

And They Shall Survive Burnt Offerings

by Moshe Dann (June 2014)

After the war, when Max came out of the Camps, he wandered back to his hometown in Poland looking for relatives, for someone he knew. He went from door to door. The local villagers who lived in the homes of his family and friends at first ignored him; then they cursed him. "Dead man, get out!" they spat at him. He too wondered by what right he was still alive, why he had come back and where he belonged. He attributed survival to chance, not choice. He looked into their fiery eyes and then, standing alone in front of their closed doors screamed out the names of people he remembered, over and over until he could only feel the burning inside, his helpless rage without tears. The watchmaker, whom he had known as a child, took pity on him, let him stay in the back of his store and taught him his trade.

During the day Max rarely went out, afraid that the townspeople would attack him. At night he wandered the empty streets waiting for them to open and swallow him. He learned to repair watches and hardly talked with anyone. He ate whatever the watchmaker prepared; in the morning, tea and buttered bread, and in the evening, bread, vegetables and soup, spiced at times with a bit of sausage that someone had brought in as payment. It was enough. He felt protected. Neither asked questions, or needed to know. Max said no blessings and accepted none. No bargains, he concluded and nothing owed.

One day a blond, blue-eyed woman from the Rescue Committee came looking for him. She was an American, but her family had come from Poland. She had heard about him from others and spent a long afternoon asking him questions about his family and where he had been. She did not ask him why he was alive. A few weeks later she arrived with a jeep and offered him a ride.

"Where are we going?" he asked, afraid that he had done something wrong and would be punished again.

"A new life," she beamed with innocent confidence.

Max looked at her grimly, but said nothing. He did not believe her and wondered if she was playing a cruel joke on him. She seemed to understand his confusion.

"America," she exhaled in one long sweet breath. "You are going to America. We've arranged

passage for you. Everything will be fine. You're still a young man. You'll be able to begin your life again."

He wasn't sure that he wanted to go anywhere. "Enough of life," he told her. "For what to live?" he asked. "Life belongs to someone else; not me." She seemed so determined that reluctantly he went along with The Plan and did as he was told. He signed papers, made a small package of everything he owned and then, embracing his friend, left. On the outskirts of town he turned around for one last look, small trails of chimney smoke waving torn hands, faces he could not forget.

When he arrived in New York another lady from the Rescue Committee greeted him. He stood in lines and answered more questions. They helped him fill out forms. A public health nurse with long red hair examined him as he shivered shirtless before her. Camp "clinics" were not for healing, but for those too sick to work; every week or two all the patients were sent to gas chambers. He wondered if she was married, how many children she had and what she thought of him, remnant of the living. In a corner, a potted plant long dead hung like a shriveled body. She wore a long white coat; her arms were delicate and pale, without numbers. While he dressed she stood with her back to him writing down what he was and how he would be. "Good luck," she smiled, handing him a certificate and walked into the next cubicle. He waited and when she didn't come back, he walked out, the smell of disinfectant in his nostrils and permission to live in his pocket.

The Committee found a small apartment for him on the Lower East Side. In the nearby park and on the street he met others who had also survived. *Bodies without souls*, he thought and kept apart. It was hard for him to hear their laughter and reminiscences. "Ghosts of ghosts," he said and did not pray or ask for favors. "Enough of God," he told them.

"I don't forgive," he cried out bitterly to clouds or the empty darkness around him at night. He didn't need symbols to tell him who he was; that was engraved on his arm.

With the small amount of money that he'd been given he purchased some tools, rented a tiny shop near his apartment and put up a sign in Yiddish and English. "Watches repaired." Max was in business.

Other survivors had opened stores along the street, but he had little to do with them. Some got married and even, to his amazement had children. New families sprouted; Max remained alone. "Nothing from nothing you can't take," he told his friend, Oscar. Some went to social clubs and evening school. Oscar owned a printing shop. "Imagine," he told Max, as if a miracle had occurred, "a Polack in business in America, talking English, making money." Max did not

believe in miracles; he prepared for the worst.

It was inevitable, he thought. The Russians would attack. The *goyim* would blame the Jews. They would come for him wearing black uniforms and hunt him down. But he would be prepared; he would protect himself.

At a moment's warning he could quickly pack up a few essential things, put them into a small backpack and escape. When "they" came to get him he would be gone. He was ready for them, the Nazis, the *schvartzes*, the police.

