

Reunion

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Reunion

The whole family has come together.

Großmutter is sitting at the dinner table, talking with my mother about how a soup is boiled best. She hurt her hip while walking last week, that's why she's not helping. Instead she fiddles with a fork beside her plate. Großvater is not here, the table feels empty without his presence. But Dad said Großvater's injuries from the war took their toll. Last time I saw him, he was lying inside a casket, ready to be lowered.

He was the first of the family. I know some friends who lost someone too, mostly brothers, fathers, grandfathers. But for me, Großvater was the first. He would've liked mother's stew even though he also would have complained loudly. He was always loud, the table is so silent without him, just the clatter of cutlery against plates. Nobody talks.

And then a knock. We don't get a lot of visitors so I understand why mother looks like a startled deer. She and Großmutter both look at Dad. Probably because he clenches his knuckles so much they're beginning to look like the bones underneath. He slowly gets up and stalks to the front door. I don't know who's visiting, so I try to finish my plate before they come back. I don't manage to.

The men striding in are wearing brown uniforms and stony faces, completely different from mother's chalk white look. Their words are just as edged and cutting as their faces. Suddenly a loud bang echoes through the living room. Then a crash. Großmutter has fallen from her seat, her wine glass too, as red is pooling around her head. I slip under the table to get to her faster.

Since when has wine ever been this hot? But it is wine, it has to be. I hear mother screaming at the top of her lungs, strangely dulled by the rushing noise in my ears Red. Screaming. A resounding slap. The screaming stops. More red. There's pressure on my neck. I still see red. Just red. And then black.

My feet hurt so much. We walk, have been doing so since I woke up in my mother's arms. I don't know where to. There has been no stop or rest, just trudging forward in almost complete silence. Because we aren't the only ones on the street. There are many people, families even. Parents who drag their children along. People leaning on each other. I don't have the motivation to look if there's someone we now Because I already know I won't see Dad. Mother cried while telling me. When the soldiers hit me, he had tried to reach for me. To see if I'm alright. If I'm alive. He shouldn't have done that, she sobs. And she is right. I was alive, he shouldn't have worried. But he did and they killed him for it. Like they killed Großmutter.

It hurts to think that. It hurts to walk. To speak. Everything. The longer the march goes on, the more conversations ebb away. Even the sobs quiet down. Why should we bother to weep, talk or mourn? All we have to do is walk.

A man tries to lift up a child that collapsed at the tree beside us. But he's not strong enough, slips under the nearly doubled weight his feet try to carry. As soon as he hits the ground, there's someone pulling him up and away from the walking crowd. The man wears brown. I see him pushing the two on their knees, take his hands from their shoulders. I hear two loud bangs.

Mother pushes me forward and her fingers clutch down with so much force I feel them almost breaking the skin on my shoulder. The cold wind numbs my senses and

I can't feel my toes, fingers or even my ears and nose. Everything hurts. Inside and out. I can't imagine where we are going or why that would matter. I'd still have to keep walking among the crowd of shivering people.

I stumble. Mother's grasp on me doesn't falter, keeps me upright. But she's stronger than me, she can still hold on. Can walk. But I can't, not anymore. Everything dulls, little by little as if thin veils are covering me, filmy and see-through. I try to get more air into my lungs, but the cold wind stings and brings the coldness into me.

Parched throat, empty stomach and bleeding feet. It gets worse with every step until even mother can't keep me standing. The ground is rough, frozen and littered with rocks. But it's better than mindlessly marching forward. I can feel someone screaming in my ear, urging me to get up, please, and pulling at me. But I know she's as tired as I am. We both know.

Being yanked to my feet is unexpected and the vicelike grip on my arm cannot belong to mother. The man is wearing brown - a soldier - and drags me to the side, away from the crowd. Mother stumbles along, still holding onto me. Wraps her arms tightly around me, warm and comforting. Whispers something to me I don't quite hear but nevertheless somehow understand. The soldier is looming over us like our fate brandishing his weapon.

I return the embrace. Close my eyes. And hear something clicking

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