When God’s Angel Goes East

He stares me in the eye and dismisses me daily. He doesn’t care that I am tired, dirty, and hurting. His indifference of the lice crawling in every crevice of my body makes me want to vomit. I haven’t eaten in days nor bathed in twice as many. My body is merely that of a skeleton that you would find in a science lab for kids to take apart and study. The makeshift shirt I wear basically consists of three bare threads that cover three of my ribs on a good day. The rest of me is bare. No pants, no socks, no shoes.

I was 12 when my home was invaded and my life turned upside down. My mother and I were in the kitchen preparing dinner for father would be home at any moment. Every day he arrived home promptly at 5, so when I heard a knock on the door at 5:03 I bounded into the living room, threw the door open with a huge smile and jumped forward. Normally, my father would be there to catch me and hug me tight. That day however, I fell onto the cold concrete, hitting my head and hurting my knee. I began crying, noticing the blood dripping from my face. I shouted, “Father, how could you let your baby girl fall to the ground?” At that moment I stared up and quickly realized the problem. There were three sets of eyes staring at me, piercing deep into my heart with their gaze. They laughed at my misfortune, then the tallest man took the butt of his gun and hit me in the gut giving me instructions in a language I couldn’t understand.

I dashed into the kitchen where my mother stood terrified. She was as white as a ghost and looked transparent. Upon seeing the blood on my face, she wet a napkin and walked toward me to wipe it away. A guard smacked her hand, knocking down the napkin, and shook his head in the gesture of no. She tried to pick up the napkin, directly defying the officer when he slapped her in the face so hard I was sure all of her teeth had broken and would fall to the floor. I told her I was fine and to just do what the guards said in the hopes they would leave. Without delay, the youngest of the three soldiers stepped forward and informed my mother that we had exactly five minutes to pack our belongings. She grabbed my arm so fiercely I thought it would snap instantly. We dashed into the bedroom and began packing a few clothing items, pictures of our family, and my mother’s jewelry, which had been inherited from her grandmother. In an instant, we were herded from our apartment like cattle, never to return.

It’s been 17 months since I have seen my mother, father, or our quaint apartment in the city. The bag we packed is long gone and the only item I have remaining is a tiny picture that I keep hidden in the straw of my “bed”. Though the picture is small, it contains a memory of the best 10th birthday party a girl could have. I find myself gravitating toward that picture at night thinking of my parents, where they were, and what they were experiencing. It also affords me the opportunity to reflect on my past when life was good and there was happiness. In this place, no happiness exists. We have all become numb to the pain our bodies scream and the daily abuse we endure. Any form of torture and/or abuse imaginable, I have experienced. I feel certain that I will die here in this camp, soon, but my friend Sofia ensures me each night that tomorrow will be the day we are rescued.

Sofia is a girl of 15, but living in these conditions for the past 3 years have made her look much more like a child of 8. She is not a Jew like me, but her parents were identified as Gypsies, so the punishment is the same. Like me, she hasn’t seen her parents since they were dropped off at the train station, but she does have an older sister who is in the same camp as us. Recently, however, her sister developed typhus and was taken to the hospital in the camp. Even in this harsh reality we are engulfed in, Sophia keeps a positive outlook and continues to pray nightly. I gave up my faith long ago and no longer believed that a benevolent God would allow such misery, but each night I hold Sophia’s hand as she prays and asks God to watch over us one more day.

When I awoke on the morning of November 7, Sofia was nowhere to be found. It was our morning routine to discuss the previous night’s dreams when we awoke, so her absence was peculiar. Fearing the worst, I felt my chest begin to tighten and I struggle to breathe. I search for her frantically to no avail. I asked others in the camp if they had seen her but the reply was always the same, “No.” Surely she wouldn’t voluntarily leave without me. I can’t survive without her. She is my calm in the storm, the hand that holds me steady, and my shoulder to cry on. I have to find her! I check the makeshift mess hall, the workroom, and the bathroom. No, no, and no. In the rush, I find a guard and try asking him where the hospital is. Sofia must be there visiting her sister. Why didn’t I think of that earlier? The guard proved unhelpful as the language barrier prevented us from exchanging thoughts. Anger took over my body and I began to scream. Louder, louder, and louder until people begin running to me from all directions.

“The hospital? Where is the hospital?” I beg and plead for an answer, but none arrives. Seeing the gathering of people in the yard, a newly recruited guard is sent to investigate. He pushes his way into the middle of the group and finds me distraught on my hands and knees. He kicks me in the back and tells me to get up. I try, but my body is too weak and fragile, so I fall face first into the snow that had arrived the previous evening. Angered, he hits me with his baton; once, then twice, then three times and my skin turns a fiery red. Two members of the circle pull me to my feet to prevent a further beating. Another member asks the guard where the hospital is. The guard begins to laugh hysterically and points to the east side of the camp. The crowd grows completely silent and for a moment time stands still. The only thing east is the mass pile of bodies; lives of mothers, fathers, sons, and daughters taken entirely too soon. How can I survive this place alone?