

THEY WENT LEFT

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Lower Silesia, August 1945

LINES. I AM GOOD AT LINES. I AM GOOD AT LINES BECAUSE YOU don't have to think in them, just stand in them, and this line is easy because now only a few people are in front of me, and easy because I understand the reason I am in it, and it's a good reason, and I am good at lines.

At the front of it, an official-looking woman—from the Red Cross, I think—sits behind a table. It's a nice, indoor table, as though it was carried out to the street from someone's dining room. Except, instead of sitting on a rug, it sits on cobblestones, and instead of candlesticks, it's piled with neat stacks of papers and smells of furniture polish, or I imagine it would; it looks like that kind of table. A solitary cup also sits on it, next to the papers at the proper two o'clock of an imaginary place setting like a leftover from the table's former life. A cup of tea for the official worker.

“Next,” she says, and we move forward because this is how lines work; they move forward.

I look back toward the door, but the other nothing-girls don't come out to say goodbye. I'm the first one of us to leave the hospital. In the early weeks after the war, there were always goodbyes from the healthier patients, always plans being made. You could look out the ward window almost any time and see a truck grinding past, stuffed with German soldiers on their way home, Polish soldiers on *their* way home. Russians, a few Canadians, everyone traveling in a different direction, and every direction was someone's home, as if the world were a board game and all the pieces had ended up scattered in the wrong corners of the box.

But none of the nothing-girls were well enough then. So we don't have a protocol yet for what to do when one of us leaves. We have no addresses to exchange. We have nothing. We weigh nothing, we feel nothing, we existed on nothing, for years.

Our minds are nothing. That's the biggest nothing, the reason we are still in the hospital. Our minds are soft. Confused.

“Zofia? I didn't know if you wanted to keep this.”

I turn to the voice, the little blond nurse jogging out the door, mouth like a red bow. She hands me a letter, addressed in my own handwriting. *Return to sender*. The sender was me; the addressee was—I'm not even sure who the addressee was this time. For months, from the day I was well enough to pick up a pen, I have been writing letters to everyone whose address I'd ever known. *Have you seen him? Tell him to wait for me*. But their addresses weren't their addresses anymore, and the mail wasn't

the mail anymore. And I wasn't me anymore, but it became clear I couldn't do what I needed to from a hospital bed. If I wanted to find him, I would have to pull myself out of it.

Even though my mind is still soft, that's why I'm standing outside and the other girls are still in the window.

Tell him the doctors won't let me leave by myself until I'm better, I wrote. Tell him I won't be better until I leave and find him.

"Here, I also made this for you," the blond nurse says, passing me a bundle of cloth, still warm. Food. The heat feels nice against my stomach. I start to unwrap the cloth so I can hand it back, but she says to keep it.

So now I own this checkered cloth. It is mine, and that will bring the number of possessions I own in this world to six. Later, I can fold it and use it as a kerchief for my hair, or I can cut it in half, in triangles, and have two handkerchiefs; that would bring my number of possessions to seven. I also have a dress, undergarments, a pair of shoes, a donated bill of money in a large denomination, and a document saying I was a prisoner in Gross-Rosen. It's supposed to connect me with relief organizations, help with food rations. The workers who gave it to me said it would be my most valuable possession.

"Next," the official woman says. She's my mother's age, with lines on her brow that have only begun to soften her face. The queue behind me has grown, as more soon-to-be-discharged patients come out. Another worker arrives to help.

The blond nurse, still watching me. "Did you forget anything else?" she asks. *Urbaniak*, I remember. *Her surname is Urbaniak.*

“My shoes. Where are my shoes?”

Why didn't I realize before? I've just looked down at my feet, and the brown leather boots I'm wearing are a stranger's.

“Those *are* your shoes. Your new shoes. Remember?” She's gentle, and then I do remember: These brown boots are mine now, because when I was brought to the hospital months ago, I was wearing the shoes the Nazis had assigned to me, ill-fitting and full of holes. My frostbitten feet were so swollen that a nurse couldn't pull them off; she had to slice them at the tongue. The nurses said I cried; I don't remember crying.

It turns out, if you have to lose toes to frostbite, the third and the fourth are possible to lose and still be able to walk and balance.

“Are you sure you don't want to stay longer, Zofia?”

“I remember about my shoes now; I just forgot for a minute.”

“You had already asked me about them once today.”

I force a smile. “Dima is leaving; he's going to his new post, and he has a car to drive me.”

Dima-the-soldier is the one who brought me to the hospital, which was not a hospital then, just a building crammed with cots and bottles of iodine. Dima's Red Army jeep was crammed, too, with people. The Russians had liberated Gross-Rosen three days before, but it had finally become clear that none of us, including the Russian soldiers, knew what liberation was supposed to look like. Thousands of us were still inside the gates, too weak to leave. Dima found me barely conscious in the women's barracks, he later told me in the broken Polish

from his mother. It was lucky I'd passed out, because by the time he stroked life back into my face, all the good rations had been handed out already: waxy chocolate, tinned beef.

