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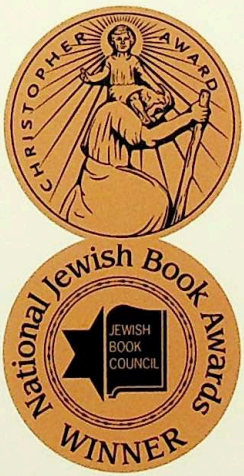
—OPRAH

THE CHOICE

Embrace the Possible

"A mind-blowing memoir of surviving Auschwitz . . . I can't imagine a more important message for modern times."
—LORI GOTTLIEB, *The New York Times Book Review*



A Memoir by

Dr. Edith Eva Eger

Foreword by Philip Zimbardo, PhD

Winner of a NATIONAL JEWISH BOOK AWARD
and CHRISTOPHER AWARD

At the age of sixteen, Edith Eger was sent to Auschwitz. Hours after her parents were killed, Nazi officer Dr. Josef Mengele forced Edie to dance for his amusement and her survival. Edie was pulled from a pile of corpses when the American troops liberated the camps in 1945.

Edie spent decades struggling with flashbacks and survivor's guilt, determined to stay silent and hide from the past. Thirty-five years after the war ended, she returned to Auschwitz and was finally able to fully heal and forgive the one person she'd been unable to forgive—herself.

Edie weaves her remarkable personal journey with the moving stories of those she has helped heal. She explores how we can be imprisoned in our own minds and shows us how to find the key to freedom. *The Choice* is a life-changing book that will provide hope and comfort to generations of readers.

"I'll be forever changed by Dr. Eger's story. . . . *The Choice* is a reminder of what courage looks like in the worst of times and that we all have the ability to pay attention to what we've lost, or to pay attention to what we still have." —OPRAH

"Dr. Eger's life reveals our capacity to transcend even the greatest of horrors and to use that suffering for the benefit of others. She has found true freedom and forgiveness and shows us how we can as well." —DESMOND TUTU, Nobel Peace Prize Laureate

"Dr. Edith Eva Eger is my kind of hero. She survived unspeakable horrors and brutality; but rather than let her painful past destroy her, she chose to transform it into a powerful gift—one she uses to help others heal." —JEANNETTE WALLS, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Glass Castle*

"A beautiful memoir, reminiscent of the great works of Anne Frank and Viktor Frankl. But it is more than a book—it is a work of art. It gave me goose bumps, the kind that grace you in transcendent moments of appreciating a Mozart sonata, an Elizabeth Barrett Browning sonnet, or the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel."
—ADAM GRANT, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Give and Take*, *Originals*, and coauthor of *Option B*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DR. EDITH EVA EGER maintains a clinical practice in La Jolla, California, and holds a faculty appointment at the University of California, San Diego. She also serves as a consultant for the U.S. Army and Navy in resiliency training and the treatment of PTSD. Edie is still dancing—and ends her talks with a ballet high kick.

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Praise for *The Choice*

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—Jeannette Walls, author of *The Glass Castle*

"*The Choice* is a gift to humanity. One of those rare and eternal stories that you don't want to end and that leave you forever changed. Dr. Eger's life reveals our capacity to transcend even the greatest of horrors and to use that suffering for the benefit of others. She has found true freedom and forgiveness and shows us how we can as well."

—Desmond Tutu, Nobel Peace Prize Laureate

"A mind-blowing memoir of surviving Auschwitz . . . I can't imagine a more important message for modern times. Eger's book is a triumph, and should be read by all who care about both their inner freedom and the future of humanity."

—Lori Gottlieb, *The New York Times Book Review*

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—Adam Grant, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Give and Take*, *Originals*, and coauthor of *Option B*

"Edith's strength and courage are remarkable in this memoir as she draws on her own unthinkable experience in Nazi concentration camps to become a therapist and help others recover from all kinds of hardship. Her life and work are an incredible example of forgiveness, resilience, and generosity."

—Sheryl Sandberg, COO of Facebook
and founder of LeanIn.org

"I finished *The Choice* with tears in my eyes and gratitude in my heart."

—Carol Brooks, editor in chief, *First for Women*

"A more important book for our times is hard to imagine."

—*The Bookseller* (UK)

be described as 'page-turners,' but Dr. Edith Eva
eption. . . . A book everyone should read and share

—*Authorlink Writers & Readers Magazine*

gist's hard-won lessons give hope to others."

—*Hadassah Magazine*

ked memoir . . . a searing, astute study of intensive healing
ce through the absolution of suffering and atrocity."

—*Kirkus Reviews* (starred review)

a searing firsthand account of surviving the Holocaust in this
noir of trauma, resilience, and hope. . . . Offering a gripping
y and hard-won wisdom for facing the painful impact of trauma
an psyche, this valuable work bears witness to the strength of the
rit to overcome unfathomable evil."

—*Library Journal*

ook will be remembered as important for going beyond the realm of a
aust memoir and becoming a Holocaust life lesson."

—*San Diego Jewish World*

e Choice pulls together stories and insights [Eger] has shared with people
ound the world for decades and reveals new dimensions of her remarkable
fe."

—*El Paso Inc. Magazine*

"*The Choice* is more than an eloquent memoir by Holocaust survivor and
psychologist Edith Eva Eger. It is an exploration of the healing potential of
choice. . . . Eger is not suggesting that she is unscarred by her experience, but
ives a life filled with grace. *The Choice* is not a how-to book; it is, how
to choose to live life fully."

—*BookP*

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EVENPU

The Choice will be an extraordinary book on h
compassion, survival with dignity, mental toughness, and
will appeal to millions of people who can learn from Dr. Eger's inspiri
and shocking personal story as well as her profound clinical wisdom to heal
their lives."

—Philip Zimbardo, PhD, Stanford professor emeritus of
psychology and author of the *New York Times* bestseller
The Lucifer Effect: Understanding How Good People Turn Evil

"*The Choice* uses Eger's journey to teach readers how they, too, can triumph
over trauma."

—*Broadly*

"We brought Dr. Eger to work with our most troubled military personnel—
people grappling with the most intense emotional scars from their experienc
in battle. Dr. Eger is a healer of the highest order. Personally, I have learne
from this gifted human being, this indomitable survivor, this accomplish
therapist more about humanity—and suffering—and resilience, than all
advanced degrees put together. Dr. Eger has informed and inspired me
than any other role model in my practice of thirty years. This efferve
brawny octogenarian has more than a story to tell, a therapy to offer, a jo
to guide; she brings us to a new way of being."

—U.S. Navy Captain Robert Koffman, MD, former di
Deployment Health/Psychological Hea
U.S. Navy Bureau of Medicine an

"I would take Edie Eger on an op with me any day."

—U.S. Navy SEALs Commander (Ret.) Mark Divin
author of *The Way of the SEAL* and *Un*

"*The Choice* . . . details [Eger's] time at Auschwitz, her esca
became a groundbreaking clinical therapist who has paved
ment of trauma survivors battling post-traumatic stress di

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THE CHOICE

Embrace the Possible

DR. EDITH EVA EGER

with Esmé Schwall Weigand

SCRIBNER

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Names and characteristics have been changed,
including for all my patients, and some individuals are composites.

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For the five generations of my family
my father, Lajos, who taught me to laugh;
my mother, Ilona, who helped me find what I needed inside;
my gorgeous and unbelievable sisters, Magda and Klara;
my children: Marianne, Audrey, and John;
and their children: Lindsey, Jordan, Rachel, David, and Ashley;
and their children's children: Silas, Graham, and Hale

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Foreword

By Philip Zimbardo, PhD

Psychologist and professor emeritus at Stanford University, Phil Zimbardo is the creator of the famed Stanford prison experiment (1971) and author of many notable books, including the New York Times bestseller and winner of the William James Book Award for best psychology book The Lucifer Effect: Understanding How Good People Turn Evil (2007). *He is founder and president of the Heroic Imagination Project.*

One spring, at the invitation of the chief psychiatrist of the U.S. Navy, Dr. Edith Eva Eger boarded a windowless fighter jet bound for one of the world's largest warships, the USS *Nimitz* aircraft carrier, stationed off the California coast. The plane swooped down toward a tiny five-hundred-foot runway and landed with a jolt as its tailhook caught the arresting wire and stopped the plane from careening into the ocean. The only female aboard the ship, Dr. Eger was shown to her room in the captain's cabin. What was her mission? She was there to teach five thousand young Navy men how to deal with the adversity, trauma, and chaos of war.

On countless occasions, Dr. Eger has been the clinical expert brought in to treat soldiers, including Special Operations Forces, suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder and traumatic brain injuries. How is this gentle grandmother able to help so many military personnel heal from the inner brutality of war?

Before I met Dr. Eger in person I called to invite her to give a guest lecture to my Psychology of Mind Control class at Stanford. Her age and her accent made me picture an old-world babushka with a head-scarf tied under her chin. When she addressed my students, I saw for myself her healing power. Luminous with her radiant smile, shining earrings, and blazing golden hair, dressed head to toe in what my wife later told me was Chanel, she wove her horrific and harrowing stories of surviving the Nazi death camps with humor, with an upbeat and feisty attitude, and with a presence and warmth I can only describe as pure light.

Dr. Eger's life has been full of darkness. She was imprisoned at Auschwitz when she was just a teenager. Despite torture, starvation, and the constant threat of annihilation, she preserved her mental and spiritual freedom. She was not broken by the horrors she experienced; she was emboldened and strengthened by them. In fact, her wisdom comes from deep within the most devastating episodes of her life.

