

*“The Choice is a gift to humanity.*

*One of those rare and eternal stories that  
you don’t want to end and that leave you  
forever changed.”*

—DESMOND TUTU, Nobel Peace Prize Laureate

# THE CHOICE

*Embrace the Possible*

A Memoir by

**Dr. Edith Eva Eger**

Foreword by Philip Zimbardo, PhD



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# THE CHOICE



Embrace the Possible

DR. EDITH EVA EGER

with Esmé Schwall Weigand

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# Contents

Foreword by Philip Zimbardo, PhD

## PART I: PRISON

Introduction: I Had My Secret, and My Secret Had Me

- 1: The Four Questions
- 2: What You Put in Your Mind
- 3: Dancing in Hell
- 4: A Cartwheel
- 5: The Stairs of Death
- 6: To Choose a Blade of Grass

## PART II: ESCAPE

- 7: My Liberator, My Assailant
- 8: In Through a Window
- 9: Next Year in Jerusalem
- 10: Flight

## PART III: FREEDOM

- 11: Immigration Day
- 12: Greener
- 13: You Were There?
- 14: From One Survivor to Another
- 15: What Life Expected
- 16: The Choice
- 17: Then Hitler Won
- 18: Goebbels's Bed

19: Leave a Stone

**PART IV: HEALING**

20: The Dance of Freedom

21: The Girl Without Hands

22: Somehow the Waters Part

23: Liberation Day

Acknowledgments

About the Author

Index

*For the five generations of my family  
my father, Lajos, who taught me to laugh;  
my mother, Ilona, who helped me find what I needed inside;  
my gorgeous and unbelievable sisters, Magda and Klara;  
my children: Marianne, Audrey, and John;  
and their children: Lindsey, Jordan, Rachel, David, and Ashley;  
and their children's children: Silas, Graham, and Hale*

# Foreword

By Philip Zimbardo, PhD

*Psychologist and professor emeritus at Stanford University, Phil Zimbardo is the creator of the famed Stanford prison experiment (1971) and author of many notable books, including the New York Times bestseller and winner of the William James Book Award for best psychology book The Lucifer Effect: Understanding How Good People Turn Evil (2007). He is founder and president of the Heroic Imagination Project.*

One spring, at the invitation of the chief psychiatrist of the U.S. Navy, Dr. Edith Eva Eger boarded a windowless fighter jet bound for one of the world's largest warships, the USS *Nimitz* aircraft carrier, stationed off the California coast. The plane swooped down toward a tiny five-hundred-foot runway and landed with a jolt as its tailhook caught the arresting wire and stopped the plane from careening into the ocean. The only female aboard the ship, Dr. Eger was shown to her room in the captain's cabin. What was her mission? She was there to teach five thousand young Navy men how to deal with the adversity, trauma, and chaos of war.

On countless occasions, Dr. Eger has been the clinical expert brought in to treat soldiers, including Special Operations Forces, suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder and traumatic brain injuries. How is this gentle grandmother able to help so many military personnel heal from the inner brutality of war?

Before I met Dr. Eger in person I called to invite her to give a guest lecture to my Psychology of Mind Control class at Stanford. Her age and her accent made me picture an old-world babushka with a headscarf tied under her chin. When she addressed my students, I saw for myself her healing power. Luminous with her radiant smile, shining earrings, and blazing golden hair, dressed head to toe in what my wife later told me was Chanel, she wove her horrific and harrowing

stories of surviving the Nazi death camps with humor, with an upbeat and feisty attitude, and with a presence and warmth I can only describe as pure light.

Dr. Eger's life has been full of darkness. She was imprisoned at Auschwitz when she was just a teenager. Despite torture, starvation, and the constant threat of annihilation, she preserved her mental and spiritual freedom. She was not broken by the horrors she experienced; she was emboldened and strengthened by them. In fact, her wisdom comes from deep within the most devastating episodes of her life.

She is able to help others heal because she has journeyed from trauma to triumph herself. She has discovered how to use her experience of human cruelty to empower so many—from military personnel like those aboard the USS *Nimitz* to couples struggling to rekindle intimacy, from those who were neglected or abused to those who are suffering from addiction or illness, from those who have lost loved ones to those who have lost hope. And for all of us who suffer from the everyday disappointments and challenges of life, her message inspires us to make our own choice to find freedom from suffering—to find our own inner light.

