

November 1943 – The present

The ground has become a patchwork of snow and mud.

Intricate patterns of ice dance from the heavens above, falling to the ashy snow only to be wiped away by the feet of my people before me as we fight against the biting wind that threatens to peel the shirts from our backs.

The haggard breaths of mist that fall from my mouth are lost under the jeers of the soldiers surrounding us, their skin as grey as ours and uniforms just as bleak. For a moment, they could have been one of us, one of me. That thought disappears as my gaze settles upon the red swastika adorning their arms, like the blood of my fallen people.

A shove in my back has me walking faster, blinking the ice that sits upon my lashes.

“Keep walking *Judenschwein!*”

Miriam, my name is Miriam I whisper under my breath

The windows of the low grey building, almost the colour of the ashy snow, glow with a warm golden light, almost as if it beckons to me and my people, to walk the muddy path towards it.

We had started down this path long ago.

November 9th, 1938. Five years ago.

Newspapers and posters blew on a biting wind, flying into the windscreens of parked automobiles and the glass windows of the storefronts. People rushed through the streets even in the brisk autumn, with ghost-white knuckles latching onto jackets and hats that threatened to blow away in the strong flurries. Bright red flags, the colour of blood, hung proudly in store windows, a bright contrast to the glaring white of the sky and plain stone buildings and street. Water splashed under my feet with each step I took on the rain splattered side walk, my face buried in the warmth of my bright red scarf.

The same red that adorned the arms of those soldiers.

I lowered my gaze from the soldiers that burst through a storefront, dragging a limp man between them.

“Keep walking” I whispered to myself, low enough so only the wind could hear it

Mother had warned me. Told me to never fight back against the soldiers, to never question them or their motives, because they were the motives of the führer.

I hate the Führer.

My brother was sent away because of him.

Shoving my hands into my armpits I quickened my pace, rounding a corner and then stopping.

Eicholz News agency read the bright blue sign that hung above the wooden door, right next to that ever-present Nazi flag. Lowering my scarf from my face, I pushed on the wooden door. The smell of old books and paper, mixed with that smell of incense that clung to me like another coat, instantly choked me as I walked into the warmth and clutter of the newsagency. Mother had told me that Mr Eicholz, was like us. A Jew. But I was not allowed to tell people that. Mother didn't want anyone knowing.

"Shalom Miriam," yelled the old man from behind the counter.

"Shalom," I mimicked as I surveyed the newspapers that lined the tables.

They were all the same.

I tentatively reached a gloved hand to the nearest one.

'Jewish teen shoots German diplomat in Paris' was sprawled across the cover in bold black, along with a picture, the teen holding a gun.

A gasp escaped my throat, as I scanned through the words.

"Can you believe what they are saying?" said Mr Eicholz from behind his counter. "Mark my words, Miriam, this is the start of something terrible."

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Indeed, it was the start of something terrible. Perhaps even the start of the path of my people, my path.

The grey building loomed ever closer, growing with each heartbeat and step through the biting cold.

Bones ache as I turn my head slowly to the side, to the trees that loom beyond the fence line in the distance. Their gnarled branches are naked, save for the fine layer of heavenly white that cover them like a blanket. But it is beautiful. The way an unfinished painting is beautiful.

Winter holds the promise of renewal. Of rebirth.

Perhaps this moment is winter for me. When my branches are thin and naked and snow covers me like a blanket. Perhaps there is a spring afterwards. Perhaps the war will end and I will be liberated. I could see my brother and mother again.

The thought almost brings a smile to my face. But that grey building looms.

November 9th, 1938 – Five years ago

I awoke to screams.

And then hands were gripping my arms.

I punched and kicked at the person with a vice like grip.

"Miriam!" whispered a voice that softened with age, my mother.

“Mama, what’s going on, what are the screams? What –”

She silenced me with a ‘shush’, pulling me into her arms and rubbing my back with a warm hand. It was then I noticed that bright red light through the window. Like a sunset but much, much brighter. I found myself standing apart from my mother’s embrace, and walking to the window.

My ears were deaf, instead a high-pitched squeal throbbed in my temples and blurred at the edges of my vision. I pulled the curtain aside –

“My god.” I threw a hand over my mouth to cut off my sob, or my scream.

My other fingers became entwined in the curtain, gripping it if it were more substantial than a length of rope, as if it would keep me from tumbling into the abyss. But as the flames engulfed the synagogue, my synagogue, I couldn’t help as the tears rolled down my cheeks. Staining them with hot salt that brought me closer to that abyss. With each new flare of brightly coloured flame I knew within my heavy, aching heart that it burnt another piece of that holy place.

