

EXCERPT FROM “NIGHT” BY ELIE WIESEL

The SS gave us a fine New Year’s gift.

We had just come back from work. As soon as we had passed through the door of the camp, we sensed something different in the air. Roll call did not take so long as usual. The evening soup was given out with great speed and swallowed down at once in anguish. I was no longer in the same block as my father. I had been transferred to another unit, the building one, where, twelve hours a day, I had to drag heavy blocks of stone about. The head of my new block was a German Jew, small of stature, with piercing eyes. He told us that evening that no one would be allowed to go out after the evening soup. And soon a terrible word was circulating—selection.

We knew what that meant. An SS man would examine us. Whenever he found a weak one, a *muselman* as we called them, he would write his number down: good for the crematory.

After soup, we gathered together between the beds. The veterans said:

“You’re lucky to have been brought here so late. This camp is paradise today, compared with what it was like two years ago. Buna was a real hell then. There was no water, no blankets, less soup and bread. At night we slept almost naked and it was below thirty degrees. The corpses were collected in hundreds everyday. The work was hard. Today, this is a little paradise. The Kapos had orders to kill a certain number of prisoners every day. And every week— selection. A merciless selection.... Yes, you’re lucky.”

“Stop it! Be quiet!” I begged. “You can tell your stories tomorrow or on some other day.”

They burst out laughing. They were not veterans for nothing. “Are you scared? So were we scared. And there was plenty to be scared of in those days.”

The old men stayed in their corner, dumb, motionless, haunted. Some were praying.

An hour’s delay. In an hour, we should know the verdict—death or a reprieve. And my father? Suddenly I remembered him. How would he pass the selection? He had aged so much....

The head of our block had never been outside concentration camps since 1933. He had already been through all the slaughterhouses, all the factories of death. At about nine o’clock, he took up his position in our midst:

“Achtung!”

There was instant silence

“Listen carefully to what I am going to say.” (For the first time, I heard his voice quiver.) “In a few moments the selection will begin. You must get completely undressed. Then one by one you will go before the SS doctors. I hope you will succeed in getting through. But you must help your own chances. Before you go into the next room, move about in some way so that you give yourselves a little color. Don’t walk slowly, run! Run as the devil were after you! Don’t look at the SS. Run, straight in front of you!”

He broke off for a moment, then added:

“And, the essential thing, don’t be afraid!”

Here was a piece of advice we should have liked very much to be able to follow.

I got undressed, leaving my clothes on the bed. There was no danger of anyone stealing them this evening. Tibi and Yossi, who had changed their unit at the same time as I had, came up to me and said:

“Let’s keep together. We shall be stronger.”

Yossi was murmuring something between his teeth. He must have been praying. I had never realized that Yossi was a believer. I had even always thought the reverse. Tibi was silent, very pale. All the prisoners in the block stood naked between the beds. This must be how one stands at the last judgment.

“They’re coming!”

There were three SS officers standing around the notorious Dr. Mengele, who had received us at Birkenau. The head of the block, with an attempt at a smile, asked us:

“Ready?”

Yes, we were ready. So were the SS doctors. Dr. Mengele was holding a list in his hand: our numbers. He made a sign to the head of the block: “We can begin!” As if this were a game!

The first to go by were the “officials” of the block: *Stubenaelteste*, Kapos, foremen, all in perfect physical condition of course! Then came the ordinary prisoners’ turn. Dr. Mengele took stock of them from head to foot. Every now and then, he wrote a number down. One single thought filled my mind: not to let my number be taken; not to show my left arm.

There were only Tibi and Yossi in front of me. They passed. I had time to notice that Mengele had not written their numbers down. Someone pushed me. It was my turn. I ran without looking back. My head was spinning: you’re too thin, you’re too weak, you’re too thin, you’re good for the furnace.... The race seemed interminable. I thought I had been running for years.... You’re too thin, you’re too weak.... At last I had arrived exhausted. When I regained my breath, I questioned Yossi and Tibi:

“Was I written down?”

“No,” said Yossi. He added, smiling: “In any case, he couldn’t have written you down, you were running too fast....”

I began to laugh. I was glad. I would have liked to kiss him. At that moment, what did the other matter! I hadn’t been written down.

Those whose numbers had been noted stood apart, abandoned by the whole world. Some were weeping in silence.

The SS officers went away. The head of the block appeared, his face reflecting the general weariness.

