

Borrowed Stories
by Fern Topas Salka

1.

It was the story of their lives
but it guided my life.
I wasn't even born
But I remember.

2.

I know the sting of the cold air
As my mother and her brother walk,
One behind the other
each careful not to touch, speak or acknowledge the other,
On the treacherous streets that are Warsaw in 1942.

3.

It could be 1943 or even 1940.
I know their stories but not the dates.
I feel their pain
I see the scenes.
But the stories come out in pieces
And there are no photos
so their journey through hell is a cracked tableau in my mind.

4.

Warsaw is a city I have never visited
The home of my parents
And their parents
And all the other dead relatives who could have peopled my life
but didn't.
Like my mother's brother,
who never lived to be my uncle,
They are strangers to me
But their stories are mine to imagine.

5.

In my mind, I hear them speaking Polish,
the language of my parents,
A language which, though they never spoke it directly to me,
is familiar to my heart.
While I cannot translate the words
I hear the fear and panic behind the Slavic tones.

6.

For as long as I can remember
I have been given a Reader's Digest of stories,
the Cliff Notes of How My Parents Survived the Holocaust.
There are many terrible stories,
But this one is the worst one.
I think of it simply as Keep on Walking.

--

I take it as our family motto,
and my personal mantra.
I understand that these words are my parents' instructions to me,
my obligation to them.

7.

This story begins as my blond mother trails her blond brother
On the sidewalks where Jews may not walk.
Hiding in plain sight
Walking as if they had lived there all their lives (which they had).
Coat sleeves unsullied by yellow armbands
Which would mark them as Jews (which they were).
They bravely make their way through the urban minefield
As if it is a stroll on the Champs Elysee
Except for the dead bodies of fallen Jews lying in the street.

8.

A brown-suited, brown booted young man
With a blazing red iron cross on his cap appears,
Pulls my uncle aside,
Pulls him off the sidewalk
Into the gutter,
Reserved for Jews and rats.
Pulls him out of the path of the ordinary,
Out of life going forward,
Towards the dungeons of the trapped,
The doomed.

9.

My mother knows her brother's life is over
Sees his sweet face disappear
Remembers how they played and talked
And shared all of their lives
Feels herself crumble, scream, reach out, shrink and die herself.
But she does not even blink.
She does not stop.
She keeps on walking.

10.

Two days before my uncle was captured
My father, my mother, and her brother and his family huddled in the little apartment
In which they all now lived together
Like the gutter rats into which they had been transformed.
As they plotted and planned how they could survive
My father bluntly told them
to pull out their wallets and empty them onto the table.
Puzzled, they removed crumpled bills from shabby leather billfolds.
My uncle made an extra contribution to the paltry offerings.
Tenderly producing a fading photo of his family in happier times
With my mother, standing among them.
But my father snatched the photo and ripped it up.

--

This, the last photo that will ever exist of my grandparents, my aunt, and my cousin, was torn to shreds

And I will never know their faces.

My uncle protested.
He missed the point—
Until two days later
When he himself was snatched from the streets.
His captors frisked him,
Pulled his wallet from his inside pocket,
And found only money.
No traces of his Jewish family,
No path leading them to my mother
Who just kept on walking.

11.

Four decades later,
When I am 33 years old,
my own husband dies suddenly.
I sit in front of his casket
with our five year old boy on my lap.
As the funeral prayers are chanted,
I remember that my mother kept on walking,
I pull my child close to me,
and I whisper in his ear:
“This is not going to get us.
Do you hear me?
We are going to be fine.”

12.

I am always fine.
How can I complain that life is hard
when my mother kept on walking,
when my father moved from the tiny apartment
to a hole in a wall?
Not a metaphor
But a real hole in the wall
of the attic apartment where my mother pretends to be living alone.

13.

My father and the few relatives who survive the war tell me
my mother was the hero of many stories

Working in a factory
Making German uniforms
Ignoring the irony,
Ignoring the fear.

Laughing in the face of the boy who shouts out in the street that she is a Jew

Shrugging and calmly saying "What do I care about that?"
When a neighbor warns her there will be a roundup of Jews that night.

14.

Did you know, one of my few surviving relatives tells me,
that your mother saved my life?
That she gave me her food because I was a hungry little girl?
That she sheltered and kept us calm when the bombs fell?
That she saved your father from certain death?

15.

"Yes," my father tells me, with gratitude and pride
"She was brave and she was clever.
"At the end of one work day, " he says
"a German officer noticed her pretty grey-green eyes,
her straight blond hair,
her full bosom,
and followed her home,
waiting to be invited in.
She fumbled noisily as she opened the padlock on the door to the apartment
Where I dashed under the bed
Just in time.
When the German officer followed her in
She coolly plied him with vodka
and he sat down on the bed.
And after a few drinks, he left without further ado"
or so my father tells the story.