I tried to speak, tried to form the words. But they slipped from my tongue, burning from my mind like the synagogue before me burnt. I felt hollow, like a shell holding in a thousand seas worth of tears that threatened to drown me if I spoke, if I so much as peeled my gaze from the synagogue before me.

“Who-”

“Soldiers in the night,” my mother said in answer, I turned. Her blue eyes were cast in an eerie shade of crimson that flickered cross her face, drawing strange shadows across her wrinkles that made her look older, warier.

High pitch wails pulled me again to that window. The air was suddenly rent with sounds of breaking glass. I craned my neck just as the window below mine shattered in an explosive arch of white, glistening crystal that fell to the flame-lit street. I did nothing, felt nothing, as those thousand fragments of skin-piercing glass littered the street like rubies and crystals against the moonlight. It took the second splinter of glass, from the window next to mine -the window inside my house - to set my heart racing and feet moving as ice surged through my blood and my door burst inward.

I stopped as the eight men surged through the door and into my too-small room.

“Out!” one of them screamed, motioning to my mother. She screamed as hands wrapped around her arms and pulled her from my room, kicking and biting.

My heart pounded in my head, my ears, my eyes, until that icy thing melted and turned to the flames that burnt my synagogue, it burnt in my blood, setting my arms into action before I knew what I was doing.

I pounded my clenched fists into the back of the closest soldier, he turned, a feral gleam burning in the irises of his crazed or drunken eyes with the flame flickering over his face, turning him into a monster incarnate.

“Dress Judenschwein,” he hissed, as he caught my hands, flinging me towards my wardrobe, a heavy and continental thing. The fire in my blood turned to ashes that wrapped around my gut and burnt my tongue.

When I stood before it, I didn’t have time to scream as four of the men, the soldiers, flung the wardrobe over.

Flinging my arms above me and closing my eyes, I waited for that impending blow, the one that would surely knock the life from me. Instead I screamed as it pushed me to the ground, not crushing me, but still hurting enough to pull the salty tears from my eyes.

I lied under that wardrobe for what seemed like an eternity, my knees brought to my chest as my lungs were racked with choked sobs that intensified with each scream from the street or the splintering of another window.

They had tried to kill me.

Only a table, previously upside down due to the destruction those soldiers had wrecked in my room, saved me. The table kept the wardrobe at an odd-angle, to prevent it from crushing me. I don’t know how many times I thanked God for saving me.

Enough times, that the screaming and splintering of glass stopped, the fire of the synagogue was reduced to nothing but ashes and a faint red light cast strange tricks in the smoke through my window. It was then I finally crawled from under the wardrobe. Palms splayed across the wooden floor, staining it red with each new cut from that inevitable glass.

“Mama?” I coughed through the haze of ashy smoke, and red dawn light, standing and brushing the splinters from my night dress, “Mama, are you here, mama?”

A choked cough was my answer.

It was all I needed to surge into action, my head spinning and red light blinding me as I burst through the splintered remains of my door and into the hallway wall. Bracing against it for a second, I continued my march through fits of ashy coughing.

“Mama!” I called out again.

I stopped at each doorway, leaning against splintered frames to peer in at the wreckage beyond. Those eight soldiers – they had wrecked havoc on my home, they had tried to kill me. It was when I stopped at the kitchen did my legs give way beneath me.

My mother, her blonde hair fell across her face, plastered to her cheeks with still-wet tears. She leant against a broken cupboard door, her pale arms and legs marred by cuts and scratches that dripped now-dried crimson.

Her blue eyes looked without seeing. Staring at the dust glistening like the broken glass in the morning light through the kitchen window.

My chest heaved as I pulled myself through the broken glass and splintered wood towards her. She jumped as I touched her shoulder, her eyes growing wild before settling onto my face, her face.

“Miriam,” she said, and shattered

A thousand oceans worth of tears, surfaced and drowned me, choked me. And my arms were wrapped around my mother, and hers around me. And we both cried. We both shattered and splintered like the broken glass that littered the street. Like the glass that made crystals in the night.

Crystal Night.

November 1943 – The Present

The night of broken glass.

That’s what they call it.

I suppose it sounds romantic. That the glass littered the streets, glowing and gleaming with luminescent moonlight, playing tricks in the light and casting shadows like the flickering globe of the grey building.

It is colder than I expected. The grey building.

The walls drip with water, and green tinges the grey of the floors and the corner of the roof. The air smells of decay and dampness, mixed with that god-awful smell of cigar and the rations they call food.

We all pause for a moment, my group and I. It has been so long since we were last brought to the showers.

The guards jeer at us, their arms proudly displaying the logo of the Nazi’s. I can’t stop the grimace that rises like the fire in my blood only to be extinguished as a guard starts speaking.