"When they come for me," he told Oscar, "they won't find anyone." He squinted and held a finger to his head.

Oscar and his wife were unimpressed; they too had numbers on their arms. They had two children without numbers. "Live," Oscar said simply to him when he left. "Come for Shabbos," he invited Max.

"No Shabbos," Max shook his head emphatically and continued to work, eyepiece to watch.

They had been childhood friends from the same town in Poland. Max could not forget; he remembered it all. Friday night. His father sitting proudly at the head of the table, candles glowing, their house filled with delicious aromas, bubbling with preparations. Everything was finally ready; they could hardly wait. Songs rang in his ears, wind-chimes of destruction. Someone was pounding at the door. He held his breath and listened to the ticking of the watch his uncle had given him for his birthday. His father got up and opened the door. His hands shook. Policemen dressed in black ordered them out. No one spoke. "Mama," his young sister cried. Outside he heard a sharp wail. Men in black uniforms were pushing people into huge black trucks. Max watched from the doorway as the girl next door walked with her parents towards the trucks. She seemed to dance on the glistening cobblestones. They were secret friends; they passed notes in school and between apartments. They made up their own language with special signs. She taught him to say blessings at night before he went to sleep. They prayed to angels and thought they would be friends for ever. Suddenly she began to run, trying to escape. She tripped and fell. Policemen began to beat and kick her. She screamed. Max shut his eyes, crying out her name inside his breath.

He stuffed his watch into one pocket, a roll into the other. His mother tried to protect the little ones as they got into a truck with their neighbors. Putting her hands to his face she kissed him, blessing him with her eyes. He filled his lungs with the smell of her hair. When he looked back there were no longer lights on in the house. He held his breath as long as he

could and did not cry. He felt his father's hand around his shoulder and saw him crying. "*Ich vel dich bshitsen,*" his father whispered. *Who will protect us?* Max shivered in the cold. *No Shabbos,* he said to himself.

When the store was empty Max would test himself. He imagined howling mobs outside, shattering glass, screams of victims in the street. He would need to move quickly. Close the blinds. Lock the front door. Pull down the gate. Empty the drawers. Take only what was most valuable, a few tools, a knife, some clothes. Leave a light on so they would think he was still inside. Escape through the back door. It would take them a while to realize he wasn't there. A few minutes would give him enough time to run. He looked through the iron bars on the window into tunneled shadows. No one would notice. No one would discover that he had escaped.

Down the street from his shop, Chinese workers from the restaurant were scrubbing large blackened pans. They dumped leftovers into garbage cans. He could grab a bag of food on the way, just in case. He would escape through narrow passageways. No one would find him.

But where could he hide? That was the most intriguing and difficult piece of the puzzle. He had few friends. *They die.* Customers? *Who cares? They find cheaper prices.* He needed a safe place. The roundup of Jews would be thorough and extensive. Every Jew would be under surveillance, arrested, or disappeared, already dead. Plane and train stations would be heavily guarded. There would be traps everywhere. No one could be trusted.

When he took a break from work Max roamed the neighborhood, his anonymity protecting him. Faces passed; no one noticed, a game that could one day mean life or death. He scouted bridges and buildings, plotting escape routes. Subways would be heavily patrolled he thought, watching policemen guarding their entrances. One day he discovered it. *A perfect place to hide! Staten Island.* Who would escape to an island, he concluded and one that was populated mostly by *goyim* eager to turn him in?

One sunny autumn afternoon he closed early, packed a knapsack with the things he needed and took the Ferry to the island. The other passengers ignored him, their impassive faces reflecting his own. Some were sullen, life sucked out by dreariness and despair. Others were young, eager and full of life; *they could never have been in the Camps. Perhaps,* he thought, *maybe their souls, once.*

As they passed the Statue of Liberty he breathed the fresh sea air. The heavy throb of engines beneath him reminded him of the ship he had taken from Europe and a whale he'd seen. A young couple touched noses in a corner, hardly talking. He remembered when he was a child, watching boats on the river, holding his father's hand.