At the close of her lecture, every single one of my three hundred students leapt into a spontaneous standing ovation. Then, at least a hundred young men and women flooded the small stage, each waiting for a turn to thank and embrace this extraordinary woman. In all my decades of teaching I had never seen a group of students so inspired.

In the twenty years that Edie and I have worked and traveled together, this is the response I have come to expect from every audience she addresses around the world. From a Hero Round Table in Flint, Michigan, where we spoke to a group of young people in a city struggling with high poverty, 50 percent unemployment, and increasing racial conflict, to Budapest, Hungary, the city where many of Edie's relatives perished, where she spoke to hundreds of people trying to rebuild from a damaging past, I have seen it happen again and again: people are transformed in Edie's presence.

In this book, Dr. Eger weaves together the stories of her patients' transformations with her own unforgettable story of surviving Auschwitz. While her story of survival is as gripping and dramatic as any that has been told, it is not just her story that has made me passionate about sharing this book with the world. It is the fact that Edie has used her experiences to help so many to discover true freedom. In this way, her book is much more than another Shoah memoir, as important as such stories are for remembering the past. Her goal is nothing less than to help each of us to escape the prisons of our own minds. Each

of us is in some way mentally imprisoned, and it is Edie's mission to help us realize that just as we can act as our own jailors, we can also be our own liberators.

When Edie is introduced to young audiences, she is often called "the Anne Frank who didn't die," because Edie and Anne were of a similar age and upbringing when they were deported to the camps. Both young women capture the innocence and compassion that allow a belief in the basic goodness of human beings, despite the cruelty and persecution they experienced. Of course, at the time Anne Frank was writing her diary, she had yet to experience the extremity of the camps, which makes Edie's insights as a survivor and as a clinician (and great-grandmother!) especially moving and compelling.

Like the most important books about the Holocaust, Dr. Eger's reveals both the darkest side of evil and the indomitable strength of the human spirit in the face of evil. But it does something else too. Perhaps the best comparison for Edie's book is to another Shoah memoir, Viktor Frankl's brilliant classic *Man's Search for Meaning*. Dr. Eger shares Frankl's profundity and deep knowledge of humanity, and adds the warmth and intimacy of a lifelong clinician. Viktor Frankl presented the psychology of the prisoners who were with him in Auschwitz. Dr. Eger offers us the psychology of freedom.

In my own work I have long studied the psychological foundations of negative forms of social influence. I've sought to understand the mechanisms by which we conform and obey and stand by in situations where peace and justice can be served only if we choose another path: if we act heroically. Edie has helped me to discover that heroism is not the province only of those who perform extraordinary deeds or take impulsive risks to protect themselves or others—though Edie has done both of these things. Heroism is rather a mind-set or an accumulation of our personal and social habits. It is a way of being. And it is a special way of viewing ourselves. To be a hero requires taking effective action at crucial junctures in our lives, to make an active attempt to address injustice or create positive change in the world. To be a hero requires great moral courage. And each of us has an inner hero waiting to be expressed. We are all "heroes in training." Our hero training is life, the daily circumstances that invite us to practice the habits of heroism: to commit daily deeds of kindness; to radiate compassion, starting with self-compassion; to bring out the best in others and ourselves; to sustain love, even in our most challenging relationships; to celebrate and exercise the power of our mental freedom. Edie is a hero—and doubly so,

because she teaches each of us to grow and create meaningful and lasting change in ourselves, in our relationships, and in our world.

Two years ago Edie and I traveled together to Budapest, to the city where her sister was living when the Nazis began rounding up Hungarian Jews. We visited a Jewish synagogue, its courtyard a memorial to the Holocaust, its walls a canvas of photographs from before, during, and after the war. We visited the Shoes on the Danube Bank memorial that honors the people, including some of Edie's own family members, who were killed by the Arrow Cross militiamen during World War II, ordered to stand on the riverbank and take off their shoes, and then shot, their bodies falling into the water, carried away by the current. The past felt tangible.