16.

My mother is steely.
She is brave.
She is the hero of my life.
And I always wonder if I, too, could be brave.
I suspect not.

17.

I suspect, too, that I will never be as clever as she
As resilient.
As alert to danger.
But I always try to be aware
To think about what I would do if I had to hide.
I think about where I could hide from Nazis
And even as I lie in my cozy bed
Over a half century
and a continent away
I think about how to stay safe when the coup comes.

18.

Stories about my father haunt me even more painfully.
My mother was hiding in plain sight.
But he, dark, Semitic, and circumcised,
Was always terrified.

19.

After the near miss of the German officer,
they knew they must be even more careful
Each day, when my mother went out,
My father went into the wall and sat still,
So there would be no footsteps
No noises that would alert the neighbors below
That my mother was not whom she seemed.

20.

Each day, my mother went out
And padlocked the door from the outside.
"If she hadn't come back and opened the door,"
my father told me,
"I would have died, trapped in a locked apartment."
Although one day she did not come home,
Taken to Germany as a Slavic Christian slave laborer,
I know that somehow she let him out before she went away
But I am fixated on the idea of his being trapped
Like being buried alive
And I cannot ride in an elevator alone.

21.

I have heard these stories many times
But I cannot imagine the hole in the wall
Until I see what must be my 300th Holocaust movie
in which, finally, they show someone who lived in a hole in the wall.

22.

Neither can I imagine the sewer into which my father fled after he left the wall,
Cannot imagine what it means to live in a sewer
With 32 people for 12 months.
I know a lot.
But I do not know what it really means
To live below the streets of Warsaw
Emerging only at night to scour
In search of a potato or an onion
Until I see yet another movie I have vowed not to see.
Like a moth to a flame, I watch Jews hiding in a sewer.
As I stifle a scream
Resist the urge to flee the theater

--

23.

I am obsessed with watching movies
reading books
hearing stories
That tear my heart apart.
I need to fill in the missing pieces.
I need a picture book of my parents' journey.
But there are no pictures and
filling out the stories will be my life's project.
I am haunted by what I can imagine.
I am haunted by what I cannot imagine.

24.

These were the stories of my childhood,
my Grimm's fairy tales
Grim, indeed.
Babies smashed against walls.
Young children snatched from their parents.
My mother raped.
My father hungry and sick nearly to death.
And always terrified.

My chest hurts when I think about the terror.
I wail like a wolf howling at the moon
But the sound is only in my head.

25.

And so, when my mother tells me
"Please drop by when my friends come over
So I can show you off,"
I do.
And I wear the blue dress she tells me to wear
So I will make her proud.

26.

I owe my parents the sunshine I bring to them.
I owe them my life.
So I spend my lifetime working to please them
And although they are not perfect,
Sometimes angry, sometimes paranoid.
They are easy for me to please.

27.

But there is a cost to me.
I practice the piano every day
Instead of watching the Mickey Mouse Club
I learn to sing, skate,
Read prayers in Hebrew, debate,
Even twirl a baton.
I write articles, get A's, get a job

--

I do not fight them when they say I cannot go away to college.
I collect degrees for their walls while my friends travel the world
I talk to my mother every day of her life.

28.

By their history, their words and their actions
they teach me
to be visible in the world
Out there.
Out loud.
Fierce.
Powerful.

29.

I become the girl in the second grade who raises her hand,
Saying "ooh, ooh, ooh,"
begging to give the answer.

I am the girl who tells her fifth grade teacher,
a bigoted, nasty old lady
who has chastised me for missing school on a Jewish holiday
"I can stay home.
It's in the Constitution."

I am the loudest singer in the seventh grade choir,
my Ethel Merman voice rising over the
united sound of the other singers.

I am the weekly columnist in the high school newspaper
Who writes her opinion about anything that strikes her fancy.

I am the debater, the journalist, and finally, the lawyer.
I speak up for what I want,
and, finally, as a lawyer, I speak up for others.

30.

After a lifetime of courtrooms
Trials
Battles
Legal wars
I become tired.
I learn that letting go is good for the soul
I leave my litigation practice
For the more gentle world of mediation.

I learn to help others make peace.
I learn new tools
Adjust my goals from winning to healing.
Get joy from serving peace..

--

31.

But the path of destruction left by the Nazis is far, deep and wide.
I help others to let go
But I cannot let go of what they did to my parents
When I think about it-
And I think about it a lot-
I am enraged.
Sometimes anger seeps out of me at the most minor of slights,
Unexpected, unwanted.

32.

I return again and again to therapy.
I turn to yoga.
I meditate.
I ruminate.
Pause, Breathe, Think becomes my new mantra
But Keep on Walking feels more natural
Even so, I persevere.
Maybe, by the time I die, I will have calmed down.
I doubt it.

33.

In the meantime,
I write Holocaust poems.