She is able to help others heal because she has journeyed from trauma to triumph herself. She has discovered how to use her experience of human cruelty to empower so many—from military personnel like those aboard the USS *Nimitz* to couples struggling to rekindle intimacy, from those who were neglected or abused to those who are suffering from addiction or illness, from those who have lost loved ones to those who have lost hope. And for all of us who suffer from the everyday disappointments and challenges of life, her message inspires us to make our own choice to find freedom from suffering—to find our own inner light.

At the close of her lecture, every single one of my three hundred students leapt into a spontaneous standing ovation. Then, at least a hundred young men and women flooded the small stage, each waiting for a turn to thank and embrace this extraordinary woman. In all my decades of teaching I had never seen a group of students so inspired.

In the twenty years that Edie and I have worked and traveled together, this is the response I have come to expect from every audience she addresses around the world. From a Hero Round Table in Flint, Michigan, where we spoke to a group of young people in a city struggling with high poverty, 50 percent unemployment, and increasing racial conflict, to Budapest, Hungary, the city where many of Edie's

relatives perished, where she spoke to hundreds of people trying to rebuild from a damaging past, I have seen it happen again and again: people are transformed in Edie's presence.

In this book, Dr. Eger weaves together the stories of her patients' transformations with her own unforgettable story of surviving Auschwitz. While her story of survival is as gripping and dramatic as any that has been told, it is not just her story that has made me passionate about sharing this book with the world. It is the fact that Edie has used her experiences to help so many to discover true freedom. In this way, her book is much more than another Shoah memoir, as important as such stories are for remembering the past. Her goal is nothing less than to help each of us to escape the prisons of our own minds. Each of us is in some way mentally imprisoned, and it is Edie's mission to help us realize that just as we can act as our own jailors, we can also be our own liberators.

When Edie is introduced to young audiences, she is often called "the Anne Frank who didn't die," because Edie and Anne were of a similar age and upbringing when they were deported to the camps. Both young women capture the innocence and compassion that allow a belief in the basic goodness of human beings, despite the cruelty and persecution they experienced. Of course, at the time Anne Frank was writing her diary, she had yet to experience the extremity of the camps, which makes Edie's insights as a survivor and as a clinician (and great-grandmother!) especially moving and compelling.

Like the most important books about the Holocaust, Dr. Eger's reveals both the darkest side of evil and the indomitable strength of the human spirit in the face of evil. But it does something else too. Perhaps the best comparison for Edie's book is to another Shoah memoir, Viktor Frankl's brilliant classic *Man's Search for Meaning*. Dr. Eger shares Frankl's profundity and deep knowledge of humanity, and adds the warmth and intimacy of a lifelong clinician. Viktor Frankl presented the psychology of the prisoners who were with him in Auschwitz. Dr. Eger offers us the psychology of freedom.

In my own work I have long studied the psychological foundations of negative forms of social influence. I've sought to understand the mechanisms by which we conform and obey and stand by in situations where peace and justice can be served only if we choose another path:

if we act heroically. Edie has helped me to discover that heroism is not the province only of those who perform extraordinary deeds or take impulsive risks to protect themselves or others—though Edie has done both of these things. Heroism is rather a mind-set or an accumulation of our personal and social habits. It is a way of being. And it is a special way of viewing ourselves. To be a hero requires taking effective action at crucial junctures in our lives, to make an active attempt to address injustice or create positive change in the world. To be a hero requires great moral courage. And each of us has an inner hero waiting to be expressed. We are all "heroes in training." Our hero training is life, the daily circumstances that invite us to practice the habits of heroism: to commit daily deeds of kindness; to radiate compassion, starting with self-compassion; to bring out the best in others and ourselves; to sustain love, even in our most challenging relationships; to celebrate and exercise the power of our mental freedom. Edie is a hero—and doubly so, because she teaches each of us to grow and create meaningful and lasting change in ourselves, in our relationships, and in our world.

Two years ago Edie and I traveled together to Budapest, to the city where her sister was living when the Nazis began rounding up Hungarian Jews. We visited a Jewish synagogue, its courtyard a memorial to the Holocaust, its walls a canvas of photographs from before, during, and after the war. We visited the Shoes on the Danube Bank memorial that honors the people, including some of Edie's own family members, who were killed by the Arrow Cross militiamen during World War II, ordered to stand on the riverbank and take off their shoes, and then shot, their bodies falling into the water, carried away by the current. The past felt tangible.

Throughout the day, Edie grew more and more quiet. I wondered if she would find it difficult to speak to an audience of six hundred that night after an emotional journey that was almost certainly stirring up painful memories. But when she took the stage she didn't begin with a story of the fear or trauma or horror that our visit had likely made all too real for her again. She began with a story of kindness, an act of everyday heroism that, she reminded us, happened even in hell. "Isn't it amazing?" she said. "The worst brings out the best in us."

At the end of her speech, which she concluded with her trademark high ballet kick, Edie called out, "Okay, now everybody dance!" The

audience rose as one. Hundreds of people ran onto the stage. There was no music. But we danced. We danced and sang and laughed and hugged in an incomparable celebration of life.

Dr. Eger is one of the dwindling number of survivors who can bear firsthand testimony to the horrors of the concentration camps. Her book recounts the hell and trauma that she and other survivors endured during and after the war. And it is a universal message of hope and possibility to all who are trying to free themselves from pain and suffering. Whether imprisoned by bad marriages, destructive families, or jobs they hate, or imprisoned within the barbed wire of self-limiting beliefs that trap them in their own minds, readers will learn from this book that they can choose to embrace joy and freedom regardless of their circumstances.

The Choice is an extraordinary chronicle of heroism and healing, resiliency and compassion, survival with dignity, mental toughness, and moral courage. All of us can learn from Dr. Eger's inspiring cases and riveting personal story to heal our own lives.

San Francisco, California
January 2017

INTRODUCTION

I Had My Secret, and My Secret Had Me

I didn't know about the loaded gun hidden under his shirt, but the instant Captain Jason Fuller walked into my El Paso office on a summer day in 1980, my gut tightened and the back of my neck stung. War had taught me to sense danger even before I could explain why I was afraid.

Jason was tall, with the lean physique of an athlete, but his body was so rigid he appeared more wooden than human. His blue eyes looked distant, his jaw frozen, and he wouldn't—or couldn't—speak. I steered him to the white couch in my office. He sat stiffly, fists pressing into his knees. I had never met Jason and had no idea what had triggered his catatonic state. His body was close enough to touch, and his anguish practically palpable, but he was far away, lost. He did not even seem to notice my silver standard poodle, Tess, standing at attention near my desk, like a second living statue in the room.

I took a deep breath and searched for a way to begin. Sometimes I start a first session by introducing myself and sharing a little of my history and approach. Sometimes I jump right into identifying and investigating the feelings that have brought the patient to my office. With Jason, it felt critical not to overwhelm him with too much information or ask him to be too vulnerable too quickly. He was completely shut down. I had to find a way to give him the safety and permission he needed to risk showing me whatever he guarded so tightly inside. And I had to pay attention to my body's warning system without letting my sense of danger overwhelm my ability to help.

"How can I be useful to you?" I asked.

He didn't answer. He didn't even blink. He reminded me of a character in a myth or folktale who has been turned to stone. What magic spell could free him?

"Why now?" I asked. This was my secret weapon. The question I always ask my patients on a first visit. I need to know why they are motivated to change. Why today, of all days, do they want to start working with me? Why is today different from yesterday, or last week, or last year? Why is today different from tomorrow? Sometimes our pain pushes us, and sometimes our hope pulls us. Asking "Why now?" isn't just asking a question—it's asking everything.

One of his eyes briefly twitched closed. But he said nothing.

"Tell me why you're here," I invited again.

Still he said nothing.

My body tensed with a wave of uncertainty and an awareness of the tenuous and crucial crossroads where we sat: two humans face-to-face, both of us vulnerable, both of us taking a risk as we struggled to name an anguish and find its cure. Jason hadn't arrived with an official referral. It appeared that he had brought himself to my office by choice. But I knew from clinical and personal experience that even when someone chooses to heal, he or she can remain frozen for years.

Given the severity of the symptoms he exhibited, if I didn't succeed in reaching him my only alternative would be to recommend him to my colleague, the chief psychiatrist at the William Beaumont Army Medical Center, where I'd done my doctoral work. Dr. Harold Kolmer would diagnose Jason's catatonia, hospitalize him, and probably prescribe an antipsychotic drug like Haldol. I pictured Jason in a hospital gown, his eyes still glazed, his body, now so tense, racked with the muscle spasms that are often a side effect of the drugs prescribed to manage psychosis. I rely absolutely on the expertise of my psychiatrist colleagues, and I am grateful for the medications that save lives. But I don't like to jump to hospitalization if there's any chance of success with a therapeutic intervention. I feared that if I recommended Jason to be hospitalized and medicated without first exploring other options, he would trade one kind of numbness for another, frozen limbs for the involuntary movements of dyskinesia—an uncoordinated dance of repeating tics and motions, when the nervous system sends the signal

for the body to move without the mind's permission. His pain, whatever its cause, might be muted by the drugs, but it wouldn't be resolved. He might feel better, or feel less—which we often mistake for feeling better—but he would not be healed.

