

Lines

It is cold and I am naked. We are all naked.

I don't know why.

The soldiers have clothes on. They have guns, too. But their power over us does not lie in their weapons, though they sweep the muzzles of their machine guns up and down our line from time to time. Somehow, their power lies in our being naked and their being clothed. Serpent-eyed, they watch us as we shuffle past, and I move forward to shield Mama's nakedness from their dead stares. But they do not notice our nakedness, any more than a farmer notices the nakedness of the shorn sheep is driving to market.

Our line snakes through the camp, and we trudge along slowly, our eyes cast down at the churned-up muck, embarrassed and ashamed of our private parts on display. I look down at my filth-caked feet and my tiny, little boy's penis shriveled pitifully by the cold. Mama walks next to me, holding my hand. My little sister holds her other hand and she is whimpering from the cold, her eyes smudged and stunned by strangeness of everything.

Slowly, slowly, the line slithers forward.

Then suddenly, as if from heaven, there is beautiful music swelling in our ears. Mama smiles and looks down at me. It's Strauss, she says! Beautiful, beautiful Strauss! And look, there's an orchestra playing! We trudge past a group of musicians seated on a mismatch of broken and listing chairs, sawing away at violins and cellos, making that wonderful, magical music.

Buoyed by the music, our mood lifts. People look around at one another, talking, smiling for the first time in days. We are going to be all right after all. Why, Mama says, they're even providing us with a shower and fresh clothes. A shower! Imagine that! A nice hot shower after days of unwashed bodies crammed into stifling cattle cars. It's like a miracle, and the music makes it so.

Airy and free, musical notes float up into the skies above the camp, mingling with a swirl of grey ash and white smoke billowing from the tall chimneys of the low brick buildings.

We begin filing into the shower rooms and everyone is smiling and chatting—everyone except for one man who barges out of line and begins shouting. His yells bring the soldiers at a run, and we watch, horrified, as he is clubbed to the ground with rifle butts. They kick him and stomp him but still he will not lie down, still he will not stop shouting. Then an officer in a long black coat barks orders and more and more soldiers come running.

The soldiers grab the man by his shattered arms and drag him away, calloused heels bouncing over the rutted ground.

Mama turns and pushes me out of the line. Run, she says. Run! I start to cry. I am confused. I don't want to leave Mama and my baby sister. I want to go into the showers with them. But every time I try to squeeze back in line, Mama shoves me out. Run, she says again, run! So confused, sobbing, I turn and run for the fence while the soldiers struggle to drag the angry man away.

I am small and runt-skinny, so it is easy for me to slip past the parked trucks and squeeze through the strands of barbed wire, though barbs snag and bloody my back. On

the other side of the fence, I look back and catch a final glimpse of Mama's despairing face, before the line sidles forward, carrying her into the showers. She is cradling my baby sister in her arms and weeping, the tears flowing unashamedly.

As I turn and run into the nearby woods, I swear I can hear a hissing, like a snake's slow release of venom. But I couldn't possibly have heard that sound. My imagination has since added that. All I could hear was the music, that beautiful Strauss waltz uncoiling slowly into the smoky skies.

Even today, when I'm standing in line at the Bank, or at the supermarket, or waiting in line at the theatre, and I look up into the face of an elderly lady, I seem to see Mama's face and for a moment I catch the groan of heartbroken cellos. But then it fades, and it isn't Mama's face, and there is no beautiful music.

There is just a line.

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