks in my mind as the cruelest.

The tattooed man turns away. The pregnant woman puts her hands on her belly and weeps. The boy chews on a twig. My jaw clenches and unclenches of its own accord. I taste the bread, the salt of the woman's tears, but what I swallow is the tattooed man's bitterness.

#

I am holding a woman in my arms outside Královsky Dvor in Hořice. Not a girl but a woman, one with experience of a certain kind, I am sure. It is late, and we are both drunk, me for the first time. I am in trouble. I can feel it rising up in me, a potency that cannot be overcome, not by the illegitimate protectorate that occupies my country, not by my mother and father, who would have me stay here and do nothing, not even by my own fear, which is considerable.

This small berg I grew up in is far too quaint for the gravity of war. Germany, with its boot on our necks, is not impressed with our statues and our cemetery portal and our pilsner: tributes to the long dead and strong beer to forget them. Tomorrow I leave for Banská Bystrica with papers that qualify me as a miner of iron and copper, a worker of the protectorate. Of course, these papers are as false as my stated intentions. I will be a partisan fighter, though I am unblooded, untrained, and have never held a rifle. But I am not worried. Until tonight, I had never held a woman.

I have no idea what to do with her. Her red lipstick portends more than a kiss, and I am more intoxicated by this prospect alone than all the beer I drank tonight. She is older than me, I can tell by her self-assured way in the tavern and the amusement in her eyes when she looks at me. It is this aspect, the indulgence of an innocence I will lose at Mauthausen, that will often sustain me there. Perhaps that is why I will seek her out after the war. Why I will marry her and try desperately to find it again in her eyes.

For the moment, we are content to stand in the alley and keep each other from falling over. I revel in the strength of my arms, the feeling of life that her body gives back to me. I have never felt anything like it before: all that I was becoming will burst forth from this moment, I know it.

#

I am lying in a bunk with a man who is kind enough to share his blanket and his warmth. I have never felt so great a need lying next to anyone before. And never will again. He is Czech like me. A year ago, he was a professor of philosophy at Charles University. The terms of his tenure at Mauthausen are written all over his wasted body. He has been dying since he got here. Maybe this is how one survives at Mauthausen, by dying more slowly than others. When I asked

him how he has endured for so long in a place where the aim is to work you to death as quickly as possible, he nodded and stroked his grey beard. "You must live *here*," he said, his arms half extended in front of him, palms up. "Nowhere else." I nodded my agreement, if not my understanding.

It is cold and dark in the barracks. I trace my fingers over the words scratched into the planks above me by the good professor: *Where is God?*

I have not been here long, but in that time, I have been stripped, shaved of all my body hair, and beaten by guards for no reason other than to acquaint me with the volatile rhythms of this place. My blanket was taken from me by a big Pole who told me I did not need it yet, that there were others who needed it more. He said one would come my way eventually.

I am most afraid at night, when I can hear the low moans and the muffled coughs and the whispered prayers. I drape my arm over the old man, pulling him closer. I hum quietly, an old song from my youth that I realize is a lullaby. I try not to think about the whereabouts of God or how a blanket will come my way or what the professor knows about enduring: I fear all of it will come at a price I cannot pay.

#

I am lying awake in bed under several blankets, my little brother sleeping next to me for the warmth. He is a pest, following me around, asking me this and that, always touching my things, gumming the frets of my guitar with sticky fingers. My mother babies him, singing cradlesongs to him at night; he is much too old for that. In the morning, when he is asleep, I am released from his precocious tyranny for a while. In three years, when typhus takes him from us, I will remember being more tolerant and loving toward him than I was. He will leave us before the war descends on him, perhaps a blessing in way.

Last night, against my mother's injunction, I opened the window a measure because I like to wake to the cold autumn air. The sweet smell of burning leaves outside competes with the lure of eggs and *klobàsa* coming from the kitchen. I am careful not to wake my brother as I get out of bed and open the window fully. The sun has not yet risen over the beech and hornbeam in Sochařský Park. My father sits on an old bentwood chair by a mound of burning leaves, wearing his Tonak fedora, smoking a cigar, another one of my mother's injunctions. He sleeps very little, rising early each day to sit outside no matter the weather. He is very still, as if what is inside him may spill out if he moves too much. He is a quiet man, my father, a keeper of secrets. He fought in the Great War but will say little about it. Once, in a mood made more inclusive by snifters of *slivovice*, he showed me his medal. Four overlapping circles of gold: a double-tailed lion, two eagles, and the double-barred cross of Slovakia. How could I not ask him what he did to deserve it? He shook his head and told me that *deserve* had nothing to do with it, that he deserved the medal no more than the soldiers who died that day deserved their fates. I pressed him for more, hoping that the plum brandy would grant me dispensation, but he shook his head again and said that the words for what happened had left him that day, and they were not likely to return.