Throughout the day, Edie grew more and more quiet. I wondered if she would find it difficult to speak to an audience of six hundred that night after an emotional journey that was almost certainly stirring up painful memories. But when she took the stage she didn't begin with a story of the fear or trauma or horror that our visit had likely made all too real for her again. She began with a story of kindness, an act of everyday heroism that, she reminded us, happened even in hell. "Isn't it amazing?" she said. "The worst brings out the best in us."

At the end of her speech, which she concluded with her trademark high ballet kick, Edie called out, "Okay, now everybody dance!" The audience rose as one. Hundreds of people ran onto the stage. There was no music. But we danced. We danced and sang and laughed and hugged in an incomparable celebration of life.

Dr. Eger is one of the dwindling number of survivors who can bear firsthand testimony to the horrors of the concentration camps. Her book recounts the hell and trauma that she and other survivors endured during and after the war. And it is a universal message of hope and possibility to all who are trying to free themselves from pain and suffering. Whether imprisoned by bad marriages, destructive families, or jobs they hate, or imprisoned within the barbed wire of self-limiting beliefs that trap them in their own minds, readers will learn from this book that they can choose to embrace joy and freedom regardless of their circumstances.

*The Choice* is an extraordinary chronicle of heroism and healing, resiliency and compassion, survival with dignity, mental toughness, and moral courage. All of us can learn from Dr. Eger's inspiring cases and riveting personal story to heal our own lives.

San Francisco, California  
January 2017

PART I



# PRISON

## INTRODUCTION

# I Had My Secret, and My Secret Had Me

I didn't know about the loaded gun hidden under his shirt, but the instant Captain Jason Fuller walked into my El Paso office on a summer day in 1980, my gut tightened and the back of my neck stung. War had taught me to sense danger even before I could explain why I was afraid.

Jason was tall, with the lean physique of an athlete, but his body was so rigid he appeared more wooden than human. His blue eyes looked distant, his jaw frozen, and he wouldn't—or couldn't—speak. I steered him to the white couch in my office. He sat stiffly, fists pressing into his knees. I had never met Jason and had no idea what had triggered his catatonic state. His body was close enough to touch, and his anguish practically palpable, but he was far away, lost. He did not even seem to notice my silver standard poodle, Tess, standing at attention near my desk, like a second living statue in the room.

I took a deep breath and searched for a way to begin. Sometimes I start a first session by introducing myself and sharing a little of my history and approach. Sometimes I jump right into identifying and investigating the feelings that have brought the patient to my office. With Jason, it felt critical not to overwhelm him with too much information or ask him to be too vulnerable too quickly. He was completely shut down. I had to find a way to give him the safety and permission he needed to risk showing me whatever he guarded so tightly inside. And I had to pay attention to my body's warning system without letting my sense of danger overwhelm my ability to help.

“How can I be useful to you?” I asked.

He didn't answer. He didn't even blink. He reminded me of a character in a myth or folktale who has been turned to stone. What magic spell could free him?

“Why now?” I asked. This was my secret weapon. The question I always ask my patients on a first visit. I need to know why they are motivated to change. Why today, of all days, do they want to start working with me? Why is today

different from yesterday, or last week, or last year? Why is today different from tomorrow? Sometimes our pain pushes us, and sometimes our hope pulls us. Asking “Why now?” isn’t just asking a question—it’s asking everything.

One of his eyes briefly twitched closed. But he said nothing.

“Tell me why you’re here,” I invited again.

Still he said nothing.

My body tensed with a wave of uncertainty and an awareness of the tenuous and crucial crossroads where we sat: two humans face-to-face, both of us vulnerable, both of us taking a risk as we struggled to name an anguish and find its cure. Jason hadn’t arrived with an official referral. It appeared that he had brought himself to my office by choice. But I knew from clinical and personal experience that even when someone chooses to heal, he or she can remain frozen for years.

