

Flying

Once, when she was a child, her mother told her a story about a boy who could fly. He had great big wings the color of cloud, and all day long he soared across the sky, swooping and diving. He made friends with the birds and one time he flew so high he met God.

She thought about this story again the year she turned seven, when she had to pin a yellow star to her shirt sleeve and her father came home late one night with blood smeared across his cheek like a Nazi flag. She thought how she would like to fly into the crimson sky, heavy with snow and hunger, until she could see the stars again.

Her father lost his job soon after the Germans came. There was no longer enough food. Her mother cleaned houses for the neighbors, but one by one the neighbors stopped paying. Her brothers chopped firewood. They carried it from house to house. Their hands grew raw from the cold and the hard work. Splinters filled their palms. Her father sat at the kitchen table and did not speak. He read the newspaper, often more than once, and smoked cigarettes.

She learned to fill her days and nights with dreams. Lying on the ground, she watched the sky, watched it fill with stars and then blush palely with dawn light and then draw wispy curtains over the sun until it was dark once more. She felt as though she might fall off the face of the Earth, keep falling and falling into the depths of the universe.

The night when the knock came at their door, she thought of the moon, wondered what it would be like to walk on its scarred surface and gaze down at the Earth. As her mother packed a bag and her father packed his cigarettes she thought of comets, how she would wait for one to pass close enough to touch and then grab on to it and ride far away from winter. As they were guided to a cattle cart, along with the other people who wore the yellow stars, she wondered if someday she could hold a shooting star in her palm, catch it in a jar like a firefly.

"Mama," she whispered, "where are we going?"

Mama held her tightly, tightly. "A work camp," she told her daughter. "We will live with other people like us and work until we can leave." It didn't sound so horrible a place. They would have jobs and nobody would break their windows.

They were moved from the cattle cart to a train. It was long and cold. She sat on the hard metal floor surrounded by people who cried and moaned. Some of them closed their eyes and did not reopen them. Her stomach ached from hunger. Her throat was dry and cracked. She did not complain. She put her head in Mama's lap and fell asleep.

Her mother woke her when they arrived. They dismounted the train and suddenly her father and brothers and their bag were gone, swept away by strong pale hands. There were many voices. Some shouted. Some wept. Mama reached out and clutched her wrist. Together, they were guided along a fence with other women. Through the fence they could see many people. They walked with a slow shuffle. They did not look out at her.

They were shoved through a gap in the fence and guided into another room. A group of tall, pale men entered. They were ordered to undress completely. Her bare feet pressed against the ground. She struggled not to shiver. The men inspected them one by one, moving slowly down the line. At last they reached her. One of the guards looked her up and down.

"Fabrik," he said, and moved on.

She was given a thin gray dress made of rough fabric, and waited in line while a man carved numbers into arms with a metal spike. When his icy hand took hold of her arm she struggled and cried out, because she could see the pain written into the others' faces. He slapped her once. *"Leise sein."* She was quiet. As the stamp bit into her arm she closed her eyes and remembered quiet nights looking at the stars.

They were led to a brick building, dark and dirty and filled with many rows of beds. They were ordered into rows outside and stood there for a long time. Men counted them and wrote down the numbers on their arms. Finally they were allowed to go in. She climbed under the sheets with her mother, because she felt cold even though spring had been blossoming at home.

She was awakened early the next morning, before the sun had risen. Outside, they were forced to stand in rows again. They stood until her legs grew weak, but the guard would not let them sit. As he paced up and down the rows, she imagined mountains, so high that she could climb them and live among the clouds, never coming down. Snow fell around her in flurries. As she sat at a table and wound thread through boot soles, she caught flakes with her hands to soothe her aching fingers.

Slowly, her days fell into a haze, a crimson cloud that descended over her vision and blurred her sight and her sense of time. Sounds came to her as if through a deep, dark well. In sleep, her dreams were terrible. Often her father and brothers smiled up at her from burning furnaces as yellow stars rained from the sky. Her fingers bled from her work in the factory. She was terribly hungry. One day her mother did not get out of bed. They lined up without her. An hour later, a soldier noticed that she was missing and sent another man into the barracks to look for her. There was a moment of silence. Then the soldier dragged Mama out and made her stand, but she fell over. He pulled her up again. Again she fell over. He frowned and reached for his gun.

She did not look.

She did not cry.

She knew they might hit her if she cried.

She squeezed her eyes tightly, tightly.

She cracked like glass.

The gunshot echoed for a long, long time and rang behind her closed eyelids like the tolling of a funeral bell. Fly away.

At night she was very cold. Sleep came slowly to her empty bed. She dreamt that she grew wings, that she flew over the fence, out over the guard towers and railroad tracks until there was nothing but sky. Flowers grew from the floor of the barracks, flowers that wilted and faded to dust when she touched them. Warm spring rain fell from the iron sky and ran down her back. She heard birds singing whenever she passed the showers. Their songs made grass grow from the frozen ground, made roses sprout up and wind around the great pits of burning bodies. With her calloused fingertips, she painted color into the lifeless horizon. With her cracked lungs she breathed warmth into the wind. Once, her father looked out at her from a column of marching workers. Cigarette smoke filled the air around him. His hands were black with newsprint and ashes. She reached a hand towards him, but he turned and shuffled away. *Tata* floated from her lips and froze in the winter air. Someone struck her across the face. She fell to her knees. She got up quickly, but she felt the snow like ice in her veins. Her eyes burned.

That night, she felt wings sprout from her shoulder blades. They filled the room with warm, sweet air. The others stirred and stared in amazement as she stepped from her bed to the ground to the door, where she stood in the snowy night. She could feel the sun on her face, and she closed her eyes because it was clearer that way. There were many stars.

She found herself lifted away by the soft wind, carried farther and farther away from the world. With her arms spread wide, she spun, dancing through the breeze. She smiled, laughed. The sound rang through the darkness, clear and bright. There was only her, drifting somewhere between the sky and everything else.

She never came back to earth. It was far too beautiful up there.