As I watch him through my window, I am jealous of what he shares with the morning; the bond he has with it is unlike any he has with us. The illicit smoke from his cigar mixes with that of the leaves, and as I watch it wind into the morning sky, I feel the thrill and the dread of someday knowing what my father knows. That day will come many years later at Mauthausen; I will take that wordless knowledge home with me to Czechoslovakia, embalm it in *slivovice*, and bury it deep inside me; I will tend it in my ruined dreams.

#

We are standing at attention in the square outside the barracks, pale stalks wilting in the sun, listening to the camp band. How a few Gypsies with violins, a Czech with a trombone, and a Spaniard with an accordion can create such beautiful music is beyond my comprehension. There was a Slovenian Jew who played guitar, but no one has seen him lately. Last week they played for the chief of barracks, whose birthday we celebrated, songs that glorify those who have imprisoned us, like "*Vorwarts! Vorwarts*!" and "*Sieg Heil Viktoria*." There was sausage on the table but only for him. Those in the band got an extra ration of bread. The rest of us were nourished by the music, if not the words, while our stomachs sang for suppers we could not have.

Today the band plays a lively song about the timely arrival of birds in springtime, a song of renewal and rebirth. At the same time, a prisoner is marched out in front, tied to a post and shot. This is Mauthausen's specialty: plant a seed, allow a shoot to poke through the soil, and then trample it; we learn to expect death even as hope sprouts. Music and blood, dreams and shit, pendulating in our thoughts, in our sleep, in our hearts.

I look away toward the crematorium on the other side of the camp. As I watch the smoke swirl from its stack into the sky, I resolve to talk to the barracks chief, let him know that I can play guitar. I feel shame at this thought, but like the soup we get once a day, it is too thin to make much of a difference, is gone soon, and leaves the same gnawing emptiness in the very center of me.

#

I am sitting in a comfortable chair in the home office of a very nice unflinching woman, listening to the noisy kibbitzing of grackles outside her open window. And I am crying. My tears, savage and unrelenting, come from far away. For months now, at the urging of my sons, I have been coming here to talk to her. Since my wife passed, my moods have been dark and

mercurial. At first, I told the therapist very little of consequence, and although she indulged my desultory patter with a grace and wit that charmed me, I returned to see her mostly because my family expected me to. And then one day something inside me shifted, like shrapnel making its way to the surface, and I told her a terrible thing. I saw neither judgment nor pity in her eyes, which surprised me. I kept coming back, wondering how both of us would respond to what I said. I began to approach what I felt in those meetings with a sense of curiosity instead of dread.

Today, she says it was not my fault, that I had no choice. I cannot bear to hear her say it, so I change the subject. I wipe my eyes and ask her how long I have to live before I can say I have survived Mauthausen. "Can it kill me this long after I have left?"

"Have you?" she asks. "Left it?" She has kind eyes and a warm smile, this woman who has risked her own peace with the world by attending to the horrors I bring to her, like a dog with something dead in its mouth, laying it at her feet and saying with its eyes, *is this what you wanted?* She is old, like me, and I am thankful for the protection that a lived life provides her. A younger person might have been swept away by the senselessness of it all. She has gone back with me to that place many times. With each telling, slivers of shame and helplessness are tweezed out.

"You can let go," she says. "It's time."

I shake my head and look at my hands, my accomplices. I place one on my chest. It is the chest of a skinny old man whose bones are borrowed from the past. Inside, there is a heart that beats strongly, but it is not mine.

#

I am standing at the top of the quarry with all the other dung beetles, free of our burdens for the moment. We can see the entire pit from up here. The SS have dubbed this the Parachutists Wall, although no one who has ever gone over was equipped with one.

They have given me a choice: I can push Kowalczyk over the edge, or they will shoot me, and I will go over. I have only a second or two to do what I have been told or it will be my bones scattered like kindling at the bottom of the quarry. None of the other dung beetles looks at me, as if doing so would court death. As if choice were a contagion and I the source.

Kowalczyk faces the quarry with me behind him, my hand on his back. I feel his ribs, the knuckles of his spine, and a resounding heartbeat. Had our lives not depended on the vagaries of mad men, he would outlast everyone, and he would go home to his family after the war. But his capacity for survival, which is remarkable, is conspicuous enough to condemn him. He is also a crazy, selfish bastard. He has stolen my food and my blanket, mocked my homeland, spit on me: he has only ever made me angry.