Given the severity of the symptoms he exhibited, if I didn’t succeed in reaching him my only alternative would be to recommend him to my colleague, the chief psychiatrist at the William Beaumont Army Medical Center, where I’d done my doctoral work. Dr. Harold Kolmer would diagnose Jason’s catatonia, hospitalize him, and probably prescribe an antipsychotic drug like Haldol. I pictured Jason in a hospital gown, his eyes still glazed, his body, now so tense, racked with the muscle spasms that are often a side effect of the drugs prescribed to manage psychosis. I rely absolutely on the expertise of my psychiatrist colleagues, and I am grateful for the medications that save lives. But I don’t like to jump to hospitalization if there’s any chance of success with a therapeutic intervention. I feared that if I recommended Jason to be hospitalized and medicated without first exploring other options, he would trade one kind of numbness for another, frozen limbs for the involuntary movements of dyskinesia—an uncoordinated dance of repeating tics and motions, when the nervous system sends the signal for the body to move without the mind’s permission. His pain, whatever its cause, might be muted by the drugs, but it wouldn’t be resolved. He might feel better, or feel less—which we often mistake for feeling better—but he would not be healed.

*What now?* I wondered as the heavy minutes dragged past, as Jason sat frozen on my couch—there by choice, but still imprisoned. I had only one hour. One opportunity. Could I reach him? Could I help him to dissolve his potential for violence, which I could sense as clearly as the air conditioner’s blast across my skin? Could I help him see that whatever his trouble and whatever his pain, he already held the key to his own freedom? I couldn’t have known then that if I

failed to reach Jason on that very day, a fate far worse than a hospital room awaited him—a life in an actual prison, probably on death row. I only knew then that I had to try.

As I studied Jason, I knew that to reach him I wouldn't use the language of feelings; I would use a language more comfortable and familiar to someone in the military. I would give orders. I sensed that the only hope for unlocking him was to get the blood moving through his body.

"We're going for a walk," I said. I didn't ask. I gave the command. "Captain, we will take Tess to the park—now."

Jason looked panicked for a moment. Here was a woman, a stranger, talking in a thick Hungarian accent, telling him what to do. I could see him looking around, wondering, "How can I get out of here?" But he was a good soldier. He stood up.

"Yes, ma'am," he said. "Yes, ma'am."

\* \* \*

I would discover soon enough the origin of Jason's trauma, and he would discover that despite our obvious differences, there was much we shared. We both knew violence. And we both knew what it was like to become frozen. I also carried a wound within me, a sorrow so deep that for many years I hadn't been able to speak of it at all, to anyone.

My past still haunted me: an anxious, dizzy feeling every time I heard sirens, or heavy footsteps, or shouting men. This, I had learned, is trauma: a nearly constant feeling in my gut that something is wrong, or that something terrible is about to happen, the automatic fear responses in my body telling me to run away, to take cover, to hide myself from the danger that is everywhere. My trauma can still rise up out of mundane encounters. A sudden sight, a particular smell, can transport me back to the past. The day I met Captain Fuller, more than thirty years had passed since I'd been liberated from the concentration camps of the Holocaust. Today, more than seventy years have passed. What happened can never be forgotten and can never be changed. But over time I learned that I can choose how to respond to the past. I can be miserable, or I can be hopeful—I can be depressed, or I can be happy. We always have that choice, that opportunity for control. *I'm here, this is now*, I have learned to tell myself, over and over, until the panicky feeling begins to ease.

Conventional wisdom says that if something bothers you or causes you anxiety, then just don't look at it. Don't dwell on it. Don't go there. So we run

from past traumas and hardships or from current discomfort or conflict. For much of my adulthood I had thought my survival in the present depended on keeping the past and its darkness locked away. In my early immigrant years in Baltimore in the 1950s, I didn't even know how to pronounce Auschwitz in English. Not that I would have wanted to tell you I was there even if I could have. I didn't want anyone's pity. I didn't want anyone to know.

I just wanted to be a Yankee doodle dandy. To speak English without an accent. To hide from the past. In my yearning to belong, in my fear of being swallowed up by the past, I worked very hard to keep my pain hidden. I hadn't yet discovered that my silence and my desire for acceptance, both founded in fear, were ways of running away from myself—that in choosing not to face the past and myself directly, decades after my literal imprisonment had ended, I was still choosing not to be free. I had my secret, and my secret had me.

The catatonic Army captain sitting immobile on my couch reminded me of what I had eventually discovered: that when we force our truths and stories into hiding, secrets can become their own trauma, their own prison. Far from diminishing pain, whatever we deny ourselves the opportunity to accept becomes as inescapable as brick walls and steel bars. When we don't allow ourselves to grieve our losses, wounds, and disappointments, we are doomed to keep reliving them.

