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The Reunion



For more than a year, I had lived a life of looking without seeing, doing without feeling, surviving from moment-to-moment and refusing to imagine beyond that. Through much of this time, it was almost as if I was actually dead, and merely going through the motions of life like a decapitated chicken.

Now I was safe, at least for the moment, but there was no way to turn off my defenses and begin to function normally. The horrors I had seen, the loved ones I had lost, would have overwhelmed me. In those first weeks and months after Liberation, many committed suicide. They had survived the nightmare of the Holocaust because they had gone through it like sleepwalkers, half-anesthetized by shock and disbelief. Now, waking too suddenly, finding things too real, they could not cope and fled their agony by the quickest way.

What I did was eat. Ami, Mariska and Eugen continued to load me with food. I devoured everything and slept endlessly between feedings. My body, which had become used to subsisting on less than 400 calories a day, was now taking in 10 or 20 times as much. Within two months' time, I had gained back all the weight I had lost in the camps, and added some 20 or 30 pounds more.

Even so, the marks of my experience were still visible upon me. My entire body was mottled with hideous purple welts, marking the places where lice and other creatures had fed on me. My boils had subsided but left ugly scars. And the look in my eyes was not that of an ordinary person.

I dared not think too much about the dead. But my thoughts

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of Nick were an obsession. Where was he? How could I find him? Had he been true to our unspoken pact to survive?

Then, in the sudden, overwhelming way that such things happen, a brief note arrived from Prague, addressed to Ami. It was from Nick! He was alive!

For one moment, I was ecstatic with joy. But the rest of the letter was terrifying.

Nick was ill with typhus, and was about to be taken to a hospital. He did not know which one, but the people at the return address would know.

I sprang to life. I must get to Prague. But how? The country was at a virtual standstill. There was little transportation, and most of that was commandeered for official uses.

For nearly a week I wandered the city, asking friends and strangers alike how I could get to Prague. No one could help me. My quest seemed hopeless.

It has been said that every survivor's history is a history of miracles. Now, yet another miracle manifested itself. There was a family from Sobrance named Goldberger. One of the daughters of this family had worked for my father, and the son, Zoltan, had been Nick's schoolmate and friend. This same Zoltan had also lived for a time in my own home as my brothers' tutor. Somewhat later he had become a Communist, changed his last name to Toman, and joined the Czech government in exile in London. He had just returned to help form the Soviet-sponsored government, and was soon to become the head of the Secret Service. In that role, he was to become a hated man, but during this early period he was instrumental more than once in saving Nick and me.

Only two days after Nick's letter arrived, I encountered Zoltan's sister, Aranka, in the street. She and I had gone to school together. I told Aranka that Nick was ill, possibly dying, in Prague and that I was desperate to go to him. Aranka told me that she was about to join her brother in Prague, and that he had sent an official

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limousine to bring her. She invited me to come along and we set out the next day.

We arrived in Prague on a Friday. I registered at a hotel, then went at once to the return address on the envelope, an apartment building with several flats. I rang and rang the bell and knocked and knocked on the door, but there was no answer. Then a neighbor came out and told me that the occupants were away for the weekend. I asked, but he knew nothing of Nick.

I was desolate. I could not wait until Monday to find out where Nick was or if he were alive. It was impossible. Impossible.

Then I remembered something I had heard without paying much attention at the time. The open square in front of the YMCA had become a gathering place for camp survivors and every sort of displaced person in search of their lost ones. I found a taxi and directed the driver to take me there. He drove me as far as he could, then let me out.

I stepped into the square and was confronted by a stunning sight. Hundreds—probably thousands—of people, most of them ragged and emaciated, were milling about, carrying signs scrawled with their names and their hometowns. Some were pushing their way through to get at those whose signs meant something to them. Others would stop to ask a brief question or two and then move on. A ghastly quiet lay over the crowd, underscored by the background noise of shuffling feet and hoarse murmurs, and punctuated by occasional cries of joy or grief.