What now? I wondered as the heavy minutes dragged past, as Jason sat frozen on my couch—there by choice, but still imprisoned. I had only one hour. One opportunity. Could I reach him? Could I help him to dissolve his potential for violence, which I could sense as clearly as the air conditioner's blast across my skin? Could I help him see that whatever his trouble and whatever his pain, he already held the key to his own freedom? I couldn't have known then that if I failed to reach Jason on that very day, a fate far worse than a hospital room awaited him—a life in an actual prison, probably on death row. I only knew then that I had to try.

As I studied Jason, I knew that to reach him I wouldn't use the language of feelings; I would use a language more comfortable and familiar to someone in the military. I would give orders. I sensed that the only hope for unlocking him was to get the blood moving through his body.

"We're going for a walk," I said. I didn't ask. I gave the command. "Captain, we will take Tess to the park—now."

Jason looked panicked for a moment. Here was a woman, a stranger, talking in a thick Hungarian accent, telling him what to do. I could see him looking around, wondering, "How can I get out of here?" But he was a good soldier. He stood up.

"Yes, ma'am," he said. "Yes, ma'am."

I would discover soon enough the origin of Jason's trauma, and he would discover that despite our obvious differences, there was much we shared. We both knew violence. And we both knew what it was like to become frozen. I also carried a wound within me, a sorrow so deep that for many years I hadn't been able to speak of it at all, to anyone.

My past still haunted me: an anxious, dizzy feeling every time I heard sirens, or heavy footsteps, or shouting men. This, I had learned, is trauma: a nearly constant feeling in my gut that something is wrong, or that something terrible is about to happen, the automatic fear responses in my body telling me to run away, to take cover, to hide

myself from the danger that is everywhere. My trauma can still rise up out of mundane encounters. A sudden sight, a particular smell, can transport me back to the past. The day I met Captain Fuller, more than thirty years had passed since I'd been liberated from the concentration camps of the Holocaust. Today, more than seventy years have passed. What happened can never be forgotten and can never be changed. But over time I learned that I can choose how to respond to the past. I can be miserable, or I can be hopeful—I can be depressed, or I can be happy. We always have that choice, that opportunity for control. *I'm here, this is now*, I have learned to tell myself, over and over, until the panicky feeling begins to ease.

Conventional wisdom says that if something bothers you or causes you anxiety, then just don't look at it. Don't dwell on it. Don't go there. So we run from past traumas and hardships or from current discomfort or conflict. For much of my adulthood I had thought my survival in the present depended on keeping the past and its darkness locked away. In my early immigrant years in Baltimore in the 1950s, I didn't even know how to pronounce Auschwitz in English. Not that I would have wanted to tell you I was there even if I could have. I didn't want anyone's pity. I didn't want anyone to know.

I just wanted to be a Yankee doodle dandy. To speak English without an accent. To hide from the past. In my yearning to belong, in my fear of being swallowed up by the past, I worked very hard to keep my pain hidden. I hadn't yet discovered that my silence and my desire for acceptance, both founded in fear, were ways of running away from myself—that in choosing not to face the past and myself directly, decades after my literal imprisonment had ended, I was still choosing not to be free. I had my secret, and my secret had me.

The catatonic Army captain sitting immobile on my couch reminded me of what I had eventually discovered: that when we force our truths and stories into hiding, secrets can become their own trauma, their own prison. Far from diminishing pain, whatever we deny ourselves the opportunity to accept becomes as inescapable as brick walls and steel bars. When we don't allow ourselves to grieve our losses, wounds, and disappointments, we are doomed to keep reliving them.

Freedom lies in learning to embrace what happened. Freedom means we muster the courage to dismantle the prison, brick by brick.

* * *

Bad things, I am afraid, happen to everyone. This we can't change. If you look at your birth certificate, does it say life will be easy? It does not. But so many of us remain stuck in a trauma or grief, unable to experience our lives fully. This we can change.

At Kennedy International Airport recently, waiting for my flight home to San Diego, I sat and studied the faces of every passing stranger. What I saw deeply moved me. I saw boredom, fury, tension, worry, confusion, discouragement, disappointment, sadness, and, most troubling of all, emptiness. It made me very sad to see so little joy and laughter. Even the dullest moments of our lives are opportunities to experience hope, buoyancy, happiness. Mundane life is life too. As is painful life, and stressful life. Why do we so often struggle to feel alive, or distance ourselves from feeling life fully? Why is it such a challenge to bring life to life?

If you asked me for the most common diagnosis among the people I treat, I wouldn't say depression or post-traumatic stress disorder, although these conditions are all too common among those I've known, loved, and guided to freedom. No, I would say hunger. We are hungry. We are hungry for approval, attention, affection. We are hungry for the freedom to embrace life and to really know and be ourselves.

My own search for freedom and my years of experience as a licensed clinical psychologist have taught me that suffering is universal. But victimhood is optional. There is a difference between victimization and victimhood. We are all likely to be victimized in some way in the course of our lives. At some point we will suffer some kind of affliction or calamity or abuse, caused by circumstances or people or institutions over which we have little or no control. This is life. And this is victimization. It comes from the outside. It's the neighborhood bully, the boss who rages, the spouse who hits, the lover who cheats, the discriminatory law, the accident that lands you in the hospital.

In contrast, victimhood comes from the inside. No one can make you a victim but you. We become victims not because of what happens to us but when we choose to hold on to our victimization. We develop a victim's mind—a way of thinking and being that is rigid, blaming, pessimistic, stuck in the past, unforgiving, punitive, and without healthy

limits or boundaries. We become our own jailors when we choose the confines of the victim's mind.

I want to make one thing very clear. When I talk about victims and survivors, I am not blaming victims—so many of whom never had a chance. I could never blame those who were sent right to the gas chambers or who died in their cot, or even those who ran into the electric barbed wire fence. I grieve for all people everywhere who are sentenced to violence and destruction. I live to guide others to a position of empowerment in the face of all of life's hardships.

I also want to say that there is no hierarchy of suffering. There's nothing that makes my pain worse or better than yours, no graph on which we can plot the relative importance of one sorrow versus another. People say to me, "Things in my life are pretty hard right now, but I have no right to complain—it's not *Auschwitz*." This kind of comparison can lead us to minimize or diminish our own suffering. Being a survivor, being a "thriver" requires absolute acceptance of what was and what is. If we discount our pain, or punish ourselves for feeling lost or isolated or scared about the challenges in our lives, however insignificant these challenges may seem to someone else, then we're still choosing to be victims. We're not seeing our choices. We're judging ourselves. I don't want you to hear my story and say, "My own suffering is less significant." I want you to hear my story and say, "If she can do it, then so can I!"

One morning I saw two patients back to back, both mothers in their forties. The first woman had a daughter who was dying of hemophilia. She spent most of her visit crying, asking how God could take her child's life. I hurt so much for this woman—she was absolutely devoted to her daughter's care, and devastated by her impending loss. She was angry, she was grieving, and she wasn't at all sure that she could survive the hurt.

My next patient had just come from the country club, not the hospital. She, too, spent much of the hour crying. She was upset because her new Cadillac had just been delivered, and it was the wrong shade of yellow. On the surface, her problem seemed petty, especially compared to my previous patient's anguish over her dying child. But I knew enough about her to understand that her tears of disappointment over the color of her car were really tears of disappointment over the big-

ger things in her life that hadn't worked out the way =
lonely marriage, a son who had been kicked out of y=
the aspirations for a career she had abandoned in
available for her husband and child. Often, the little =
are emblematic of the larger losses; the seemingly ins=
are representative of greater pain.

I realized that day how much my two patients,
different, had in common—with each other and with
where. Both women were responding to a situation the
in which their expectations had been upended. Bot
and hurting because something was not what they w
it to be; they were trying to reconcile what was with w
been. Each woman's pain was real. Each woman was
human drama—that we find ourselves in situations w
ing and that we don't feel prepared to handle. Both
my compassion. Both had the potential to heal. Both
us, had choices in attitude and action that could mo
tim to survivor even if the circumstances they were d
change. Survivors don't have time to ask, "Why me?"
only relevant question is, "What now?"

Whether you're in the dawn or noon or late evening of
you've seen deep suffering or are only just beginn
struggle, whether you're falling in love for the first ti
life partner to old age, whether you're healing from a
or in search of some little adjustments that could b
your life, I would love to help you discover how t
centration camp of your own mind and become the
meant to be. I would love to help you experience f
past, freedom from failures and fears, freedom fro
takes, freedom from regret and unresolved grief—a
enjoy the full, rich feast of life. We cannot choose to
hurt. But we can choose to be free, to escape the pa
befalls us, and to embrace the possible. I invite you t
to be free.

Like the challah my mother used to make for our
this book has three strands: my story of survival, m

myself, and the stories of the precious people I've had the privilege of guiding to freedom. I've conveyed my experience as I can best remember it. The stories about patients accurately reflect the core of their experiences, but I have changed all names and identifying details and in some instances created composites from patients working through similar challenges. What follows is the story of the choices, big and small, that can lead us from trauma to triumph, from darkness to light, from imprisonment to freedom.

CHAPTER 1

The Four Questions

If I could distill my entire life into one moment, into one still image, it is this: three women in dark wool coats wait, arms linked, in a barren yard. They are exhausted. They've got dust on their shoes. They stand in a long line.

The three women are my mother, my sister Magda, and me. This is our last moment together. We don't know that. We refuse to consider it. Or we are too weary even to speculate about what is ahead. It is a moment of severing—mother from daughters, life as it has been from all that will come after. And yet only hindsight can give it this meaning.