But as I push him over the edge, I am not angry. There will never be words for what I feel. He falls silently, endlessly, dooming me to forever hear him plummeting in the stillness at the top of my breath.

#

I am standing in the highest tier of bleachers, hand over heart, trying to remember the words to "The Star-Spangled Banner." The diamond and field are positioned with eleven- and twelve-year-olds doing the same. I can see everything from up here. My older son is standing on the pitcher's mound looking nervous. At "rocket's red glare," he bends over and vomits the oatmeal he had for breakfast, and then I see not my son but the boy at Mauthausen tasked with burying body parts, trying to sick up the knowledge of what was under the mound of dirt he

stood on. I start forward, but my wife puts a hand on my shoulder. She knows. "It is a baseball game, *miláčku*," she says. "Nothing more." When the anthem stops, the coach trudges to the mound with a square-tipped shovel in one hand and a can of sawdust in the other. He cleans up the mess with the weary nonchalance of someone accustomed to children's unpredictable spewing.

The umpire yells, "Play ball!" The families in the stands cheer. I relax a little.

My younger son complains he is hungry, though it is only midmorning. My wife takes him to the concession stand and comes back with hotdogs and sodas. I watch the game I have come to love. I have never played it, but, sadly, I know more about its rules and strategies now than I know about the history of my adopted country. My son pitches a good game until the fourth inning when he starts hitting batters. His coach walks to the mound, says some words to him, puts his hand on his back. I can feel his knobby spine, his chicken-wing shoulder blades. My heart races, my mouth goes dry, and I am at the top of the quarry again. *Do not push him*, I think. I start to get up again, but my wife stops me. I take deep breaths. I tell myself that I am in America, a long way from Mauthausen, watching children play a game. My son walks to the dugout with his head down, yet he has nothing to be ashamed of. And the coach was simply keeping the game alive.

He had no choice. No choice. None.

#

I am sitting against the wall of the barracks on a sunny day in early May 1945, too weak to stand, as the Division of Americans comes through the front gate in their armored cars. They are met with no resistance, as the last of the SS and guards left days ago. My clothes have all

fallen away like the bark of a dying tree, and I sit here with other such survivors, if that is what we are. If I have learned anything here, it is that survival is momentary.

Hale and thick-limbed, the Americans bring with them an air of invincibility, a brightness that cannot be looked at directly. The crowd greeting them is clothed and raucous, the heartiest among us. We, who sit here, farther down in the square where roll was called, have watery soup in our veins and sawdust in our marrow. Privation has enfeebled us, made us anonymous, stripped us down to the wick. Yet we may still be counted among the living because we have lived *here*, nowhere else, as the late professor instructed. There was nothing before Mauthausen, and in our eyes is the shock of our birth here.

The air is cool, but the sun warms me. Beyond the walls and electrified fences lies a patchwork of fields left to their own. Too late for anything to grow there but field cress and bindweed. Or maybe oat grass and daisies will grow tall, and one day children will run through them. I would like to see that. There may yet be reasons to fight for my life. I lean into the thought with my withered haunches, bite down on it with loosened molars, until I am standing. I see bright spots flickering across the fields. Hands reach out to steady me. I must learn how to walk, how to feed myself, how to be human. I must learn to forget so that I can remember how to live.

#

I am holding the hand of *Babička* as we walk through grass almost as tall as me. She is old beyond my reckoning but sturdy, and my eyes are fixed on her thick calves and ankles. They scare me a little. I want to run through the grass, but she grips my hand firmly and says, “Stay with me, little one.” In her eyes is forgiveness. It was always there, I simply needed to remember it.

My suffering waits patiently for me at Mauthausen; it does not begrudge me this moment, and I reach back from almost eight decades to feel the love in her hand. The light is fading as we reach a stump at the edge of the meadow. She sits me in her lap and recites a nursery rhyme about a mouse cooking porridge for her children. She traces the pot on my palm, and each finger becomes a little mouse. There is enough to feed all except the smallest one, who scampers up my arm and hides where I am most ticklish. I am innocent of his hunger, so I laugh, and my laughter peals through time, making me feel better now. I will go back and feed him, lift him up, keep him warm. The ripples of this act of compassion will wash over me before I die. My memories, as long as I have them, may return me to Mauthausen, but I will not be confined there: there is plenty of room in the accommodating lap of *Babička*. And at the moment of my death, I will know, finally, that I have survived.

We watch fireflies sparkling across the meadow while *Babička* hums a song of memories yet to be made. I can still feel her fingers dancing up my arm.

I close my eyes.