“Un-dress *Jewsow*”

December 1941 – Two years ago

We never spoke about what happened that night three years ago. We never really spoke at all. My mother and I moved from Nuremberg, heading instead to the country where there were less people to hate us. She didn’t say it, but I knew that’s what she thought as she had packed our

suitcases and driven our run-down automobile all day northward through heavy winter snow, until we reached a small town near Kiel.

But the hate against our people followed us.

It seemed even the words of the führer could reach even the furthest parts of Germany.

It happened on a brisk day.

“Marion?” my mother said turning to me, using my new name I had been given when it was clear being Jewish was too dangerous

“Yes mama,” I said, carefully placing the apple I had chosen into my basket, my gaze slipped to her pale hand, at the small scar on it. She noticed my stare and shifted her coat sleeve.

“Let’s go home.”

I frowned at her sudden change. We had been in the grocer a mere ten minutes what had come over –

Soldiers were in the street, pointing as they dragged limp and screaming people between them. Ice like fear crept up my arms, jagged ice that felt too-much like the glass that had once stuck to my arms –

*Stop, I told myself as people stared at me, as I clutched a hand to my chest as I coughed
Ash. Smoke. Glass.*

“Papers please.” I didn’t notice as the soldier crept up behind me, I turned. His eyes dark brown were suddenly hued with red, like the flickering of fire.

I handed him the papers from the confines of my coat.

Wordlessly he scanned through them, staring at my birthdate, my name, my residence.

“All is in order” I tried not to let my relief show as he handed me my papers back

“Wait” I froze as a harsh voice broke through the tension of the grocers, I turned to see a soldier, a leader of some sort, marching towards me, hands braced behind his back, “That was far too fast for a paper check”

The leader snatched my papers from my hand, fixing glasses to his face as his subordinate stood at attention beside him, the perfect picture of obedience.

“It says here you are Catholic.”

Yes. No

“I –” I choked before he cut me off.

“It is Sunday morning, why are you not at church?”

“I only moved here recently. My mother is still choosing a church,” the lies tasted like ash on my tongue.

“There are only two Catholic churches, it must not be hard to choose which one you go to.”

“Mother doesn’t want to make a bad choice.”

“A bad choice...” he chuckled.

“I think you are lying to me Jew,” his eyes narrowed at me.

“She’s not lying sir, we are proud Catholics,” said my mother, I glanced at her once, her eyes were wild, like a deer caught in the sights of a ruthless hunter.

“You are her mother, yes?” said the man turning to her. I hate what it did to her, how she shrunk away from him, her eyes darting to her arms as if she could imagine the glass that had cut her.

He snatched her papers from her hands, and compared them to mine.

Two heartbeats.

That’s all it took.

I was a chicken with a fox in his den, utterly trapped in the corner, nowhere to run.

“Your last names are spelt different.”

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Two heartbeats was the difference between life and, this... half-life.

One. Two.

And I am being marched towards the showers, my hands cover up what little of my modesty still remains.

I try not to grimace each time my hands bump into my too-pronounced rib cage, or too thin stomach.

I like to think about what could have been. To pass the time. If my mother and I hadn’t walked into that grocer on that day, then maybe I wouldn’t be here.

Not that I knew where here is.

They didn’t like us knowing our bearings, just in case we would try to escape. Not that we could make it far, with the barb wire fence, the soldiers with guns and the cold winter without proper supplies, we would be lucky to last a minute.

I looked up at the rusted shower head. Preparing for that onslaught of icy cold water. Instead it never comes.

And then...

I smell the gas.

Notes & acknowledgments:

Herschel Grynszpan, a Jewish teen living in Paris, walked into the German embassy and killed diplomat Ernst Vom Rath on November 7 1938. This is seen as a pivotal moment as the shooting was used as motivation for Kristallnacht.

The Nazi Newspaper, featuring a caricature of Herschel Grynszpan was published in December 1938 (not November nine as said in the historic novel). And the headline read *"Is the Jewish question solved: Retributive measures against the Jews/The world historical task of Germany/The struggle continues"*

Kristallnacht (Night of broken glass) occurred on November 9 and 10, 1938. The violence ordered upon the Jewish by Nazi propoganda leader, Joseph Goebbels, was disguised as "public outrage" after the assassination of Ernst von Rath.

The rioters destroyed 267 synagogues throughout the Reich, Austria and Sudetenland. SA and Hitler youth members participated in the destruction of Jewish properties and businesses. The largest killing centre was Auschwitz-Birkenau, which by spring 1943 had four gas chambers functioning. Almost all prisoners sent to the killing centres were killed immediately, some were chosen for special work teams. At the height of the deportations, up to six thousand Jewish were gassed each day at Auschwitz-Birkenau.

Part of the Kristallnacht section of this historic narrative were based on the accounts of a Jewish girl by the name of Susan, from Nuremberg

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