I see the three of us from behind, as though I am next in line. Why does memory give me the back of my mother's head but not her face? Her long hair is intricately braided and clipped on top of her head. Magda's light brown waves touch her shoulders. My dark hair is tucked under a scarf. My mother stands in the middle and Magda and I both lean inward. It is impossible to discern if we are the ones who keep our mother upright, or if it is the other way around, her strength the pillar that supports Magda and me.

This moment is a threshold into the major losses of my life. For seven decades I have returned again and again to this image of the three of us. I have studied it as though with enough scrutiny I can recover something precious. As though I can regain the life that precedes this moment, the life that precedes loss. As if there is such a thing.

I have returned so that I can rest a little longer in this time when our arms are joined and we belong to one another. I see our sloped shoulders. The dust holding to the bottoms of our coats. My mother. My sister. Me.

* * *

Our childhood memories are often fragments, brief moments or encounters, which together form the scrapbook of our life. They are all we have left to understand the story we have come to tell ourselves about who we are.

Even before the moment of our separation, my most intimate memory of my mother, though I treasure it, is full of sorrow and loss. We're alone in the kitchen, where she is wrapping up the leftover strudel that she made with dough I watched her cut by hand and drape like heavy linen over the dining room table. "Read to me," she says, and I fetch the worn copy of *Gone with the Wind* from her bedside table. We have read it through once before. Now we have begun again. I pause over the mysterious inscription, written in English, on the title page of the translated book. It's in a man's handwriting, but not my father's. All that my mother will say is that the book was a gift from a man she met when she worked at the Foreign Ministry before she knew my father.

We sit in straight-backed chairs near the woodstove. I read this grown-up novel fluently despite the fact that I am only nine. "I'm glad you have brains because you have no looks," she has told me more than once, a compliment and a criticism intertwined. She can be hard on me. But I savor this time. When we read together, I don't have to share her with anyone else. I sink into the words and the story and the feeling of being alone in a world with her. Scarlett returns to Tara at the end of the war to learn her mother is dead and her father is far gone in grief. "*As God is my witness*," Scarlett says, "*I'm never going to be hungry again*." My mother has closed her eyes and leans her head against the back of the chair. I want to climb into her lap. I want to rest my head against her chest. I want her to touch her lips to my hair.

"Tara . . ." she says. "America, now that would be a place to see." I wish she would say my name with the same softness she reserves for a country where she's never been. All the smells of my mother's kitchen are mixed up for me with the drama of hunger and feast—always, even in the feast, that longing. I don't know if the longing is hers or mine or something we share.

We sit with the fire between us.

"When I was your age . . ." she begins.

Now that she is talking, I am afraid to move, afraid she won't continue if I do.

"When I was your age, the babies slept together and my mother and I shared a bed. One morning I woke up because my father was calling to me, 'Ilonka, wake up your mother, she hasn't made breakfast yet or laid out my clothes.' I turned to my mother next to me under the covers. But she wasn't moving. She was dead."

She has never told me this before. I want to know every detail about this moment when a daughter woke beside a mother she had already lost. I also want to look away. It is too terrifying to think about.

"When they buried her that afternoon, I thought they had put her in the ground alive. That night, Father told me to make the family supper. So that's what I did."

I wait for the rest of the story. I wait for the lesson at the end, or the reassurance.

"Bedtime," is all my mother says. She bends to sweep the ash under the stove.

Footsteps thump down the hall outside our door. I can smell my father's tobacco even before I hear the jangle of his keys.

"Ladies," he calls, "are you still awake?" He comes into the kitchen in his shiny shoes and dapper suit, his big grin, a little sack in his hand that he gives me with a loud kiss to the forehead. "I won again," he boasts. Whenever he plays cards or billiards with his friends, he shares the spoils with me. Tonight he's brought a petit four laced in pink icing. If I were my sister Magda, my mother, always concerned about Magda's weight, would snatch the treat away, but she nods at me, giving me permission to eat it.

She is standing now, on her way from the fire to the sink. My father intercepts her, lifts her hand so he can twirl her around the room, which she does, stiffly, without a smile. He pulls her in for an embrace, one hand on her back, one teasing at her breast. My mother shrugs him away.

"I'm a disappointment to your mother," my father half whispers to me as we leave the kitchen. Does he intend for her to overhear, or is this a secret meant only for me? Either way, it is something I store away to mull over later. Yet the bitterness in his voice scares me. "She wants to go to the opera every night, live some fancy cosmopolitan life. I'm just a tailor. A tailor and a billiards player."

My father's defeated tone confuses me. He is well known in our

town, and well liked. Playful, smiling, he always seems comfortable and alive. He's fun to be around. He goes out with his many friends. He loves food (especially the ham he sometimes smuggles into our kosher household, eating it over the newspaper it was wrapped in, pushing bites of forbidden pork into my mouth, enduring my mother's accusations that he is a poor role model). His tailor shop has won two gold medals. He isn't just a maker of even seams and straight hems. He is a master of couture. That's how he met my mother—she came into his shop because she needed a dress and his work came so highly recommended. But he had wanted to be a doctor, not a tailor, a dream his father had discouraged, and every once in a while his disappointment in himself surfaces.

"You're not just a tailor, Papa," I reassure him. "You're the best tailor!"

"And you're going to be the best-dressed lady in Košice," he tells me, patting my head. "You have the perfect figure for couture."

He seems to have remembered himself. He's pushed his disappointment back into the shadows. We reach the door to the bedroom I share with Magda and our middle sister, Klara, where I can picture Magda pretending to do homework and Klara wiping rosin dust off her violin. My father and I stand in the doorway a moment longer, neither one of us quite ready to break away.

"I wanted you to be a boy, you know," my father says. "I slammed the door when you were born, I was that mad at having another girl. But now you're the only one I can talk to." He kisses my forehead.

I love my father's attention. Like my mother's, it is precious . . . and precarious. As though my worthiness of their love has less to do with me and more to do with their loneliness. As though my identity isn't about anything that I am or have and only a measure of what each of my parents is missing.

"Good night, Dicuka," my father says at last. He uses the pet name my mother invented for me. Ditzu-ka. These nonsense syllables are warmth to me. "Tell your sisters it's time for lights out."

As I come into the bedroom, Magda and Klara greet me with the song they have invented for me. They made it up when I was three and one of my eyes became crossed in a botched medical procedure. "You're so ugly, you're so puny," they sing. "You'll never find a husband." Since the accident I turn my head toward the ground when I

walk so that I don't have to see anyone looking at my lopsided face. I haven't yet learned that the problem isn't that my sisters taunt me with a mean song; the problem is that I believe them. I am so convinced of my inferiority that I never introduce myself by name. I never tell people, "I am Edie." Klara is a violin prodigy. She mastered the Mendelssohn violin concerto when she was five. "I am Klara's sister," I say.

But tonight I have special knowledge. "Mama's mom died when she was exactly my age," I tell them. I am so certain of the privileged nature of this information that it doesn't occur to me that for my sisters this is old news, that I am the last and not the first to know.

"You're kidding," Magda says, her voice full of sarcasm so obvious that even I can recognize it. She is fifteen, busty, with sensual lips, wavy hair. She is the jokester in our family. When we were younger, she showed me how to drop grapes out of our bedroom window into the coffee cups of the patrons sitting on the patio below. Inspired by her, I will soon invent my own games; but by then, the stakes will have changed. My girlfriend and I will sashay up to boys at school or on the street. "Meet me at four o'clock by the clock on the square," we will trill, batting our eyelashes. They will come, they will always come, sometimes giddy, sometimes shy, sometimes swaggering with expectation. From the safety of my bedroom, my friend and I will stand at the window and watch the boys arrive.

"Don't tease so much," Klara snaps at Magda now. She is younger than Magda, but she jumps in to protect me. "You know that picture above the piano?" she says to me. "The one that Mama's always talking to? That's her mother." I know the picture she's talking about. I've looked at it every day of my life. "Help me, help me," our mother moans up at the portrait as she dusts the piano, sweeps the floor. I feel embarrassed that I have never asked my mother—or anyone—who was in that picture. And I'm disappointed that my information gives me no special status with my sisters.

I am used to being the silent sister, the invisible one. It doesn't occur to me that Magda might tire of being the clown, that Klara might resent being the prodigy. She can't stop being extraordinary, not for a second, or everything might be taken from her—the adoration she's accustomed to, her very sense of self. Magda and I have to work at getting something we are certain there will never be enough of; Klara has to worry that at

y moment she might make a fatal mistake and lose it all. Klara has en playing violin all my life, since she was three. It's not until much er that I realize the cost of her extraordinary talent: she gave up being hild. I never saw her play with dolls. Instead she stood in front of an en window to practice violin, not able to enjoy her creative genius less she could summon an audience of passersby to witness it.

"Does Mama love Papa?" I ask my sisters now. The distance between ır parents, the sad things they have each confessed to me, remind me at I have never seen them dressed up to go out together.

"What a question," Klara says. Though she denies my concern, I think see a recognition in her eyes. We will never discuss it again, though will try. It will take me years to learn what my sisters must already now, that what we call love is often something more conditional—the ward for a performance, what you settle for.

As we put on our nightgowns and get into bed, I erase my worry or my parents and think instead of my ballet master and his wife, of he feeling I get when I take the steps up to the studio two or three at time and kick off my school clothes, pull on my leotard and tights. I ıave been studying ballet since I was five years old, since my mother ntuited that I wasn't a musician, that I had other gifts. Just today we ɔracticed the splits. Our ballet master reminded us that strength and lexibility are inseparable—for one muscle to flex, another must open; o achieve length and limberness, we have to hold our cores strong.

