

## First Place, Prose, Grades 7-9

### הסלקציה "The Selection," Noa Ní Aoláin Gross

The day they took me was like any regular day, any normal day. Again I sat in the cupboard. I've already forgotten how many days I'd been there, biting my knuckles to distract myself from my ever-empty stomach. Curled into the fetal position, using my free hand I drew a picture with the dirt on the ground, a picture of mother with the yellow sun behind her. I drew a cake and presents, and I allowed myself to imagine for just a moment that she was standing outside the doors, just waiting for me to come out. If only I had the strength to move, maybe I could have saved myself from the inevitable pain that would soon come.

As I waited in silence for her to come bursting through the door with my little sister waddling behind her, each moment that passed felt like a vise slowly closing in, stealing my last breaths. As my hope faded, I thought to myself that I've already forgiven her for missing my birthday. Maybe next year when she had returned and Peter had stopped hitting me when I passed him, and we could be friends again. Just maybe we could share our birthdays... Just maybe.

I scolded myself. I would not let myself hope for the impossible. The pain only worsens when there is hope. I thought about the promise mother made me make. "If people come for you, remember, even if they look like Peter or Hans from down the street, you do not know them, do you understand?"

I looked at her wide-eyed. "What if it really is Peter? How will I know the difference?"

Mother looked down at me. Her eyes brimmed with tears. "Most men can tell the difference between monsters and people."

Then I remembered how she gave me one last hug, exited the cupboard and gave the signal to close the door. That was a while ago though. No one had knocked at the door for some time, leaving me alone with my thoughts and ever-rumbling belly.

Suddenly a noise snapped me back into the real world. I opened my eyes, held my breath and listened. I heard German. It was of no use trying to hide; there was nowhere left to hide. As the Germans entered the closet, I wished Mother were here.

She would have known how to stop the soldiers, or at least hold my hand. I would be fine without her, I told myself. I'm grown up now, I'm already nine.

The soldiers yelled at me and kicked me and stomped. When they lifted their feet, all that remained was scattered dust. One soldier even put a gun to my head as if to shoot me, but of course he didn't. We all know how expensive bullets are.

I thought I recognized a soldier as my old neighbor who used to give me a piece of candy whenever I saw him. I reached out, pleading with my eyes. He returned my look with a stone-cold glare full of nothingness. I still naively asked him for help, pushing the words meekly out of my dry, cracked lips. He looked down at me, and for a minute I thought he was going to offer me his hand. I never expected the spit, and all the soldiers laughed as I tried to scrub it off my face, leaving dirt smudges everywhere.

The soldiers forced me out of the locker and into town. As we passed houses with the shutters tightly locked as if to keep a secret, I cried and shouted, but it was as if the entire world was wearing earmuffs.

As I was dragged through town, I saw the grass which had begun to fill with snow. It was as if sugar or my mother's cream had been dusted over the field. The sky was a light blue color starting to grey, and I thought how beautiful it could have been here if only the shattered windows and broken glass which were streaked with yellow and black paint were cleaned up.

I had the odd feeling that I would never return to this place. But before I could think about it, I was thrown onto a train car. The car was crowded. I thought I was going to suffocate. The proximity left little oxygen, and the smell of death invaded my nostrils as I was squeezed between the dead and the dying. I felt like an ant, as if the tiniest of things could crush me. I wished Mother were here. She could have helped the woman who suffered a heart attack, the child struggling to catch a breath in his father's arms. I sat on the side holding my head high as Mother had taught me to, and with my fingernails I drew a picture on the wall. I drew my old house and our happy family. The sun was so yellow like a piece of cheese, and on

the grass I played a game. In the picture my little sister was still alive and playing with her toys. In the picture I could protect her from harm. I could ensure she never starved, that she was never taken.

On the train ride hours passed, but I don't remember if I was awake or asleep. Either way, the nightmare was the same. Frightening shadows in crisp uniforms with their guns at the ready lurked at every corner, and the walls of the sentenced were inescapable. Eventually the train came to a dejected halt, as if it were a bystander watching as thousands met their predetermined fate. The masses of people exited the train in a zombie-like state, trying to distance themselves from the dead. As I exited the train, soldiers entered, carelessly dragging the dead, the lifeless out of the car. When a soldier laughed, I felt a familiar despondency as I wondered what lay ahead for me. I wondered if Mother had told soldiers to respect those who have passed when she arrived.

As I stepped into the camp, I felt like a bird without wings, trapped and with no escape. As I walked past the gate, past the sneers of the guards, I saw a finger moving back and forth like one of my games. Side to side. It did not stop even when people cried, even when people died. Side to side. Side to side. People forcibly separated from their loved ones into lines. I wondered where those lines led. In which line would I end up? Side to side. When I reached the front of the line, I saw the eyes like something unworldly, with no compassion. They stared through me, and for a moment I thought I was already dead. The second that I awaited my sentence felt like an eternity.

As I was dragged to my fate, I looked to the sky. Drifting away from the camp, the music and smoke intermingled in a never-ending embrace.

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