The ferry docked, a bell clanged and everyone moved quickly toward the exit. He took his time. There was no hurry; he had no place to go. Leaves were turning colors, the sky an exceptional blue. He paid no attention as he wandered through the streets until he came to a park bordering a small wooded area. It was empty except for a few children playing on a rusty swing. In a corner at the edge of the grass a sign on a shed indicated, "Property of New York City." He peered through thick layers of grime that covered the barred windows. Inside tools and small machines used to maintain the park were stacked in a corner. A simple padlock on the door could be broken easily; he could hide inside, at least for a while. He could bring food and water but how long would that last, he wondered. At night he could sneak out among the trees, careful not to leave tracks.

Sitting on one of the green wooden benches nearby, he took out his wallet, stuffed it inside his backpack and looked around for a place to hide it. *If they catch me they won't know who I am.* On the other side of the park he noticed a young woman sitting on a bench. She hardly moved, as if listening attentively to something. She was plain looking, short dark hair, a shawl around her shoulders reminded him of that girl who had lived next door.

The woman on the bench pulled her shawl around her. Her expression did not change. Max looked around, relieved that no one else was there. He wondered what she was doing alone in the park, perhaps waiting for someone, but no one came. He stared at her, but she didn't seem to notice him, even when he got up and moved closer. Gracefully, she reached for a long white stick beside her.

She's blind, he realized. She can't betray me. I'm safe.

Max watched her walk towards the exit sign, pulling his coat around him as the wind picked up. *Time to go,* he warned himself and noticed that she was having difficulty getting around a large branch that had blown across the path. He hesitated to help, fearing that she might be able to identify him later, but then decided to act.

"Excuse me," he mumbled and pulled the branch to one side.

"Oh, thanks," she said and smiled.

"You're needing help?" he asked, afraid that he might be offering too much. *Perhaps it was a trap.*

"No, thanks," she said self-confidently. *Perhaps she could really see and had been sent as a spy,* he thought. *Part of their plan.* He watched her eyes suspiciously; she seemed to look past

him.

"I'm going this way," he said and took her arm.

She didn't seem to mind. *Even if she's blind*, he thought *she still might recognize my voice*. She stumbled and held his arm. Her fingers were strong. *Perhaps it was a trick*, he thought, *to throw me off guard*. He walked deliberately along a side path.

"This isn't the way," she stopped and tapped her stick.

"Ah, you're right," he said as if everything could be excused by admitting mistakes and turned towards the exit. "Don't litter," read a large sign below the arched gateway with the name of the park. He thought of other signs, names of railroad stations and Camps. Other languages. A dog barked. He looked around.

"What a beautiful day," she said casually.

"Yes," he agreed, wondering how she knew what kind of day it was, or would be and surmised that she was only trying to put him at ease. *No trains*. Wind swept back and forth through the treetops. *No dogs*. *No Jews*. She seemed so fragile; she too could be easily crushed.

"I can feel the sun." She lifted her face and smiled.

Max felt more daring. "You're coming here often?"

"On my lunch break, sometimes. I work at the library. They have a section for Braille. And where are you from?" she asked.

"Oh, ah, around, the neighborhood," he muttered vaguely.

"I haven't seen you before," she said.

'Seen,' he thought. *Perhaps I'm right; she can see*.

"What do you do?" she asked.

"Watches," he mumbled. "I'm fixing watches." *Have I spoken too much? She could identify my accent*. He looked around and felt sweat along his back, across the scars where he was beaten. When they stopped in front of the library he was surprised by his hesitation to leave, wanting to hold her arm a bit longer. Her voice, like a string around his finger.

"Nice to meet you," she said and turned to walk up the steps. She reached for the railing,

touching the first step with her foot. "By the way, what's your name?" she asked.

"Max," he answered. "I'm going now," he said and moved a step backward.

"Well, thank you Max. Where are you going?"

"Home." *Why did she want to know? What did it matter?* He was unsure of what he really wanted to do.

"Have a nice day, Max, and goodbye." She looked past him and he watched her climb the stairs to the huge glass doors at the top.

He was a few blocks away when he remembered that he had forgotten his knapsack in the park. He rushed back, but it was gone. He searched the trash containers and the edges of the park thinking that someone might have tossed it away, but couldn't find it. *Careless*, he berated himself. *Idiot! Now what?* He had some change and keys in his pockets; it reminded him of what he could live without, what could be replaced or not, each loss an emptiness that consumed more of him.

On the way back home he thought about the Camps. There was no meaning there, he stared into the ship's long wake; at the end of the day what mattered was only who survived and who did not. Either way the world went on, each person was alone, an island.