I stood there staring, as my taxi pulled away. Would one of those signs say something to me? Then, from the crowd, a figure emerged. A man came toward me. He was young and gaunt. “Aren’t you from Uzhorod?” he asked. “Aren’t you the Dr. Berman’s wife?”

Yes, I was, I told him. “I’m looking for my husband.” I described the circumstances.

“Stay here,” he said. “I’ll see if I can find out anything.”

I nodded and thanked him, and he went off. I could not recall

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having met this man. Like celebrities, our family had been known by many we did not know.

It was about six in the evening when he left me. The hours passed. Word had gotten around that I was from Uzhorod, the first person to get out since the Russian occupation. Many desperate people came to me to ask about their own lost ones, but no one had any news of Nick.

It grew dark. The man did not come back. I kept to my own vicinity but dared not either plunge into the crowd or leave.

I had just about decided that he had forgotten me, when the man returned with a very tall, thin, pale, tired woman of about 40. He let her speak for herself. "I was just released from the hospital today," she said. "As I was leaving, a man called out the window to me. He said, 'I'm Dr. Nicholas Berman from Uzhorod. I'm looking for my wife, Gizel. If you come across her, let her know where I am.'"

I thanked them both from my heart. Although this encounter may sound extraordinary, it was commonplace at that time. All these people in the square were carrying such messages and hoping for such messages. It was the reason they were there.

By then, it was nearly ten at night. I hunted down a taxi and went directly to the hospital. The guard at the door refused to let me in. Visiting hours were over, he said. Lights were out. The patients were asleep. I should come back in the morning.

But just as it had been impossible for me to wait until Monday for news of Nick, it was now impossible for me to wait until morning to see him. I wept, I pleaded, I nagged, I persisted. At first, he threatened to have me arrested. Then he washed his hands of the problem and caved in. Let the hospital staff deal with me.

"All right, go in," he agreed. "But you'll never find him."

"Oh, yes, I will," I declared.

I went inside and followed the signs to the men's ward. I don't remember anyone attempting to stop me. Perhaps it was assumed that I had legitimate business, since I had gotten by the guard.

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I entered the men's ward. It was immense and dim, lit only by night-lights along the walls at floor level. On either side was a long row of beds, each one filled with a sleeping patient covered with a dark green blanket. How was I to find Nick among these dozens of identical shapes?

Then, as my eyes grew accustomed to the dimness, I noticed that one patient had fallen asleep with a book on his chest. Nick was a voracious reader. Perhaps . . . ?

I made my way over to this patient and looked at him. He was emaciated, his face hollowed with starvation and disease. But it was Nick.

I put my hand on his arm. He opened his eyes and looked at me.

I wish I could say that this reunion was heart-rendingly beautiful. That we wept with joy at the sight of each other. That we murmured thanks to God and fell into a blissful embrace. But this is not how it happened.

Neither outside nor inside were Nick and I the people we had been. In appearance, I was fat and pasty-faced and my body was covered with hideous purple welts. In spirit, I was still desensitizing myself. Nick, meanwhile, was a living skeleton, as dazed and numb as I. We did not know what we had become as moral beings either.

So the first thing he said to me was, "You are so fat. I thought you would be so thin."

I guessed he was imagining me the pampered mistress of some SS man. "Ami and Mariska and Eugen have all been feeding me," I explained.

Although he was still very sick, he wanted to leave the hospital. I got him out the next morning and took him to the hotel. Two months before, I could think of nothing but food. Now it was his turn. It was June and fresh fruit was just appearing in the stores. Nick craved it desperately, especially the cherries. I still remember buying him those first cherries and the profound lust and joy he took in eating them.

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It would be a long time before we could bring that kind of lust and joy to one another.

We were strangers to each other and to ourselves. We were ill at ease and baffled as to what to say. But we clung together. What else could we do?

As soon as Nick regained a little strength, he demanded to go back to Uzhorod. I argued with all the strength I could muster. "There's no point going back," I told him. It's completely changed. It's not home anymore. The Russians are running everything, and they're behaving like barbarians."

