

The Still-Sleeping World

There was no sound but the panting of the engine as our train wound its way through the snow-laden mountainside. In the dark early morning, the snow glistened blue in its passing light.

I held Josepha so that my mother could stitch Shoshanah's skirt. I remember sitting on the floor of the compartment with my sisters. Josepha was not yet one, Shoshanah was seven, and I was ten. My mother turned the jeweled rooster over and over in her hand before sewing it into Shoshanah's hem.

"Why the *sechvi*, mama?" I'd asked. "You have so many pretty brooches."

My mother took the pins from her mouth. "This animal has a special place in our family and in our faith... The Talmud says, 'When you hear the rooster crowing at dawn, you should say *Blessed is the One who has given understanding to the rooster.*' Our Torah encourages us to cherish wisdom. And, God has blessed the rooster with the unique ability to perceive the dawn of a new day, and to crow it loudly to the still-sleeping world."

My father entered our compartment from the hall, hat in hand, but my mother continued. "Remember *sechvi* does not only mean rooster... it also refers to the human heart. Just as the rooster distinguishes between the light of day and the darkness of the night, so too the human heart should distinguish between those ideas which bring light into the world, and those which bring darkness."

My father kissed her on the forehead. "We're at the border... Don't be afraid, darling, it will just be a formality. They'll check our visas and let us on our way."

"Mama's not afraid of anything," I said.

The steam squealed from the train as it slows to a stop. The porter knocked on our cabin door and asked us to detrain. He asked us to bring our papers and our bags. He had asked it kindly, but my father still asked him if there was a problem, as if it had been an unreasonable or unexpected demand.

"No sir, the porter said. "It often happens this way. Everything will be fine."

Our family stepped off the train together. Shoshanah and I held hands. Our tracks were deep in the snow as we

approached the border crossing. A guard demanded our papers and Papa handed a sheaf of passports and visas to him.

Without even looking at the papers in his hand, the guard ordered two other officers to escort my father away. They led him to a small concrete building. My mother clutched Josepha to her chest and ran after them, but she was held back.

“Joseph! Joseph! Joseph!” she yelled, kicking and flailing. Josepha, his namesake, was wailing, too.

Three guards took us to a separate bunker. “We need to check you thoroughly.... take off everything,” they demanded my mother. And then, through my mother’s protests, they demanded the same of Shoshanah and me.

We were just little girls. I will not say what happened next in the ugly yellow light of that bunker. Somehow, by the time the snow began to fall again, we were returning to the train.

Shoshanah and I met in the dining car. Her cheeks were flushed bright pink and her eyes were glittering. From the window, we could see my mother and baby sister trekking through the snow back to the train. They left no footprints. My mother was also flushed and bright-eyed. My cheeks felt hot when I finally could embrace her.

“Oh, my darlings, I’m so sorry,” she whispered. “But we must be grateful they let us go! We are all together, thank God. And we’ll be in a safe place soon...”

We sat at a small table and the same elderly porter came by with a tea tray. Steam rose as he poured three cups.

“Where’s papa?” my sister asked him.

My mother looked concerned, but just reassured her that he was on his way back.

Shoshanah nodded toward the porter and said, “*He* knows.”

He then poured himself a cup of tea and joined our table. He patted my mother’s hand in a comforting way and, as he did, their two hands together emitted an eerie glow. He cupped her hands together and poured hot tea, then milk, right into her palms. The liquid vanished without even touching her lips.

“This isn’t right, isn’t possible...” she said. And then, after only a moment of consideration, “We’re gone, aren’t we? We never came back from that bunker.”

“Of course we came back, mama,” I countered “We're right here!”

“Dead and gone are not the same,” the porter said.

“We're not dead,” Shoshanah stated matter-of-factly, in the way only a seven-year-old can.

“You have very intuitive girls.” The porter leaned in and spoke to us in a low voice, sharing a secret. “The way I understand it, young ladies, is that God never intended for our bodies and souls to be separate. And, we all look forward to the eventual divine reunion. But, sometimes, God perceives that the future of certain bodies may be too much for those souls to bear. It's by his grace that, for a little time on earth, the body goes one direction and the soul another.”

“What's going to happen to us?” I asked him.

“Well, miss, your forms are on another train... headed for someplace God would like to spare you. So, me surmising what happens in those camps goes against His plan to keep your soul safe.”

He stirred his tea. “A soul such as myself can still feel and taste and touch the world, only in a different way... The catch, of course, is that I'm not sure where or what my old body is doing. So, it will come as great surprise to me when I pass on, wherever I am, and this soul and that body are reunited.”

My mother stroked Josepha's cheek and the baby's skin shone luminously where touched. Shoshanah felt patted her braids, sweater, and skirt to see what of her was still there. She reached for her pleated hem. There was a slit in the place the brooch had been hidden. Her fingers could go right through.

“But where's our papa?” we insisted.

A gunshot echoed from the small building by the border crossing. We are all quiet and still.

“He's not like us,” the porter replied. “He won't wait.”

Our train continued through the Alps as sunlight began to break. In the distance, a rooster crowed. The mountainside was a blaze of color as the sunrise reflected against fresh snow.