Our stomachs were too weak for rich foods. I watched people who'd lived for months on a potato a day eat the beef and never get up again. We were liberated and still dying by the dozens.

"*It's over now,*" the soldiers said to us in February. It wasn't over, not officially, not for a few months, but what they meant was, the SS officers were not coming back to the camp.

"*It's really over now,*" the nurses told us in May, spoon-feeding us sugar water and porridge. We could hear cheering and yelling in the corridor; Germany had surrendered.

What did they mean, it was over? What was over? I was miles from home, and I didn't own so much as my own shoes. How was any of this over?

"Next," says the official woman, and I take another step forward.

A puff of smoke, the growl of a motor. Dima pulls up in his jeep. He leaps out when he sees me waiting, and I'm struck again by how much he looks like a cinema poster, like the film version of a soldier: Square chin. Nice cheekbones. Kind eyes. Dima, who postmarked my letters for me. Who, when I begged him, asked his soldier friends about Birkenau and found out for me that it had been liberated a month before Gross-Rosen. And who repeated the same thing for me again when I forgot, and then again when I forgot again. *Remember, Zofia? We discuss already.* My mind is a sieve, and Dima is how I am allowed to leave this place—because he is leaving with me.

“I would have come inside, Zofia.” He places his hands on my shoulders. His hair is shorter above one ear. He must have cut it himself again in the mirror. “You get too tired. You know I worry about you.”

“I have to stand in this line now.”

“She has to be processed,” Nurse Urbaniak explains. “The aid organizations are keeping records.”

A tap on glass, like a bird. I look up. In the second-floor hospital window behind me, the nothing-girls have woken; they’re touching the glass and waving. To Dima as much as to me; they love him. He waves back.

“Next,” the Red Cross woman says. I wait for a minute before realizing it’s finally my turn. Her uniform is a single-breasted blue suit. My dress is also pale blue. The nurse who gave it to me said it went with my hair and eyes. *Kind lies*. My hair then was patchy and scabbed over, short as a boy’s. It’s grown back almost to my chin, but a thin, timid brown instead of lustrous curls. My eyes are still the color of empty. “Miss?” says the woman maternally. “Miss?”

“Zofia Lederman.” I wait for her to check me off on her papers.

“And you’re going home?”

“Yes. To Sosnowiec.”

“And who would you like me to put on your list?” She reads my confusion. “We’re asking if you have any names.”

“Names?” I know what she’s asking must make sense, but my brain is fogged again; it can’t parse the words. I start to turn back to Nurse Urbaniak and Dima for help.

The worker places her hand on mine until I look back at her. Her voice has softened from its clipped, official tone. “Do you understand? We’re logging where you’re going, but also the family you’re looking for. Is there anyone who could be looking for you?”

Names. I did this once already, months ago, with some charity workers as soon as I was conscious. Nothing ever came of it, and now his name hurts in my throat.

“Abek. My brother, Abek Lederman.”

“Age?”

“He would be twelve now.”

“Do you know anything about where he might be?”

“We were both sent to Birkenau, but I was transferred twice, to a textile factory in Neustadt and then to Gross-Rosen. The last time I saw him was more than three years ago.”

I watch her make careful notes. “Who else?” she asks.

“Just Abek.”

Just Abek. This is why I need to go home. Birkenau was liberated a month before Gross-Rosen. Abek could already be waiting.

“Are you sure that’s all?” Her pen hesitates over the next blank line. She’s trying to figure out how to be delicate with me. “We’ve found that it’s better to cast as wide a net as possible. Not just immediate family, but cousins, distant relations. All will improve the chances of your finding someone.”

“I don’t need to add anyone else.”

Distant relations. She doesn’t mean it this way, but it reminds me of when my old teacher would bring candy to lessons. *Don’t be choosy*, he’d warn, walking around with a bowl.

Don't be choosy. You'd be lucky to have any relatives at all; just pick something.

"Look at all these empty rows." The worker gestures to her paper, patient, as you'd talk to a baby. "There's plenty of room to add as many people as you'd like. If you're looking for only one person—one on this entire continent—it could be impossible."

One person. Impossible.

I look at her empty lines. There aren't enough of them, not even close. Not nearly enough space for me to tell the story of the people I'm missing. I squeeze my eyes shut, trying to keep my thoughts from leaking, because I know the nurses have been wrong all along: Sometimes it's not that I have trouble remembering things, it's that I have trouble forgetting.

Behind me, Dima shifts his weight, concerned. I can tell he wonders if he should help.

