

The Ride

I've taken many train rides in my life. Train rides to Bunică's house in the country on the lake or train rides to visit Mama's old friends outside of Vienna. Those trains had red velvet seats that smelled of new cloth and heavy perfume. The arm rests were a glossy, polished wood. They had big windows that allowed your eyes to view the beautiful green plains of Hungary as you passed by.

This train isn't like that.

We stand on this train in little huddles, Mama, Emalia, and I together, similar to other families on the train. This train is made of old wood and there are no big windows. This train smells like rotting wood and grief. There are perhaps seven small cracks through which you can peek to see the plains outside. And if you really try, you can smell the turned soil from outside along with the scent of decaying wood. The people on this train aren't smiling and the air is heavy, heavy with fear and sadness. No, this train is very different.

I want to ask where we are going, but Mama told us she doesn't want questions right now. 3 days ago, we woke up and just got on the train with nothing. But that's okay. I like to think we are going home. Back to the old life that we lived happily three years ago. Three years ago those men hadn't killed Papa, hadn't taken everything, hadn't destroyed life. No, life was simple then. The days when we were allowed to be Roma, and not have to suffer and question everything but nothing. The days when we lived in our beautiful brick apartment building in Budapest. When we lived on the third floor, apartment 11, and every day Papa would always tell us we had the best view of the city from our windows. When Emalia and I shared a room, painted a fair pink, with two matching beds and faded blue sheets. We both had trunks at the foot of our beds, full of colorful skirts, beautiful blouses, Bunică's old scarfs and the most valuable possessions. When our kitchen always smelled of black coffee and desserts made with sugary ingredients discovered in the cupboards. I remember walking to school, past the corner bakery that handed out free kifles to children on Sundays and past the shoe store owned by Mr. and Mrs. Katz. Yes, home would be nice to go to. Home.

That's when my life felt full. Now with every passing month of uncertainty, the color has been drained from the world. Family gave us greens, love gave us reds, freedom gave us blues and happiness gave us a rainbow. Now there is no happiness, no freedom. Every color of the spectrum was taken from us; now the "bad men" are painting over and over again with black. A black that absorbs all love, all happiness.

Emalia leans her shoulder on me and with a sigh asks, "Where are we going?"

I don't take my gaze off the hole in the warped wood. "Back home, I think. Mama hasn't said."

She tilts her head up, her green eyes staring wide at me. Her face has gotten slenderer these past few years, giving her a more mature look. "I hope we're going home." After a few seconds pass she speaks again. "This is a long train ride, Keja."

"Yes, I know."

"How long has it been?" Emalia asks curiously.

"Almost four days loves," Mama interrupts as she moves next to us.

"I didn't think our house in the ghetto was that far from home," I muttered.

I think Mama has heard me, because she looks at me, her eyes heavy with heartache. She walks over and lovingly wraps her arms around Emalia and me.

"You two are my everything. *Me mangav tut."

The train came to a slow stop, the wheels creaking underneath. I held Mama's hand tight, so tight that I could hold onto her forever. Two men, dressed just like the ones who took us away, opened the heavy wood doors from the outside. Light poured into the car, though dim from the clouds covering the sky. The men shouted angry words at everyone, words I didn't understand. Still grasping Mama's hand in front of me, we exited the train, single file onto a small platform. Shouting accompanied with crying and screaming filled the damp heavy air as we exited the cars. Big guns, the size of a small child, carried by brute evil men. I can tell that these men like order. Any time a man, woman or child steps out of the line, the men would shout and push at them with their big guns. I jump down from the platform to feel my matte black shoes sink into the mud path. Hours go by it feels, hours of standing and waiting. Waiting for something.

I poke my head out of the line to see up ahead the line being split into two. Above them hangs a metal sign. The sprawling metal forms a strange pattern of letters. The words that are hung over bad places. That's what Mama once said to us. Words that were false. The words...

"Work sets you free."

"No." I whisper. "Not here." I turn around. The line of people, statues even, stretch for what seems like miles and the loading station is out of view.

My feet know what I'm doing before my head. I jump out of line, turn around and walk. "No." I say. "Not here, just not here" Now I'm running. Faster and faster. Towards the cattle cars, towards the sign, towards the platform where I first realized my circumstances. Just away. With each stride, "No" fits in rhythmically. I'm sprinting now. Hot tears roll down my face. "NO!" I scream. People around me stare with wide eyes and open mouths. I almost reach the platform

* Romani for "I love you"

when I was tackled to the ground. Two Nazis fall on top of me as I squirm and kick and scream. I can't breathe anymore. My cold gasps stab my lungs like a dagger. "NOOOOO, STOP NO!" My arms are held behind me and, try as I might, I can't break free from the officer's grip. Unable to move I sink to the ground, on my knees, hot tears sting my red cheeks along with the wind whipping past. "No." I whisper as I'm being pulled back. Back to Auschwitz, back towards my death, back into the black. "No."