I hold his instructions in my mind like a prayer. Down I go, spine straight, abdominal muscles tight, legs stretching apart. I know to ɔreathe, especially when I feel stuck. I picture my body expanding like the strings on my sister's violin, finding the exact place of tautness that makes the whole instrument ring. And I am down. I am here. In the full splits. "Brava!" My ballet master claps. "Stay right as you are." He lifts me off the ground and over his head. It's hard to keep my legs fully extended without the floor to push against, but for a moment I feel like an offering. I feel like pure light. "Editke," my teacher says, "all your ecstasy in life is going to come from the inside." It will take me years to really understand what he means. For now all I know is that I can breathe and spin and kick and bend. As my muscles stretch and strengthen, every movement, every pose seems to call out: *I am, I am, I am. I am me. I am somebody.*

* * *

Memory is sacred ground. But it's haunted too. It's the place where my rage and guilt and grief go circling like hungry birds scavenging the same old bones. It's the place where I go searching for the answer to the unanswerable question: *Why did I survive?*

I am seven years old, and my parents are hosting a dinner party. They send me out of the room to refill a pitcher of water. From the kitchen I hear them joke, "We could have saved that one." I think they mean that before I came along they were already a complete family. They had a daughter who played piano and a daughter who played violin. I am unnecessary, I am not good enough, there is no room for me, I think. This is the way we misinterpret the facts of our lives, the way we assume and don't check it out, the way we invent a story to tell ourselves, reinforcing the very thing in us we already believe.

One day when I am eight, I decide to run away. I will test the theory that I am dispensable, invisible. I will see if my parents even know that I am gone. Instead of going to school, I take the trolley to my grandparents' house. I trust my grandparents—my mother's father and stepmother—to cover for me. They engage in a continuous war with my mother on Magda's behalf, hiding cookies in my sister's dresser drawer. They are safety to me, and yet they sanction the forbidden. They hold hands, something my own parents never do. There's no performing for their love, no pretending for their approval. They are comfort—the smell of brisket and baked beans, of sweet bread, of *cholent*, a rich stew that my grandmother brings to the bakery to cook on Sabbath, when Orthodox practice does not permit her to use her own oven.

My grandparents are happy to see me. It is a wonderful morning. I sit in the kitchen, eating nut rolls. But then the doorbell rings. My grandfather goes to answer it. A moment later he rushes into the kitchen. He is hard of hearing, and he speaks his warning too loudly. "Hide, Dicuka!" he yells. "Your mother's here!" In trying to protect me, he gives me away.

What bothers me the most is the look on my mother's face when she sees me in my grandparents' kitchen. It's not just that she is surprised to see me here—it is as though the very fact of my existence has taken her by surprise. As though I am not who she wants or expects me to be.

I won't ever be beautiful—this my mother has made clear—but the

year I turn ten she assures me that I won't have to hide my face anymore. Dr. Klein, in Budapest, will fix my crossed eye. On the train to Budapest I eat chocolate and enjoy my mother's exclusive attention. Dr. Klein is a celebrity, my mother says, the first to perform eye surgery without anesthetic. I am too caught up in the romance of the journey, the privilege of having my mother all to myself, to realize she is warning me. It has never occurred to me that the surgery will hurt. Not until the pain consumes me. My mother and her relatives, who have connected us to the celebrated Dr. Klein, hold my thrashing body against the table. Worse than the pain, which is huge and limitless, is the feeling of the people who love me restraining me so that I cannot move. Only later, long after the surgery has proved successful, can I see the scene from my mother's point of view, how she must have suffered at my suffering.

I am happiest when I am alone, when I can retreat into my inner world. One morning when I am thirteen, on the way to school, in a private gymnasium, I practice the steps to the "Blue Danube" routine my ballet class will perform at a festival on the river. Then invention takes hold, and I am off and away in a new dance of my own, one in which I imagine my parents meeting. I dance both of their parts. My father does a slapstick double take when he sees my mother walk into the room. My mother spins faster, leaps higher. I make my whole body arc into a joyful laugh. I have never seen my mother rejoice, never heard her laugh from the belly, but in my body I feel the untapped well of her happiness.

When I get to school, the tuition money my father gave me to cover an entire quarter of school is gone. Somehow, in the flurry of dancing, I have lost it. I check every pocket and crease of my clothing, but it is gone. All day the dread of telling my father burns like ice in my gut. At home he can't look at me as he raises his fists. This is the first time he has ever hit me, or any of us. He doesn't say a word to me when he is done. In bed that night I wish to die so that my father will suffer for what he did to me. And then I wish my father dead.

Do these memories give me an image of my strength? Or of my damage? Maybe every childhood is the terrain on which we try to pinpoint how much we matter and how much we don't, a map where we study the dimensions and the borders of our worth.

Maybe every life is a study of the things we don't have but wish we did, and the things we have but wish we didn't.

It took me many decades to discover that I could come at my life with a different question. Not: *Why did I live?* But: *What is mine to do with the life I've been given?*

My family's ordinary human dramas were complicated by borders, by wars. Before World War I, the Slovakian region where I was born and raised was part of Austro-Hungary, but in 1918, a decade before my birth, the Treaty of Versailles redrew the map of Europe and created a new state. Czechoslovakia was cobbled together from agrarian Slovakia, my family's region, which was ethnically Hungarian and Slovak; the more industrial regions of Moravia and Bohemia, which were ethnically Czech; and Subcarpathian Rus', a region that is now part of Ukraine. With the creation of Czechoslovakia, my hometown—Kassa, Hungary—became Košice, Czechoslovakia. And my family became double minorities. We were ethnic Hungarians living in a predominately Czech country, and we were Jewish.

Though Jews had lived in Slovakia since the eleventh century, it wasn't until 1840 that Jews were permitted to settle in Kassa. Even then, city officials, backed by Christian trade guilds, made it difficult for Jewish families who wanted to live there. Yet by the turn of the century, Kassa had become one of Europe's largest Jewish communities. Unlike in other Eastern European countries, such as Poland, Hungarian Jews weren't ghettoized (which is why my family spoke Hungarian exclusively and not Yiddish). We weren't segregated, and we enjoyed plenty of educational, professional, and cultural opportunities. But we still encountered prejudice, subtle and explicit. Anti-Semitism wasn't a Nazi invention. Growing up, I internalized a sense of inferiority and the belief that it was safer not to admit that I was Jewish, that it was safer to assimilate, to blend in, to never stand out. It was difficult to find a sense of identity and belonging. Then, in November 1938, Hungary annexed Košice again, and it felt like home had become home.

My mother stands on our balcony at Andrássy Palace, an old building that has been carved into single-family apartments. She has draped an Oriental rug across the railing. She's not cleaning; she's celebrating. Admiral Miklós Horthy, His Serene Highness the Regent of the

Kingdom of Hungary, arrives today to formally welcome our town into Hungary. I understand my parents' excitement and pride. We belong! Today I, too, welcome Horthy. I perform a dance. I wear a Hungarian costume: bold floral embroidery on a bright wool vest and skirt, billowing white-sleeved blouse, ribbons, lace, red boots. When I do the high kick by the river, Horthy applauds. He embraces the dancers. He embraces me.

"Dicuka, I wish we were blond like Klara," Magda whispers at bedtime.

We are still years away from curfews and discriminatory laws, but Horthy's parade is the starting point of all that will come. Hungarian citizenship has brought belonging in one sense but exclusion in another. We are so happy to speak our native tongue, to be accepted as Hungarians—but that acceptance depends on our assimilation. Neighbors argue that only ethnic Hungarians *who are not Jewish* should be allowed to wear the traditional garments.

"It's best not to let on you're Jewish," my sister Magda warns me. "It will just make other people want to take away your beautiful things."

Magda is the firstborn; she reports the world to me. She brings me details, often troubling things, to study and ponder. In 1939, the year that Nazi Germany invades Poland, the Hungarian Nazis—the *nyilas*—occupy the apartment below ours in Andrássy Palace. They spit at Magda. They evict us. We move to a new apartment, at Kossuth Lajos Utca #6, on a side street instead of the main road, less convenient for my father's business. The apartment is available because its former occupants, another Jewish family, have left for South America. We know of other Jewish families leaving Hungary. My father's sister Matilda has been gone for years already. She lives in New York, in a place called the Bronx, in a Jewish immigrant neighborhood. Her life in America seems more circumscribed than ours. We don't talk about leaving.

Even in 1940, when I'm thirteen, and the *nyilas* begin to round up the Jewish men of Kassa and send them to a forced labor camp, the war feels far away from us. My father isn't taken. Not at first. We use denial as protection. If we don't pay attention, then we can continue our lives unnoticed. We can make the world safe in our minds. We can make ourselves invisible to harm.

But one day in June 1941, Magda is out on her bicycle when the sirens roar. She dashes three blocks to the safety of our grandparents' house, only to find half of it gone. They survived, thank God. But their landlady didn't. It was a singular attack, one neighborhood razed by one bombing. We're told the Russians are responsible for the rubble and death. No one believes it, and yet no one can refute it. We are lucky and vulnerable in the same instant. The only solid truth is the pile of smashed brick in the spot where a house used to be. Destruction and absence—these become facts. Hungary joins Germany in Operation Barbarossa. We invade Russia.

Around this time we are made to wear the yellow star. The trick is to hide the star, to let your coat cover it. But even with my star out of sight, I feel like I have done something bad, something punishable. What is my unpardonable sin? My mother is always near the radio. When we picnic by the river, my father tells stories about being a prisoner of war in Russia during World War I. I know that his POW experience—his trauma, though I don't know to call it that—has something to do with his eating pork, with his distance from religion. I know that war is at the root of his distress. But the war, this war, is still elsewhere. I can ignore it, and I do.