If there were enough empty lines on that sheet of paper, this is how I would start:

I would start by telling her that on the twelfth of August in 1942, all remaining Jews of Sosnowiec were told to go to the soccer stadium. The instructions said we were to be issued new identification. It seemed suspicious even then, but you have to understand—I would tell her, *You must understand*—the Germans had already occupied our city for three years. We were accustomed to arbitrary orders that sometimes became terrifying and sometimes benign. I would tell her how my family had been moved from our apartment to another across town, for no other reason than imaginary boundaries had been drawn on

a map, and Jews could now live only inside them. How Baba Rose and I had already made stars to pin on our clothes, cut from a pattern in the newspaper.

Papa had already reported to the stadium once: The Germans made all men. They were taken, but they were returned, ashen and not wanting to speak of what they'd seen. *They returned.*

I would tell this Red Cross worker that our identification cards were how we survived: Without one, you couldn't buy food or walk in the street. So we had to go, and we wore our best clothes. The instructions told us to do this, which we took comfort in, because maybe they really were going to take our pictures for identification.

But then we got there, and there were no cameras. Just soldiers. And all they were doing was sorting us. By health. By age. Strong-looking into one group; weak or old or families with young children in another. One line to work in factories. Another line to camps.

It took hours. It took days. Thousands of us were on the field. All of us had to be sorted. All of us had to be queried about whether we had special skills or connections. The SS surrounded the perimeter. Behind my family, an old man I recognized from the pharmacy was praying, and two soldiers came over to jeer. One knocked the pharmacist's hat off; the other kned him to the ground. My father ran over to help him up—I knew he would; he was always kind to old people—even while my mother and I begged him not to, and I thought, *What's the use.*

My mother and I took turns curling our arms around Abek and telling him fairy tales: *The Frog Princess*. *The Bear in the Forest Hut*. *The Whirlwind*, his favorite.

Abek was tall for his age, which made him look older. When we realized how the soldiers were sorting us, we told ourselves that would matter. *Abek*, Mama said. *You are twelve, not nine, all right? You're twelve, and you've been working in your father's factory for a year already.*

We made up these reassurances for all of us. We looked at Baba Rose, my sweet, patient grandmother, and we told ourselves she looked much younger than sixty-seven. We told ourselves nobody in Sosnowiec could sew half as well. Customers who bought suits and skirts from my family's business did so because of the embroidery done at Baba Rose's hand, and surely this counted as a special skill.

We told ourselves my mother's cough, the one that had made her weak and gasping over the past months, the one Abek was starting to get, too, was barely noticeable. We said nobody would even see Aunt Maja's limp.

Pinch your cheeks, Aunt Maja told me. *When they come to you, pinch your cheeks to make them full of life.*

Beautiful Aunt Maja's face was so pretty and her laugh was so gay, none of her suitors ever cared that she was born with a mangled hip that made her lurch instead of glide. She was much younger than Mama, just nine years older than me. She used to tell me to pinch my cheeks so I would be as pretty as she was. Now it was so we would both be safe.

Darkness fell; it started to rain. We opened our mouths to

catch the drops; we hadn't eaten or drank in days. The water on our now-sunburned skin felt nice for a minute, and then we were cold. Next to me, Abek tucked his hand in mine.

And Prince Dobrotek crept into the horse's ear, I said, telling The Whirlwind again. I was always good at telling stories. And when he crawled out the other side, can you remember what he was wearing?

A golden suit of armor, Abek said. And then he rode the horse to the moving mountain.

Pinch your cheeks! Aunt Maja called to me. *Zofia, pinch your cheeks and smile.*

I kept Abek's hand in mine and dragged him with me to the soldiers.

Fifteen, I told them. I can sew and run a loom. My brother is twelve.

Do you see why there isn't enough room on this woman's intake form for me to explain all this? It would take her hours to write it down. She would run out of ink. There are too many other Jews, millions of missing, whose information she also needs to collect.

Dima steps forward. "Zofia doesn't have more names; she's not well."

"I can do it," I protest, but I'm not even sure what I mean by *it*. I can keep standing in this line? I can be well again?

The official woman adds my records to her pile. Dima extends his hand, and I accept it. I fold myself into the passenger side of his jeep and allow him to arrange his coat over my lap while Nurse Urbaniak makes sure the bundle of food is secure on the floorboard.

What I should have told the official woman is this: I know I don't need to put anyone else on my list, because when the soldiers sorted my family, they sent us all to Birkenau. And when we got to Birkenau, there was another line dividing into two. In that line, the lucky people were sent to hard labor. The unlucky people—we could see the smoke. The smoke was the burning bodies of the unlucky people.

In that line, Abek and I were sent to the right.

On this continent, I need to find only one person. I need to go home, I need to survive, I need to keep my brain working for only one person.

Because everyone else: Papa, Mama, Baba Rose, beautiful Aunt Maja—all of them, all of them, as the population of Sosnowiec was devastated—they went left.