

Death Parade

The sound of marching startles me out of a fitful sleep. I shiver under the paper thin blankets, the cold air entering through the door, and seeping into every crack in my weak bones. A dull, lingering ache settles over me, and I feel vicious pangs of hunger clawing at my stomach. My hands shake and my fingers tremble as I wipe the remains of last night's tears. Nightmares are a frequency nowadays. It is commonplace to be awoken from a restless sleep by shrill screams coming from the girl in the bunk next to you, often several times a night. Dark circles, blacker than the soot from the crematorium, are painted around the eyes of each individual I can see. God forbid the lack of sleep interferes with our work – although some argue a quick death from a bullet is preferable to a slow one from typhus. The disease has taken its toll on the camp, the 'ovens' are working overtime, and all around me are ghostly, frail, emaciated shells of human beings.

The marching grows louder. Undoubtedly another sadistic parade to the 'showers'. The inhumane nature of those chambers never ceases to amaze me. The cold satisfaction of gazing upon icy, still bodies, twisted in pain, is something I will never understand. The chambers haunt my nightmares, and my waking days. The desperate cries and pounding on metal which frequent those large buildings echo in my head whenever I close my eyes.

Death has swept over our camp. Empty beds and even heavier workloads a constant reminder of all that's been lost. There are new arrivals every day, but never enough to truly compensate for the rapidly increasing fatalities. Each morning is greeted by a wail (or several) and the echoing of a gunshot, usually accompanied by a twitching body, lingering on the treacherous verge between life and whatever comes next. Not Heaven, surely. Heaven is for the good, the humane, and I struggle to believe that there is a single human being on this Earth who possesses even one of those qualities.

Jane would often scold me for talking like that. She was adamant that there would always be hope. I told her: 'I will make it out of here, but I will emerge a withered shell of the girl I was, with a burning resentment for humanity.' She would smile fondly, and then begin to speak, her voice brimming with hope and raw passion, everyone in the barrack crowding around to hear her words. Her 'hope' got her nowhere. She died from a combination of typhus, hunger, and exhaustion during the height of the illness. A common death, her charred body discarded into a mass grave alongside hundreds of other faceless, nameless 'people'.

I will never forget the glazed look in her eyes, the icy feel of her drained skin, the sharp jutting of her cheekbones and ribs, the burning heat which left her head that night. The unbearable stillness as I tried to wake her that morning. The irregular squeak of the wheel on the cart which took her away.

A sudden crash snaps me out of my reminiscing. Around me, weary girls struggle to awaken, the lure of sleep pulling them in, only marred by the knowledge of the inevitable bullet wound they know they will receive if they fail to awaken. I sit bolt upright, electrified, every muscle in my body tense, bracing myself for whatever is about to come through the door.

The door bursts open, the sudden light blinding. The first thing I make out is the uniformed sleeve of a gestapo. I freeze, too shocked to move, as he yells at us to get outside. My limited knowledge of the German language, and the knowledge of what will happen if I disobey, propels me forward just in time. The Polish girl in the bed opposite me, unable to understand what she is being asked to do, doesn't make it out in time. I am deaf to the sound of gunfire, immune to her shattered scream as she falls to the floor. I feel no grief, I don't turn to look at her twitching body. This pales in comparison to other tortures we witness here. I have no time to mourn, anyway. The marching starts up again. I am marching too. One foot after the other, one step at a time, towards my demise. No. No, I will make it out.

This has to be one of the biggest marches yet. The camp is filled with a line of people, the majority struggling to stand, clutching each other for support. I glance at the world around me. The scarce patches of grass have never looked greener, the usual grey sky replaced by a piercing blue. I hear nothing but the pounding of my heart, and a silent – yet deafening – roaring. The air is fresh and bittersweet. The showers come into view. I freeze, but the current of the crowd carries me forward. The world spins around me as they strip us of our clothes. My vision becomes blurred, and a tide of nausea rises within me. I retch, but the malnourishment makes it impossible for anything further to happen. I stumble for a second, and am abruptly struck on the head with the butt of a gun. The pain is sickening, blinding, but I must keep walking. My legs shake, as though they will give way at any moment. The doors to the showers open, and my breath ceases. I gasp as I catch a glimpse of ominous, formidable canisters. They begin herding us into the building. Some put up a struggle, but in their weakened state are easily overpowered by the gestapo.

The queue is getting dangerously short. My eyes scan the surroundings, desperately looking for a window of opportunity – anything. The throbbing in my head dulls my vision, making it impossible to see anything other than blurred figures. Suddenly, there is a hand on my shoulder. I am thrust into the chamber. I try to escape through the door, but there are hundreds of people with the same idea, none of which are successful. The door is slammed with a resounding 'bang', and all 'hope' is lost. People around me scabble at the walls, the door, pounding on anything they can find, desperate for someone to save them. Too late. It's too late. I sink to my knees, heaving, breath coming in short, sharp bursts. An acidic tang fills my mouth, and my insides burn. Tears stream down my face as I gag. Around me people are dropping like flies. I begin to hyperventilate, dread and terror brewing inside of me, and cascading over. Dear Lord, please make it quick...