The sun rested on the shoulders of gray clouds as the Ferry heaved in the waves. In the distance tall buildings along the dark, delicate skyline grew more distinct, like giant chimneys. He thought about the woman he'd met, the way she'd held his arm, the sharp features of her face. Seagulls accompanied him, balancing in the wind, waiting for scraps.

"Here, my dear friends," he called to them, "you will be so lucky" and threw them small pieces of dried bread he'd saved in his pockets. At another time such scraps might have made a difference.

His apartment was cold. Hungry and exhausted, he opened the refrigerator and took out some bread and cheese, pickles and olives. He made space at his kitchen table cluttered with notices, bills and old newspapers.

Who cares, even if one survives for another day. He looked around. *There's nothing I need. I am a ransom for another life.* Steam from radiators hissed softly around him as he ate. He took off his coat and heated the kettle on the stove.

The phone rang. *It's probably Oscar.* He didn't answer and slumped into a large overstuffed chair that he'd found on the street. When the kettle whistled he pushed himself up and made a cup of tea, warming his hands. Simple pleasures, he thought, remembering when his hands had stuck to pieces of ice as he sucked them. Lines of broken, ragged men hoping for a bowl of soup, crumbs hidden in his pockets. The phone rang again. Reluctantly he picked it up.

"Hello," a woman's voice inquired. "Max Wershavfsky?" she said, mispronouncing his name. He wanted to correct her. *Who cares about names? Family names without families.*

"Ya," he answered, wondering into what trouble he had fallen.

"Your wallet," she said. "We found your wallet; it was in your knapsack. Someone turned it in. They found it near our library. Do you use our library?" she asked.

"No, no," he rummaged excitedly for words. He wondered if this could be a trick. *Perhaps someone discovered my plans. Had I been watched? The woman could be a spy.* He was confused. *Nonsense! No one cares.* "Yes, I lost it," he admitted.

"Would you like to come and fetch it?" she said. "You'll have to bring some identification, of course."

"Yes," he murmured, "of course." He tried to imitate her strict official voice, not daring to betray his sense of relief and danger. "Of course," he repeated, "thank you." But he knew that he had already exposed himself and could easily fall into a trap, even by the escape plans that he had so carefully prepared. He realized that they knew who he was and where he lived.

Max sipped his tea and tried to re-organize his defenses. The lost wallet may have given him away, but there was no need for concern he reassured himself, as long as he didn't create any suspicions. In the morning, he would go to his shop as usual and set everything in order, just in case.

The next day Max took the Ferry back to Staten Island, following the same route he had taken before. When he arrived at the library, he walked to the front desk. An elderly woman wearing a grey jacket sat behind the counter; she looked up at him sternly.

"My wallet," he said. "And my bag."

"Oh yes," she seemed doubtful. He recognized her voice. "Did you bring some ID?" she demanded.

"ID?" he pleaded, confused. "You have my papers," he insisted.

"But you must be able to identify yourself..." she stared at him.

"Here," he said, pulling a crumpled receipt from his pocket with his name and address on it.

"I don't know..." she took the paper and examined it as if it contained some hidden meaning.

"You have my wallet, my bag." He raised his voice. "It's mine. Give it back," he insisted. "*Gib mir tzurik!*" She stepped back and frowned.

"I'm sorry. I'll have to ask ..." Max was afraid that she would call the police.

"It's okay," another woman's voice suddenly wafted from behind a shelf of books. "You can give it to him. His name is Max. It's his."

The librarian turned around and Max saw the blind woman that he'd met the day before.

"Don't worry. It's okay. He walked me to the library yesterday." She stood amidst piles of books on wooden carts, one hand resting on a shelf.

"Thanks," Max said quietly as she handed him his things. He looked at the two women, turned and walked towards the stairs, then stopped for a moment and turned back towards the desk.

"Can I help you?" the librarian looked strangely at him. "Are you okay?"

Max looked for the blind woman. "Sure," he said. "I just wanted to ask Miss... ah..." he stopped. *What do I really want?* He remembered the way she stood awkwardly in front of him, her eyes looking vaguely to the side.

He saw her make her way towards the front doors and then followed her down the stairs and into the street. She seemed to know the route well for she hesitated only a few times, tapping her cane and then, sensing that he was near her, she turned her head slightly towards him. He caught up with her quickly.

"Hello," he offered hesitantly. "Thanks for helping ..." he said.