Freedom lies in learning to embrace what happened. Freedom means we muster the courage to dismantle the prison, brick by brick.

\* \* \*

Bad things, I am afraid, happen to everyone. This we can't change. If you look at your birth certificate, does it say life will be easy? It does not. But so many of us remain stuck in a trauma or grief, unable to experience our lives fully. This we can change.

At Kennedy International Airport recently, waiting for my flight home to San Diego, I sat and studied the faces of every passing stranger. What I saw deeply moved me. I saw boredom, fury, tension, worry, confusion, discouragement, disappointment, sadness, and, most troubling of all, emptiness. It made me very sad to see so little joy and laughter. Even the dullest moments of our lives are opportunities to experience hope, buoyancy, happiness. Mundane life is life too. As is painful life, and stressful life. Why do we so often struggle to feel alive, or distance ourselves from feeling life fully? Why is it such a challenge to bring life to life?

If you asked me for the most common diagnosis among the people I treat, I wouldn't say depression or post-traumatic stress disorder, although these conditions are all too common among those I've known, loved, and guided to freedom. No, I would say hunger. We are hungry. We are hungry for approval, attention, affection. We are hungry for the freedom to embrace life and to really know and be ourselves.

My own search for freedom and my years of experience as a licensed clinical psychologist have taught me that suffering is universal. But victimhood is optional. There is a difference between victimization and victimhood. We are all likely to be victimized in some way in the course of our lives. At some point we will suffer some kind of affliction or calamity or abuse, caused by circumstances or people or institutions over which we have little or no control. This is life. And this is victimization. It comes from the outside. It's the neighborhood bully, the boss who rages, the spouse who hits, the lover who cheats, the discriminatory law, the accident that lands you in the hospital.

In contrast, victimhood comes from the inside. No one can make you a victim but you. We become victims not because of what happens to us but when we choose to hold on to our victimization. We develop a victim's mind—a way of thinking and being that is rigid, blaming, pessimistic, stuck in the past, unforgiving, punitive, and without healthy limits or boundaries. We become our own jailors when we choose the confines of the victim's mind.

I want to make one thing very clear. When I talk about victims and survivors, I am not blaming victims—so many of whom never had a chance. I could never blame those who were sent right to the gas chambers or who died in their cot, or even those who ran into the electric barbed wire fence. I grieve for all people everywhere who are sentenced to violence and destruction. I live to guide others to a position of empowerment in the face of all of life's hardships.

I also want to say that there is no hierarchy of suffering. There's nothing that makes my pain worse or better than yours, no graph on which we can plot the relative importance of one sorrow versus another. People say to me, "Things in my life are pretty hard right now, but I have no right to complain—it's not *Auschwitz*." This kind of comparison can lead us to minimize or diminish our own suffering. Being a survivor, being a "thrivor" requires absolute acceptance of what was and what is. If we discount our pain, or punish ourselves for feeling lost or isolated or scared about the challenges in our lives, however insignificant these challenges may seem to someone else, then we're still choosing to be victims. We're not seeing our choices. We're judging ourselves. I don't want you to hear

my story and say, “My own suffering is less significant.” I want you to hear my story and say, “If she can do it, then so can I!”

One morning I saw two patients back to back, both mothers in their forties. The first woman had a daughter who was dying of hemophilia. She spent most of her visit crying, asking how God could take her child’s life. I hurt so much for this woman—she was absolutely devoted to her daughter’s care, and devastated by her impending loss. She was angry, she was grieving, and she wasn’t at all sure that she could survive the hurt.

My next patient had just come from the country club, not the hospital. She, too, spent much of the hour crying. She was upset because her new Cadillac had just been delivered, and it was the wrong shade of yellow. On the surface, her problem seemed petty, especially compared to my previous patient’s anguish over her dying child. But I knew enough about her to understand that her tears of disappointment over the color of her car were really tears of disappointment over the bigger things in her life that hadn’t worked out the way she had hoped—a lonely marriage, a son who had been kicked out of yet another school, the aspirations for a career she had abandoned in order to be more available for her husband and child. Often, the little upsets in our lives are emblematic of the larger losses; the seemingly insignificant worries are representative of greater pain.