After school, I spend five hours at the ballet studio, and I begin to study gymnastics too. Though it begins as a complementary practice to the ballet, gymnastics soon grows to be an equal passion, an equal art. I join a book club, a group made up of girls from my private gymnasium and students from a nearby private boys' school. We read Stefan Zweig's *Marie Antoinette: The Portrait of an Average Woman.* We talk about Zweig's way of writing about history from the inside, from the mind of one person. In the book club, there's a boy named Eric, who notices me one day. I see him looking closely at me every time I speak. He's tall, with freckles and reddish hair. I imagine Versailles. I imagine Marie Antoinette's boudoir. I imagine meeting Eric there. I know nothing about sex, but I am romantic. I see him notice me, and I wonder, *What would our children look like? Would they have freckles too?* Eric approaches me after the discussion. He smells so good—like fresh air, like the grass on the banks of the Hornád River where we will soon take walks.

Our relationship holds weight and substance from the start.

We talk about literature. We talk about Palestine (he is a devoted Zionist). This isn't a time of carefree dating, our bond isn't a casual crush, a puppy love. This is love in the face of war. A curfew has been imposed on Jews, but we sneak out one night without wearing our yellow stars. We stand in line at the cinema. We find our seats in the dark. It's an American film, starring Bette Davis. *Now, Voyager*, I later learn, is its American name, but in Hungary it's called *Utazás a múltból*, Journey to the Past. Bette Davis plays an unmarried daughter tyrannized by her controlling mother. She tries to find herself and her freedom but is constantly knocked down by her mother's criticisms. Eric sees it as a political metaphor about self-determination and self-worth. I see shades of my mother and Magda—my mother, who adores Eric but chastises Magda for her casual dating; who begs me to eat more but refuses to fill Magda's plate; who is often silent and introspective but rages at Magda; whose anger, though it is never directed at me, terrifies me all the same.

The battles in my family, the front with Russia closing in—we never know what is coming next. In the darkness and chaos of uncertainty, Eric and I provide our own light. Each day, as our freedom and choices become more and more restricted, we plan our future. Our relationship is like a bridge we can cross from present worries to future joys. Plans, passion, promise. Maybe the turmoil around us gives us the opportunity for more commitment, less questioning. No one else knows what will come to pass, but we do. We have each other and the future, a life together we can see as clearly as we can see our hands when we join them. We go to the river one August day in 1943. He brings a camera and photographs me in my bathing suit, doing the splits in the grass. I imagine showing our children the picture one day. Telling them how we held our love and our commitment bright.

When I come home that day, my father is gone. He has been taken to the forced labor camp. He is a tailor, he is apolitical. How is he a threat to anyone? Why has he been targeted? Does he have an enemy? There are lots of things my mother won't tell me. Is it simply because she doesn't know? Or is she protecting me? Or herself? She doesn't talk openly about her worries, but in the long months that my father is away, I can feel how sad and scared she is. I see her trying to make several meals out of one chicken. She gets migraines. We take in a boarder

to make up for the loss of income. He owns a store across the street from our apartment, and I sit long hours in his store just to be near his comforting presence.

Magda, who is essentially an adult now, who is no longer in school, finds out somehow where our father is and visits him. She watches him stagger under the weight of a table he has to heft from place to place. This is the only detail she tells me of her visit. I don't know what this image means. I don't know what work it is that my father is forced to do in his captivity, I don't know how long he will be a prisoner. I have two images of my father: one, as I have known him my entire life, cigarette hanging out of his mouth, tape measure around his neck, chalk in his hand for marking a pattern onto expensive cloth, his eyes twinkling, ready to burst into song, about to tell a joke. And this new one: lifting a table that is too heavy, in a no-name place, a no-man's-land.

On my sixteenth birthday, I stay home from school with a cold, and Eric comes to our apartment to deliver sixteen roses and my first sweet kiss. I am happy, but I am sad too. What can I hold on to? What lasts? I give the picture Eric took of me on the riverbank to a friend. I can't remember why. For safekeeping? I had no premonition that I would be gone soon, well before my next birthday. Yet somehow I must have known that I would need someone to preserve evidence of my life, that I would need to plant proof of my self around me like seeds.

Sometime in early spring, after seven or eight months at the work camp, my father returns. It is a grace—he has been released in time for Passover, which is just a week or two away. That's what we think. He takes up his tape measure and chalk again. He doesn't talk about where he has been.

I sit on the blue mat in the gymnastics studio one day, a few weeks after his return, warming up with a floor routine, pointing my toes, flexing my feet, lengthening my legs and arms and neck and back. I feel like myself again. I'm not the little cross-eyed runt afraid to speak her name. I'm not the daughter afraid for her family. I am an artist and an athlete, my body strong and limber. I don't have Magda's looks, or Klara's fame, but I have my lithe and expressive body, the budding existence of which is the only one true thing I need. My training, my skill—my life brims with possibility. The best of us in my gymnastics class have formed an Olympic training team. The 1944 Olympics have

been canceled due to the war, but that just gives us more time to prepare to compete.

I close my eyes and stretch my arms and torso forward across my legs. My friend nudges me with her toe and I lift my head to see our coach walking straight toward me. We are half in love with her. It's not a sexual crush. It's hero worship. Sometimes we take the long way home so we can pass her house, where we go as slowly as possible along the sidewalk, hoping to catch a glimpse of her through the window. We are jealous of what we don't know of her life. With the promise of the Olympics when the war finally ends, much of my sense of purpose rests within the scope of my coach's support and faith in me. If I can manage to absorb all she has to teach me, and if I can fulfill her trust in me, then great things lie in store.

"Editke," she says as she approaches my mat, using my formal name, Edith, but adding a diminutive. "A word, please." Her fingers glide once over my back as she ushers me into the hall.

I look at her expectantly. Maybe she has noticed my improvements on the vault. Maybe she would like me to lead the team in more stretching exercises at the end of practice today. Maybe she wants to invite me over for supper. I'm ready to say yes before she has even asked.

"I don't know how to tell you this," she begins. She studies my face and then looks away toward the window where the dropping sun blazes in.

"Is it my sister?" I ask, before I even realize the terrible picture forming in my mind. Klara studies at the conservatory in Budapest now. Our mother has gone to Budapest to see Klara's concert and fetch her home for Passover, and as my coach stands awkwardly beside me in the hall, unable to meet my eyes, I worry that their train has derailed. It's too early in the week for them to be traveling home, but that is the only tragedy I can think of. Even in a time of war, the first disaster to cross my mind is a mechanical one, a tragedy of human error, not of human design, although I am aware that some of Klara's teachers, including some of the gentile ones, have already fled Europe because they fear what is to come.

"Your family is fine." Her tone doesn't reassure me. "Edith. This isn't my choice. But I must be the one to tell you that your place on the Olympic training team will go to someone else."

I think I might vomit. I feel foreign in my own skin. "What did I do?" I comb over the rigorous months of training for the thing I've done wrong. "I don't understand."

"My child," she says, and now she looks me full in the face, which is worse, because I can see that she is crying, and at this moment when my dreams are being shredded like newspaper at the butcher shop I do not want to feel pity for her. "The simple truth is that because of your background, you are no longer qualified."

I think of the kids who've spit at me and called me dirty Jew, of Jewish friends who have stopped going to school to avoid harassment and now get their courses over the radio. "If someone spits at you, spit back," my father has instructed me. "That's what you do." I consider spitting on my coach. But to fight back would be to accept her devastating news. I won't accept it.

"I'm not Jewish," I say.

"I'm sorry, Editke," she says. "I'm so sorry. I still want you at the studio. I would like to ask you to train the girl who will replace you on the team." Again, her fingers on my back. In another year, my back will be broken in exactly the spot she now caresses. Within weeks, my very life will be on the line. But here in the hallway of my cherished studio, my life feels like it is already over.

In the days that follow my expulsion from the Olympic training team, I plot my revenge. It won't be the revenge of hate; it will be the revenge of perfection. I will show my coach that I am the best. The most accomplished athlete. The best trainer. I will train my replacement so meticulously that I will prove what a mistake has been made by cutting me from the team. On the day that my mother and Klara are due back from Budapest, I cartwheel my way down the red-carpeted hall toward our apartment, imagining my replacement as my understudy, myself the headlining star.

My mother and Magda are in the kitchen. Magda's chopping apples for the *charoset*. Mother's mixing matzo meal. They glower over their work, barely registering my arrival. This is their relationship now. They fight all the time, and when they're not fighting they treat each other as though they are already in a face-off. Their arguments used to be about food, Mother always concerned about Magda's weight, but now

the conflict has grown to a general and chronic hostility. "Where's Klarie?" I ask, swiping chopped walnuts from a bowl.

"Budapest," Magda says. My mother slams her bowl onto the counter. I want to ask why my sister isn't with us for the holiday. Has she really chosen music over us? Or was she not allowed to miss class for a holiday that none of her fellow students celebrates? But I don't ask. I am afraid my questions will bring my mother's obviously simmering anger to a boil. I retreat to the bedroom that we all share, my parents and Magda and me.