She looked startled, and smiled. "Oh, that's okay. It is you, isn't it?" she asked and laughed.

"Yes, Yes," Max said smiling, "it's me...I think," he said, laughing with her. He watched her eyes that reflected nothing. "Do you mind if I'm walking with you?"

"Not at all," she said. "It's such a beautiful day. Are there many people in the park?"

"No, only a few...and us..." he felt confused and out of breath, excited to have met her again.

"I often come here. I hear other people, but I don't know if there are others around, perhaps like you, or me." She laughed again gently, pulling him.

"No, not so many people." He began to describe what he saw. "Someone is running around in... pajamas..." he began.

"Oh, yes, him..." she interrupted, "sometimes he passes close to me. What color is his track suit?"

"Red," Max answered. "And white." He remembered Red Cross trucks that arrived at the gates of the camp. People vomited blood. Heaps of bodies. No one to help.

"I thought it must be something like that," she pursed her lips. "I can only hear him running past me." She turned to Max. "Are you taking the day off?" she asked.

"Yes, I guess," he started. "Not really," he thought more carefully. "You see, I am..." he hesitated again, unsure of what he could divulge. "I thought to take a walk before I'm going back to work."

"You're a watchmaker."

"Ya," he nodded, trying to remember if he had told her and how she had remembered. He glanced at her face to see if she was pretending. Her skin was white and smooth, unlike his own, his face scarred and bearded. *'Too much. You're talking too much!'*

"Your voice sounds East European. Were you..." she began. He stopped her.

"I'm not talking about it," he said abruptly. He wanted to leave. *Perhaps it was already too late.*

She put her hand on his arm. He felt her warmth and an intensity.

"Would you like to join me for a cup of tea?" she asked. "There's a little shop nearby; they have delicious cookies and cakes. You like things like that, don't you?"

He didn't answer as they started to walk. *Where is she taking me?*

"When did you come here," she asked. "Did you come by ship? Was it hard for you? Oh, I have so many questions and you have all the answers, don't you? I've never been on a ship, or even in

a boat, except the Ferry. But the ocean. Such vastness." She stopped. Her voice became quiet, as if caught in the wind spray from the sea.

"Did you ever see whales?" she asked.

"Whales?" he was startled. *Why such a question?*

"Yes, whales. I've always wondered what it was like when they dive into the water and their tails go up and they make a big woosh." She waved her hand as if it was a tail. "I've heard about it. Someone described it to me. We can be so close to fear and the possibility of life, we have such immense power to live and still we are so vulnerable and alone."

"I don't remember," he admitted and thought for a moment. "Yes, maybe once I saw..." He remembered the converted freighter that had brought him to America, filled with others like him, shapes and shadows that could suddenly disappear, shouts of strangers around him longing for a new life. "It was very powerful," he said. "The sound when they're diving. The water is shaking."

"I thought of that too," she said. "It must be overwhelming to see that," she took a deep breath, "and know that life is more than daring to live."

Built of dark wood, the coffee shop reminded him of the cafes in his hometown. Through the window he could make out a few couples. As he opened the door the smell of fresh coffee and sweet rolls made him suddenly very hungry. He questioned whether he deserved such luxuries. She held his arm as they walked to a table and sat down, relieved that no one paid any attention to them. But it seemed strange to be there, with her, as if he was acting in a play and would soon be exposed.

He looked over the menu and then at her as she turned her head slightly towards a conversation nearby. She seemed so comfortable.

"Do I look all right?" she asked, touching the napkin in front of her. He stared into her vacant eyes.

"Yes, fine," he reassured her, trying to make sense of what seemed unreal, a deceiving illusion. Although taking a risk, he thought, somehow he felt at ease with her. There were dark tables, a small bar in one corner; quiet laughter and classical music in the background. She took off her coat and draped it over her chair.

He ordered coffee; she had tea. They split a pastry. He noticed the way she held her cup with

both hands, long slender fingers marked with specks of ink, bare arms. White skin; blue ink.

"I don't come here often," she said. "Only on special occasions. This is a special occasion, isn't it?" She smiled; Max wanted to agree, to feel that moment as if it had stopped. "You see," she continued, "I have a sense about people. I can't see them, but I can tell a lot about them from their voices. You have a very gentle voice, very quiet. And sad."

Max watched her eyes, unable to decipher their hidden messages. He sipped his coffee, licking the creamy topping from his lips and unbuttoned his coat. It was, he felt, time to ask.