I realized that day how much my two patients, who appeared so different, had in common—with each other and with all people everywhere. Both women were responding to a situation they couldn’t control in which their expectations had been upended. Both were struggling and hurting because something was not what they wanted or expected it to be; they were trying to reconcile what was with what ought to have been. Each woman’s pain was real. Each woman was caught up in the human drama—that we find ourselves in situations we didn’t see coming and that we don’t feel prepared to handle. Both women deserved my compassion. Both had the potential to heal. Both women, like all of us, had choices in attitude and action that could move them from victim to survivor even if the circumstances they were dealing with didn’t change. Survivors don’t have time to ask, “Why me?” For survivors, the only relevant question is, “What now?”

\* \* \*

Whether you’re in the dawn or noon or late evening of your life, whether you’ve seen deep suffering or are only just beginning to encounter struggle, whether

you're falling in love for the first time or losing your life partner to old age, whether you're healing from a life-altering event or in search of some little adjustments that could bring more joy to your life, I would love to help you discover how to escape the concentration camp of your own mind and become the person you were meant to be. I would love to help you experience freedom from the past, freedom from failures and fears, freedom from anger and mistakes, freedom from regret and unresolved grief—and the freedom to enjoy the full, rich feast of life. We cannot choose to have a life free of hurt. But we can choose to be free, to escape the past, no matter what befalls us, and to embrace the possible. I invite you to make the choice to be free.

Like the challah my mother used to make for our Friday night meal, this book has three strands: my story of survival, my story of healing myself, and the stories of the precious people I've had the privilege of guiding to freedom. I've conveyed my experience as I can best remember it. The stories about patients accurately reflect the core of their experiences, but I have changed all names and identifying details and in some instances created composites from patients working through similar challenges. What follows is the story of the choices, big and small, that can lead us from trauma to triumph, from darkness to light, from imprisonment to freedom.

## CHAPTER 1

# The Four Questions

If I could distill my entire life into one moment, into one still image, it is this: three women in dark wool coats wait, arms linked, in a barren yard. They are exhausted. They've got dust on their shoes. They stand in a long line.

The three women are my mother, my sister Magda, and me. This is our last moment together. We don't know that. We refuse to consider it. Or we are too weary even to speculate about what is ahead. It is a moment of severing—mother from daughters, life as it has been from all that will come after. And yet only hindsight can give it this meaning.

I see the three of us from behind, as though I am next in line. Why does memory give me the back of my mother's head but not her face? Her long hair is intricately braided and clipped on top of her head. Magda's light brown waves touch her shoulders. My dark hair is tucked under a scarf. My mother stands in the middle and Magda and I both lean inward. It is impossible to discern if we are the ones who keep our mother upright, or if it is the other way around, her strength the pillar that supports Magda and me.

This moment is a threshold into the major losses of my life. For seven decades I have returned again and again to this image of the three of us. I have studied it as though with enough scrutiny I can recover something precious. As though I can regain the life that precedes this moment, the life that precedes loss. As if there is such a thing.

I have returned so that I can rest a little longer in this time when our arms are joined and we belong to one another. I see our sloped shoulders. The dust holding to the bottoms of our coats. My mother. My sister. Me.

\* \* \*

Our childhood memories are often fragments, brief moments or encounters, which together form the scrapbook of our life. They are all we have left to understand the story we have come to tell ourselves about who we are.

Even before the moment of our separation, my most intimate memory of my mother, though I treasure it, is full of sorrow and loss. We're alone in the kitchen, where she is wrapping up the leftover strudel that she made with dough I watched her cut by hand and drape like heavy linen over the dining room table. "Read to me," she says, and I fetch the worn copy of *Gone with the Wind* from her bedside table. We have read it through once before. Now we have begun again. I pause over the mysterious inscription, written in English, on the title page of the translated book. It's in a man's handwriting, but not my father's. All that my mother will say is that the book was a gift from a man she met when she worked at the Foreign Ministry before she knew my father.