On any other evening, especially a holiday, we would gather around the piano, the instrument Magda had been playing and studying since she was young, where Magda and my father would take turns leading us in songs. Magda and I weren't prodigies like Klara, but we still had creative passions that our parents recognized and nurtured. After Magda played, it would be my turn to perform. "Dance, Dicuka!" my mother would say. And even though it was more a demand than an invitation, I'd savor my parents' attention and praise. Then Klara, the star attraction, would play her violin and my mother would look transformed. But there is no music in our house tonight. Before the meal, Magda tries to cheer me up by reminding me of seders past when I would stuff socks in my bra to impress Klara, wanting to show her that I'd become a woman while she was away. "Now you've got your own womanhood to flaunt around," Magda says. At the seder table she continues the antics, splashing her fingers around in the glass of wine we've set for Prophet Elijah, as is the custom. Elijah, who saves Jews from peril. On any other night our father might laugh, despite himself. On any other night our mother would end the silliness with a stern rebuke. But tonight our father is too distracted to notice, and our mother is too distraught by Klara's absence to chastise Magda. When we open the apartment door to let the prophet in, I feel a chill that has nothing to do with the cool evening. In some deep part of myself I know how badly we need protection now.

"You tried the consulate?" my father asks. He isn't even pretending to lead the seder anymore. No one but Magda can eat. "Ilona?"

"I tried the consulate," my mother says. It is as though she conducts a conversation from another room.

"Tell me what Klara said."

"Again?" my mother protests.

"Again."

She tells it blankly, her fingers fidgeting with her napkin. Klara had called her hotel at four that morning. Klara's professor had just told her that a former professor at the conservatory, Béla Bartók, now a famous composer, had called from America with a warning: The Germans in Czechoslovakia and Hungary were going to start closing their fist; Jews would be taken away come morning. Klara's professor forbade her to return home to Kassa. He wanted her to urge my mother to stay in Budapest as well and send for the rest of the family.

"Ilona, why did you come home?" my father moans.

My mother stabs her eyes at him. "What about all that we've worked for here? We should just leave it? And if you three couldn't make it to Budapest? You want me to live with that?"

I don't realize that they are terrified. I hear only the blame and disappointment that my parents routinely pass between them like the mindless shuttle on a loom. *Here's what you did. Here's what you didn't do. Here's what you did. Here's what you didn't do.* Later I'll learn that this isn't just their usual quarreling, that there's a history and a weight to the dispute they are having now. There are the tickets to America my father turned away. There is the Hungarian official who approached my mother with fake papers for the whole family, urging us to flee. Later we learn that they both had a chance to choose differently. Now they suffer with their regret, and they cover their regret in blame.

"Can we do the four questions?" I ask to disrupt my parents' gloom. That is my job in the family. To play peacemaker between my parents, between Magda and my mother. Whatever plans are being made outside our door I can't control. But inside our home, I have a role to fill. It is my job as the youngest child to ask the four questions. I don't even have to open my Haggadah. I know the text by heart. "Why is this night different from all other nights?" I begin.

At the end of the meal, my father circles the table, kissing each of us on the head. He's crying. *Why is this night different from all other nights?* Before dawn breaks, we'll know.

CHAPTER 2

What You Put in Your Mind

They come in the dark. They pound on the door, they yell. Does my father let them in, or do they force their way into our apartment? Are they German soldiers, or *nyilas*? I can't make sense out of the noises that startle me from sleep. My mouth still tastes of seder wine. The soldiers storm into the bedroom, announcing that we're being moved from our home and resettled somewhere else. We're allowed one suitcase for all four of us. I can't seem to find my legs to get off the cot where I sleep at the foot of my parents' bed, but my mother is instantly in motion. Before I know it she is dressed and reaching high into the closet for the little box that I know holds Klara's caul, the piece of amniotic sac that covered her head and face like a helmet when she was born. Midwives used to save cauls and sell them to sailors as protections against drowning. My mother doesn't trust the box to the suitcase—she tucks it deep into the pocket of her coat, a good luck totem. I don't know if my mother packs the caul to protect Klara, or all of us.

"Hurry, Dicu," she urges me. "Get up. Get dressed."

"Not that wearing clothes ever did your figure any good," Magda whispers. There's no reprieve from her teasing. How will I know when it's time to be really afraid?

My mother is in the kitchen now, packing leftover food, pots and pans. In fact, she will keep us alive for two weeks on the supplies she thinks to carry with us now—some flour, some chicken fat. My father paces the bedroom and living room, picking up books, candlesticks, clothing, putting things down. "Get blankets," my mother calls to him. I think that if he had one petit four that is the thing he would take along, if only for the joy of handing it to me later, of seeing a swift sec-

ond of delight on my face. Thank goodness my mother is more practical. When she was still a child, she became a mother to her younger siblings, and she staved their hunger through many seasons of grief. *As God is my witness*, I imagine her thinking now, as she packs, *I'm never going to be hungry again.* And yet I want her to drop the dishes, the survival tools, and come back to the bedroom to help me dress. Or at least I want her to call to me. To tell me what to wear. To tell me not to worry. To tell me all is well.

The soldiers stomp their boots, knock chairs over with their guns. Hurry. Hurry. I feel a sudden anger with my mother. She would save Klara before she would save me. She'd rather cull the pantry than hold my hand in the dark. I'll have to find my own sweetness, my own luck. Despite the chill of the dark April morning, I put on a thin blue silk dress, the one I wore when Eric kissed me. I trace the pleats with my fingers. I fasten the narrow blue suede belt. I will wear this dress so that his arms can once again encircle me. This dress will keep me desirable, protected, ready to reclaim love. If I shiver, it will be a badge of hope, a signal of my trust in something deeper, better. I picture Eric and his family also dressing and scrambling in the dark. I can feel him thinking of me. A current of energy shoots down from my ears to my toes. I close my eyes and cup my elbows with my hands, allowing the afterglow of that flash of love and hope to keep me warm.

But the ugly present intrudes on my private world. "Where are the bathrooms?" one of the soldiers shouts at Magda. My bossy, sarcastic, flirtatious sister cowers under his glare. I've never known her to be afraid. She's never spared an opportunity to get a rise out of someone, to make people laugh. Authority figures have never held any power over her. In school she wouldn't stand up, as required, when a teacher entered the room. "Elefánt," her math teacher, a very short man, reprimanded her one day, calling her by our last name. My sister got up on tiptoes and peered at him. "Oh, are you there?" she said. "I didn't see you." But today the men hold guns. She gives no crude remark, no rebellious comeback. She points meekly down the hall toward the bathroom door. The soldier shoves her out of his way. He holds a gun. What other proof of his dominance does he need? This is when I start to see that it can always be so much worse. That every moment harbors

a potential for violence. We never know when or how we will break. Doing what you're told might not save you.

"Out. Now. Time for you to take a little trip," the soldiers say. My mother closes the suitcase and my father lifts it. She fastens her gray coat and is the first to follow the commanding officer out into the street. I'm next, then Magda. Before we reach the wagon that sits ready for us at the curb, I turn to watch our father leave our home. He stands facing the door, suitcase in his hand, looking muddled, a midnight traveler patting down his pockets for his keys. A soldier yells a jagged insult and kicks our door back open with his heel.

"Go ahead," he says, "take a last look. Feast your eyes."

My father gazes at the dark space. For a moment he seems confused, as though he can't determine whether the soldier has been generous or unkind. Then the soldier kicks him in the knee and my father hobbles toward us, toward the wagon where the other families wait.

I'm caught between the urge to protect my parents and the sorrow that they can no longer protect me. *Eric*, I pray, *wherever we are going, help me find you. Don't forget our future. Don't forget our love.* Magda doesn't say a word as we sit side by side on the bare board seats. In my catalog of regrets, this one shines bright: that I didn't reach for my sister's hand.

Just as daylight breaks, the wagon pulls up alongside the Jakab brick factory at the edge of town, and we are herded inside. We are the lucky ones; early arrivers get quarters in the drying sheds. Most of the nearly twelve thousand Jews imprisoned here will sleep without a roof over their heads. All of us will sleep on the floor. We will cover ourselves with our coats and shiver through the spring chill. We will cover our ears when, for minor offenses, people are beaten with rubber truncheons at the center of the camp. There is no running water here. Buckets come, never enough of them, on horse-drawn carts. At first the rations, combined with the pancakes my mother makes from the scraps she brought from home, are enough to feed us, but after only a few days the hunger pains become a constant cramping throb. Magda sees her old gym teacher in the barracks next door, struggling to take care of a newborn baby in these starvation conditions. "What will I do when my milk is gone?" she moans to us. "My baby just cries and cries."

There are two sides to the camp, on either side of a street. Our side is occupied by the Jews from our section of town. We learn that all of Kassa's Jews are being held here at the brick factory. We find our neighbors, our shopkeepers, our teachers, our friends. But my grandparents, whose home was a thirty-minute walk from our apartment, are not on our side of the camp. Gates and guards separate us from the other side. We are not supposed to cross over. But I plead with a guard and he says I can go in search of my grandparents. I walk the wall-less barracks, quietly repeating their names. As I pace up and down the rows of huddled families, I say Eric's name too. I tell myself that it is only a matter of time and perseverance. I will find him, or he will find me.

I don't find my grandparents. I don't find Eric.

And then one afternoon when the water carts arrive and the crowds rush to scoop a little pail of it, he spies me sitting alone, guarding my family's coats. He kisses my forehead, my cheeks, my lips. I touch the suede belt of my silk dress, praising it for its good luck.