"You want something from me?" he asked directly. "You are curious?"

She seemed puzzled, her eyebrows knotted together. "What makes you think that?" she asked. Then she laughed. "Oh, you're right. There *is* something I want from you. I want to get to know you and I would like you to know me. That is, if you want to." She began to unravel details of her life, her family and friends, attending special schools for the blind, and eventually graduating from college. "And my grandmother was Jewish. But we weren't raised that way. I guess you'd say we're just good old Americans. There, now it's your turn."

"Well," he began, "I saw a whale once, but maybe it was only a dream." They laughed. He didn't want to remember and yet, with her he felt different, that she could touch his world. "But some things I'm not talking about," he said firmly. "My work, you know, a few friends; enough. I'm living on the Lower East Side." He stopped. "I have a beard," he said.

"I thought so," she nodded. "You sound like a man with a beard. Is it long or short?"

He rubbed his beard. "Half half," he said. "I'm trimming it."

"May I feel it?" she asked.

At first Max was taken aback. "I'm not usual..." he began.

"It's okay; I understand," she sensed his uneasiness. "Only if you feel comfortable. For me, it's like seeing who you are."

"Yes, of course." He felt awkward, but drawn to her openness. He watched her trace the edge of her cup. "If you want..." he offered hesitantly, guiding her hands to his face. He remembered the way his mother had touched his face. He closed his eyes, feeling her fingers on his forehead, his cheeks, his beard, then his lips, and finally his nose. "It's okay?" he challenged her, wondering what others would think watching them. *A Jewish nose.*

"It's okay," she laughed warmly and then checked her watch with her fingers. "But I have to go now. And I have one more request. Let's meet again. How about next week?"

"How about tomorrow?" he responded impulsively, unable to resist his sudden impatience. "But what about your work?"

"I'm closing early. I'm making sandwiches. You like chopped liver, corned beef, brisket? My neighbor, he's owning a deli."

"I'll have them all," she laughed and got up. "Now, I need to finish up a few things at work," she said "so let's walk back to the library." When they arrived she turned toward him. "Thanks, Max," she said. "I had a lovely time."

"Me too," he said and held her hand. "Your name," he asked, sounding too formal.

"Oh, yes. Nora. Is that enough?" and smiled.

Max nodded as she climbed the stairs and entered the building. He walked more slowly towards the Ferry, wondering where this would lead.

The trip back seemed shorter than before, his mind filled with questions and anticipation, his pockets empty. That night he hardly slept. The next morning he bought the makings for lunch and rushed to the library. She was waiting for him on the steps when he walked up to her and called her name.

"Ah, there you are," she said, smiling and slipped her arm around his.

"I brought sandwiches," he said enthusiastically as they walked towards the park.

"Yes. Smells delicious," she breathed deeply as he guided her to a bench and they sat down.

"Well, *monsieur*, what do you suggest?"

"Well, today we're having specials," he said, unwrapping the sandwiches between them.

"I'll taste them all," she said. "Yes, a bit of whatever you have."

He placed a napkin on her lap and watched as she touched each portion with the tips of her fingers and then put one carefully into her mouth. "Wonderful," she exclaimed. "A real picnic."

Max stared her fingers measuring borders and spaces, careless strands of hair that fell over

her face, her eyes that seemed far away, watching him without attention.

"What is it like to be blind?" he asked cautiously.

"I see things other people don't see. But I've only lost my sight," she answered. "I have a life, my family and my friends...Max, do you have a family?" she asked.

Family, he thought. "No family," he said quietly. "No one."

He shivered. '*How dare you...*' A warning, an alarm, simple gestures of humanity that were crushed, memories that gutted everything he touched. Max tried to focus, her voice drowned by screams. '*How dare you live again,*' they shrieked in the wind.

Her vacant eyes reminded him of those he saw in the Camps, but the memory was offset by her smile, her silk scarf draped around her neck, the delicate smell of perfume. He stared at her, trying to make sense of images superimposed upon each other as she ran her fingers over the wrapping paper.

"Why are you silent?" she asked quietly. "Are you sad?"

He noticed her hands clasping the napkin, her shoes and the buttons of her jacket. *What am I doing here?* he asked himself. Her question stuck inside, he tried to speak, to tell her that he lived in another world, closed, burned and unburied. He listened for sounds of gunshots in the trees, cries of children; they were not alone.