He shook his head at me. "How can that be, Gizu? Home is home. I want to go home. We managed to survive under the Hungarians, before the Germans came. You can't tell me the Russians are worse than the Hungarians."

"Yes. I'm telling you they're worse. Or at least as bad in another way."

"This is ridiculous. The Russians are our friends. Good, honest Slavs, like the Czechs and the Slovaks. And Communism is not Fascism. Communism is a humane system."

Why shouldn't he think so? I had once thought the same. We had heard it in the schools, on the streets, in our homes, in the camps. Nothing I might say could get past the barrier of these ingrained conceptions. He simply could not imagine the scenes I was describing.

So, when a train became available, we went home to Uzhorod and stayed with Ami.

The war was over now and the Russians were more firmly entrenched. Uzhorod was being treated as part of the Soviet Union. Nick soon learned that everything I had said was true. Our friends were mostly dead. Our house was no longer ours and never would be again.

We had been back in town only a few days when Nick was ordered to leave Uzhorod and go deeper into Russian-occupied

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territory. He was to be the sole medical officer for a large rural district. We pleaded that he was still suffering the effects of starvation and typhus and weighed less than 100 pounds.

“You’ll do what you are told!” the Russian official exploded at us. “Dirty bourgeois Jews! Too bad they didn’t finish you all off.”

At last, Nick saw what he had “come home” to. For Karpathia, the war had not ended. Only the uniforms had changed. We had no choice. We went where they sent us. Nick deteriorated rapidly under the load of the work. There were constant rumors that the area was to be formally annexed by the Soviet Union. Desperate, we tried an escape.

Almost half a century later, it is impossible to remember how we managed the details. All I know is that, about a month after we arrived, we somehow collected our possessions and made our way safely to a train for Budapest. From there we took another train to Prague. A few months later, with borders sealed and controls in place, our flight would have been impossible. But this was still the immediate post-war period and many displaced persons were still on the roads without papers. So we slipped through a “window.”

The atmosphere in Prague was comparatively free. The administration was Czech, not Soviet. Friends recommended that we go to Decin, a town closer to the Western border. This was an area that had once been heavily German in population. Now all Germans were being expelled. There was plenty of housing available and a need for doctors.

We left for Decin and soon found ourselves living a comparatively normal life. We took a flat in an apartment building and Nick opened a practice in his own specialty. He could make a living without working beyond his capacity and we enjoyed the amenities of a quiet but modern town. Yet, we were still only going through the motions. The strongest feeling in our repertoire was fear.

Then a strange thing happened. One day I went up into the attic of our building to store something, and found someone hiding

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out. He was an emaciated old man, a German, who had stayed behind when his people were expelled. He had been old and sick and alone and unable to face leaving his home to start life again somewhere else. So when the round up began, he had hidden. Since then he had been living in fear, by whatever means he could.

How he had survived this long I couldn't imagine. I helped make him more comfortable and started feeding him on a daily basis. I had no feeling against this man just because he was German. He was simply one more victim of the insanity of the war, the insanity of shoving masses of people around, treating them as members of some race or religion or nation, instead of as human beings. In fact, it comforted me to take care of him. It was the kind of thing I was used to, from the camps.

I said nothing to Nick. I didn't dare. Nick might be so full of hate that he would kill this miserable old man because he was German.

And then, one day, going up to feed the man before Nick got home, I found Nick himself on the stairs, with a packet of food he had brought in from the outside.

We stared at each other, stunned. Then I found my voice. "You? You've been feeding him too?"

And he said, "You've been feeding him too?"

And I said, "I was afraid to tell you. I thought you might kill him."

And he said, "That's what I thought about you."

I was swept by a tide of emotion. We were alike! We thought the same! Then I recognized what I was feeling.

Love. Joy. A sense of incredible feeling and release.

We were both laughing uncontrollably, weeping uncontrollably, clinging together. We had been reunited at last. With one another. And with our own souls.