We manage to meet every day after that. Sometimes we speculate about what will befall us. Rumors spread that we will be sent to a place called Kenyérmező, an internment camp, where we will work and live out the war with our families. We don't know that the rumor was started by the Hungarian police and *nyilas* dishing out false hope. After the war, piles of letters from concerned relatives in faraway cities will sit in stacks in post offices, unopened; the address lines read: *Kenyérmező*. No such place exists.

The places that do exist, that await our coming trains, are beyond imagining. *After the war.* That is the time Eric and I allow ourselves to think about. We will go to the university. We will move to Palestine. We will continue the salons and book club we began at school. We will finish reading Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams.*

From inside the brick factory we can hear the streetcars trundle past. They are within reach. How easy it could be to jump aboard. But anyone who comes close to the outer fence is shot without warning. A girl only a little older than me tries to run. They hang her body in the middle of the camp as an example. My parents don't say a word to me or Magda about her death. "Try to get a little block of sugar," my father tells us. "Get a block of sugar and hold on to it. Always keep a little something sweet in your pocket." One day we hear that my

grandparents have been sent away in one of the first transports to leave the factory. We'll see them in Kenyérmező, we think. I kiss Eric good night and trust that his lips are the sweetness I can count on.

One early morning, after we have been in the factory for about a month, our section of the camp is evacuated. I scramble to find someone who can pass a message to Eric. "Let it go, Dicu," my mother says. She and my father have written a goodbye letter to Klara, but there is no way to send it. I watch my mother throw it away, see her drop it onto the pavement like ash from a cigarette, see it disappear under three thousand pairs of feet. The silk of my dress brushes against my legs as we surge and stop and surge and stop, three thousand of us marched toward the factory gates, pressed into a long row of waiting trucks. Again we huddle in the dark. Just before the truck pulls away, I hear my name. It's Eric. He's calling through the slats of the truck. I shove my way toward his voice.

"I'm here!" I call as the engine starts. The slats are too narrow for me to see him or touch him.

"I'll never forget your eyes," he says. "I'll never forget your hands."

I repeat those sentences ceaselessly as we board a crowded car at the train station. I can't hear the shouting officers or crying children over the salve of his remembered voice. *If I survive today, then I can show him my eyes, I can show him my hands.* I breathe to the rhythm of this chant. *If I survive today . . . If I survive today, tomorrow I'll be free.*

The train car is like none I've ever been in. It's not a passenger train; it's for transporting livestock or freight. We are human cargo. There are a hundred of us in one car. Each hour feels like a week. The uncertainty makes the moments stretch. The uncertainty and the relentless noise of the wheels on the track. There is one loaf of bread for eight people to share. One bucket of water. One bucket for our bodily waste. It smells of sweat and excrement. People die on the way. We all sleep upright, leaning against our family members, shouldering aside the dead. I see a father give something to his daughter, a packet of pills. "If they try to do anything to you . . ." he says. Occasionally the train stops and a few people from each car are ordered to get out to fetch water. Magda takes the bucket once. "We're in Poland," she tells us when she returns. Later she explains how she knows. When she went for water, a man out in

his field had yelled a greeting to her in Polish and in German, telling her the name of the town and gesturing frantically, drawing his finger across his neck. "Just trying to scare us," Magda says.

The train moves on and on. My parents slump on either side of me. They don't speak. I never see them touch. My father's beard is growing in gray. He looks older than his father, and it frightens me. I beg him to shave. I have no way of knowing that youthfulness could indeed save a life when we reach the end of this journey. It's just a gut feeling, just a girl missing the father she knows, longing for him to be the bon vivant again, the debonair flirt, the ladies' man. I don't want him to become like the father with the pills who mutters to his family, "This is worse than death."

But when I kiss my father's cheek and say, "Papa, please shave," he answers me with anger. "What for?" he says. "What for? What for?" I'm ashamed that I've said the wrong thing and made him annoyed with me. Why did I say the wrong thing? Why did I think it was my job to tell my father what to do? I remember his rage when I lost the tuition money for school. I lean against my mother for comfort. I wish my parents would reach for each other instead of sitting as strangers. My mother doesn't say much. But she doesn't moan either. She doesn't wish to be dead. She simply goes inside herself.

"Dicuka," she says into the dark one night, "listen. We don't know where we're going. We don't know what's going to happen. Just remember, no one can take away from you what you've put in your mind."

I fall into another dream of Eric. I wake again.

They open the cattle car doors and the bright May sun slashes in. We are desperate to get out. We rush toward the air and the light. We practically fall out of the car, tumbling against one another in our hurry to descend. After several days of the ceaseless motion of the train, it's hard to stand upright on firm ground. In every way we are trying to get our bearings—piece out our location, steady our nerves and our limbs. I see the crowded dark of winter coats amassed on a narrow stretch of dirt. I see the flash of white in someone's scarf or cloth bundle of belongings, the yellow of the mandatory stars. I see the sign: ARBEIT MACHT FREI. Music plays. My father is suddenly cheerful. "You see," he says, "it can't be a terrible place." He looks as though he would dance

if the platform weren't so crowded. "We'll only work a little, till the war's over," he says. The rumors we heard at the brick factory must be true. We must be here to work. I search for the ripple of nearby fields and imagine Eric's lean body across from me, bending to tend a crop. Instead I see unbroken horizontal lines: the boards on the cattle cars, the endless wire of a fence, low-slung buildings. In the distance, a few trees and chimneys break the flat plane of this barren place.

Men in uniform push among us. Nobody explains anything. They just bark simple directions. *Go here. Go there.* The Nazis point and shove. The men are herded into a separate line. I see my father wave to us. Maybe they're being sent ahead to stake out a place for their families. I wonder where we'll sleep tonight. I wonder when we'll eat. My mother and Magda and I stand together in a long line of women and children. We inch forward. We approach the man who with a conductor's wave of a finger will deliver us to our fates. I do not yet know that this man is Dr. Josef Mengele, the infamous Angel of Death. As we advance toward him, I can't look away from his eyes, so domineering, so cold. When we've drawn nearer, I can see a boyish flash of gapped teeth when he grins. His voice is almost kind when he asks if anyone is sick, and sends those who say yes to the left.

"If you're over fourteen and under forty, stay in this line," another officer says. "Over forty, move left." A long line of the elderly and children and mothers holding babies branches off to the left. My mother has gray hair, all gray, early gray, but her face is as smooth and unlined as mine. Magda and I squeeze our mother between us.

It's our turn now. Dr. Mengele conducts. He points my mother to the left. I start to follow her. He grabs my shoulder. "You're going to see your mother very soon," he says. "She's just going to take a shower." He pushes Magda and me to the right.

We don't know the meaning of left versus right. "Where are we going now?" we ask each other. "What will happen to us?" We're marched to a different part of the sparse campus. Only women surround us, most young. Some look bright, almost giddy, glad to be breathing fresh air and enjoying the sun on their skin after the relentless stench and claustrophobic dark of the train. Others chew their lips. Fear circulates among us, but curiosity too.

We're stopped in front of more low buildings. Women in striped

dresses stand around us. We soon learn that they are the inmates charged with governing the others, but we don't know yet that we're prisoners here. I've unbuttoned my coat in the steady sun and one of the girls in a striped dress eyes my blue silk. She walks toward me, cocking her head.

"Well, look at you," she says in Polish. She kicks dust on my low-heeled shoes. Before I realize what's happening, she reaches for the tiny coral earrings set in gold that, in keeping with Hungarian custom, have been in my ears since birth. She yanks and I feel a sharp sting. She pockets the earrings.

In spite of the physical hurt, I feel desperate for her to like me. As ever, I want to belong. Her humiliating sneer hurts more than my ripped earlobes. "Why did you do that?" I say. "I would have given you the earrings."

"I was rotting here while you were free, going to school, going to the theater," she says.

I wonder how long she's been here. She's thin, but sturdy. She stands tall. She could be a dancer. I wonder why she seems so angry that I have reminded her of normal life. "When will I see my mother?" I ask her. "I was told I'd see her soon."

She gives me a cold, sharp stare. There is no empathy in her eyes. There is nothing but rage. She points to the smoke rising up from one of the chimneys in the distance. "Your mother is burning in there," she says. "You better start talking about her in the past tense."

CHAPTER 3

Dancing in Hell

"All your ecstasy in life is going to come from the inside," my ballet master had told me. I never understood what he meant. Until Auschwitz.

Magda stares at the chimney on top of the building our mother entered. "The soul never dies," she says. My sister finds words of comfort. But I am in shock. I am numb. I can't think about the incomprehensible things that are happening, that have already happened. I can't picture my mother consumed by flames. I can't fully grasp that she is gone. And I can't ask why. I can't even grieve. Not now. It will take all of my attention to survive the next minute, the next breath. I will survive if my sister is there. I will survive by attaching myself to her as though I am her shadow.

We are herded through the silent yet echoing showers. We are robbed of our hair. We stand outside, shorn and naked, waiting for our uniforms. Taunts from the kapos and SS officers swarm us like arrows grazing our bare, wet skin. Worse than their words are their eyes. I'm sure the disgust with which they glare at us could tear my skin, split my ribs. Their hate is both possessive and dismissive, and it makes me ill. Once I thought that Eric would be the first man to see me naked. Now he will never see my flesh unscarred by their hatred. Have they already made me something less than human? Will I ever resemble the girl I was? *I will never forget your eyes, your hands.* I have to keep myself together, if not for myself then for Eric.

I turn to my sister, who has fallen into her own shocked silence, who has managed in each chaotic dash from place to place, in every crowded line, not to leave my side. She shivers as the sun falls. She holds in her hands her shorn locks, thick strands of her ruined hair. We have been