“Everything went off all right. Don’t worry. Nothing is going to happen to anyone. To anyone.”

Again he tried to smile. A poor, emaciated, dried-up Jew questioned him avidly in a trembling voice:

“But... but, *Blockaelteste*, they did write me down!”

The head of the block let his anger break out. What! Did someone refuse to believe him!

“What’s the matter now? Am I telling lies then? I tell you once and for all, nothing’s going to happen to you! To anyone! You’re wallowing in your own despair, you fool!”

The bell rang, a signal that the selection had been completed throughout the camp.

With all my might I began to run to Block 36. I met my father on the way. He came up to me:

“Well?” So you passed?”

“Yes. And you?”

“Me too.”

How we breathed again, now! My father had brought me a present - half a ration of bread obtained in exchange for a piece of rubber, found at the warehouse, which would do to sole a shoe.

The bell. Already we must separate, go to bed. Everything was regulated by the bell. It gave me orders, and I automatically obeyed them. I hated it. Whenever I dreamed of a better world, I could only imagine a universe with no bells.

Several days had elapsed. We no longer thought about the selection. We went to work as usual, loading heavy stones into railway wagons. Rations had become more meager: this was the only change.

We had risen before dawn, as on every day. We had received the black coffee, the ration of bread. We were about to set out for the yard as usual. The head of the block arrived, running.

“Silence for a moment. I have a list of numbers here. I’m going to read them to you. Those whose numbers I call won’t be going to work this morning; they’ll stay behind in the camp.”

And, in a soft voice, he read out about ten numbers. We had understood. These were numbers chosen at the selection. Dr. Megele had not forgotten.

The head of the block went toward his room. Ten prisoners surrounded him, hanging onto his clothes:

“Save us! You promised...! We wandered to the yard. We’re strong enough to work as good workers. We can...we will....”

He tried to calm them to reassure them about their fate, to explain to them that the fact that they were staying behind in the camp did not mean much, had no tragic significance.

“After all, I stay here myself every day” he added.

It was a somewhat feeble argument. He realized it, and without another word went and shut himself up in his room.

The bell had just rung.

“Form up!”

It scarcely mattered now that the work was hard. The essential thing was to be as far as possible from the block, from the crucial death, from the center of hell.

I saw my father running toward me. I looked frightened all of a sudden.

“What’s the matter?”

Out of breath, he could hardly open his mouth.

“Me, too...me, too...! They told me to stay behind in the camp.”

They had written down his number without his being aware of it.

“What will happen?” I asked in anguish.

But it was he who tried to reassure me.

“It isn’t certain yet. There’s still a chance of escape. They’re going to do another selection today...a decisive selection.”

I was silent.

He felt that his time was short. He spoke quickly. He would have liked to say so many things. His speech grew confused; his voice choked. He knew that I would have to go in a few moments. He would have to stay behind alone, so very alone.

“Look, take this knife,” he said to me. “I don’t need it any longer. It might be useful to you. And take this spoon as well. Don’t sell them. Quickly! Go on. Take what I’m giving you!”

The inheritance.

“Don’t talk like that, Father.” (I felt that I would break into sobs.) “I don’t want you to say that. Keep the spoon and knife. You need them as much as I do. We shall see each other again this evening, after work.”

He looked at me with his tired eyes, veiled with despair. He went on: “I’m asking this of you.... Take them. Do as I ask, my son. We have no time.... Do as your father asks.”

Our Kapo yelled that we should start.

The unit set out toward the camp gate. Left, right! I bit my lips. My father had stayed by the block, leaning against the wall. Then he began to run, to catch up with us. Perhaps he had forgotten something he wanted to say to me.... But we were marching too quickly... left, right!

We were already at the gate. They counted us, to the din of military music. We were outside.

The whole day, I wandered about as if sleepwalking. Now and then Tibi and Yossi would throw me a brotherly word. The Kapo, too, tried to reassure me. He had given me easier work today. I felt sick at heart. How well they were treating me! Like an orphan! I thought: even now, my father is still helping me.

I did not know myself what I wanted—for the day to pass quickly or not. I was afraid of finding myself alone that night. How good it would be to die here!

At last we began the return journey. How I longed for orders to run!

The military march. The gate. The camp.

I ran to Block 36.

Were there still miracles on this earth? He was alive. He had escaped the second selection. He had been able to prove that he was still useful.... I gave him back his knife and spoon.

Wiesel, E. (2006). *Night*. Hill & Wang.