"I...I...can't" he stammered, unable to explain the taste of ashes in his mouth. She touched his arm. "Too much. They tried to make us into animals. There was no reason to live. Only to die."

"Max, I don't know what your world is like. I can't live there any more than you can live in mine. But maybe we can find a place for each other. Some things have no explanations. They just are and you live with them." She folded the paper over what was left of their sandwiches, sounds brittle in the silence. "Save them," she said, "for another time."

"You don't understand. I have seen life too much, more than nightmares."

"I see with these too," she said, touching his hands. "And mine ears," she said, imitating him and pulling at one. "And I see in you an inner light, a goodness there."

"You see ashes and fire."

"Yes, that too. But it's not everything."

Max leaned towards her and then drew back.

"Sandwiches. Save them ..." he put the neatly wrapped leftovers in a bag. "I don't understand. I don't know..."

"Max, this is between you and me now. What do you see?"

"I want to see, but ..."

"I know you're afraid. I can't know what you've been through, but maybe you'll learn to trust me. It's a way of making a world and finding yourself in it." She stood up. "Come on, let's go." She brushed against him. "Oops," she said, losing her balance and held his arm tightly. Dark clouds obscured the sun. He looked around helplessly. "*Run, hide*" they whispered, "*before it's too late.*"

"Max, I've got to get back to the library, but we'll meet again soon, won't we?" The sound of footsteps tramping nearby. "Will you miss me?" she teased. Max nodded as they moved along the path, his feet suddenly heavy, stuck in thick mud.

"Miss you?" her words mirrored inside. He put his hand on hers.

Trees swayed violently above them, dark fingers pointing into the sky. Heavy footsteps pounded around him, lines of men, their rhythm broken by an occasional groan, a sudden fall, a shout for help, the sound of gunshots, bodies left along the road.

Escape. There was a chance if the guards weren't paying attention. With luck I might survive for another day. I could hide, run away with my parents, my brothers and sisters. I would protect them. If we're discovered, I'd face the soldiers alone so the rest could escape. I'd fight ferociously, as much as I could until they beat me into unconsciousness. I'd taste blood, but wouldn't cry. I will protect you.

"*Ich vel dich bshitsen,*" he said softly.

"What did you say?" she pulled his arm and leaned against him. He couldn't answer. Sounds shook inside, withered hands clung to him; he could not protect them, or himself. He felt her fingers on his arm and breathed the heavy dust that began to cover them, *blackened faces, hollow eyes pleading for food, for forgiveness*, light tangled in darkness.

They were about to cross the street when Max saw a huge truck swerve around the corner roaring towards them. Terrified, he pulled Nora back sharply. She lost her balance and fell, pulling

him down as well. She hit her head on a stone and screamed his name; he reached out. People ran towards them. Dazed, Max got to his knees and looked around.

A few people surrounded Nora. *They'll blame me.* He squinted and held a finger to his head. *I should have known better; my fault. I should have protected her. Ich vel dich bshitsen.*

Someone tried to help him stand. He stared at them, unable to understand their words, their strange faces, their arms without numbers. He held his hands out in front of him. *What have you done?*

"Vos host di geton?" he mumbled words from his childhood. *"Far vos?"* he screamed and suddenly shaking began to cry. He had not cried since the Camps.

"Are you okay?" someone asked gently, putting an arm on his shoulder. "Who are you?"

Slowly, Max pulled up his sleeve, revealing his bare arm. He opened his mouth but couldn't speak. He tried to explain, waiting for the abyss to open and consume him. A sound came out, a cry, silent howl.

A siren wailed as an ambulance arrived. Sirens warned of an escape.

"Max," he suddenly heard Nora's voice. "Max, where are you?" she called out and raised an arm to him. He knelt beside her and placed her hand on his face. "Do you hear?" she whispered. "Whales!"

"Ya," he said, tasting blood. "I'm hearing them too." His body trembled. He noticed that her watch was smashed and, slipping it off, held it tightly in his hand.

"I'm fixing it," he said, her eyes enclosing him. *"Ich ken es ferrichten,"* he pleaded. *"Ich ken,"* as they lifted her into the ambulance. He tried to hold on to one of the doors. *"Ich ken es ferrichten!"* he shouted as they pushed him away leaving him alone, the touch of her fingers on his face like wind spray from the sea.

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