We sit in straight-backed chairs near the woodstove. I read this grown-up novel fluently despite the fact that I am only nine. "I'm glad you have brains because you have no looks," she has told me more than once, a compliment and a criticism intertwined. She can be hard on me. But I savor this time. When we read together, I don't have to share her with anyone else. I sink into the words and the story and the feeling of being alone in a world with her. Scarlett returns to Tara at the end of the war to learn her mother is dead and her father is far gone in grief. "As God is my witness," Scarlett says, "I'm never going to be hungry again." My mother has closed her eyes and leans her head against the back of the chair. I want to climb into her lap. I want to rest my head against her chest. I want her to touch her lips to my hair.

"Tara ..." she says. "America, now that would be a place to see." I wish she would say my name with the same softness she reserves for a country where she's never been. All the smells of my mother's kitchen are mixed up for me with the drama of hunger and feast—always, even in the feast, that longing. I don't know if the longing is hers or mine or something we share.

We sit with the fire between us.

"When I was your age ..." she begins.

Now that she is talking, I am afraid to move, afraid she won't continue if I do.

"When I was your age, the babies slept together and my mother and I shared a bed. One morning I woke up because my father was calling to me, 'Ilonka, wake up your mother, she hasn't made breakfast yet or laid out my clothes.' I turned to my mother next to me under the covers. But she wasn't moving. She was dead."

She has never told me this before. I want to know every detail about this moment when a daughter woke beside a mother she had already lost. I also want to look away. It is too terrifying to think about.

“When they buried her that afternoon, I thought they had put her in the ground alive. That night, Father told me to make the family supper. So that’s what I did.”

I wait for the rest of the story. I wait for the lesson at the end, or the reassurance.

“Bedtime,” is all my mother says. She bends to sweep the ash under the stove.

Footsteps thump down the hall outside our door. I can smell my father’s tobacco even before I hear the jangle of his keys.

“Ladies,” he calls, “are you still awake?” He comes into the kitchen in his shiny shoes and dapper suit, his big grin, a little sack in his hand that he gives me with a loud kiss to the forehead. “I won again,” he boasts. Whenever he plays cards or billiards with his friends, he shares the spoils with me. Tonight he’s brought a petit four laced in pink icing. If I were my sister Magda, my mother, always concerned about Magda’s weight, would snatch the treat away, but she nods at me, giving me permission to eat it.

She is standing now, on her way from the fire to the sink. My father intercepts her, lifts her hand so he can twirl her around the room, which she does, stiffly, without a smile. He pulls her in for an embrace, one hand on her back, one teasing at her breast. My mother shrugs him away.

“I’m a disappointment to your mother,” my father half whispers to me as we leave the kitchen. Does he intend for her to overhear, or is this a secret meant only for me? Either way, it is something I store away to mull over later. Yet the bitterness in his voice scares me. “She wants to go to the opera every night, live some fancy cosmopolitan life. I’m just a tailor. A tailor and a billiards player.”

My father’s defeated tone confuses me. He is well known in our town, and well liked. Playful, smiling, he always seems comfortable and alive. He’s fun to be around. He goes out with his many friends. He loves food (especially the ham he sometimes smuggles into our kosher household, eating it over the newspaper it was wrapped in, pushing bites of forbidden pork into my mouth, enduring my mother’s accusations that he is a poor role model). His tailor shop has won two gold medals. He isn’t just a maker of even seams and straight hems. He is a master of couture. That’s how he met my mother—she came into his shop because she needed a dress and his work came so highly recommended. But he

had wanted to be a doctor, not a tailor, a dream his father had discouraged, and every once in a while his disappointment in himself surfaces.

“You’re not just a tailor, Papa,” I reassure him. “You’re the best tailor!”

“And you’re going to be the best-dressed lady in Košice,” he tells me, patting my head. “You have the perfect figure for couture.”

He seems to have remembered himself. He’s pushed his disappointment back into the shadows. We reach the door to the bedroom I share with Magda and our middle sister, Klara, where I can picture Magda pretending to do homework and Klara wiping rosin dust off her violin. My father and I stand in the doorway a moment longer, neither one of us quite ready to break away.

“I wanted you to be a boy, you know,” my father says. “I slammed the door when you were born, I was that mad at having another girl. But now you’re the only one I can talk to.” He kisses my forehead.

I love my father’s attention. Like my mother’s, it is precious ... and precarious. As though my worthiness of their love has less to do with me and more to do with their loneliness. As though my identity isn’t about anything that I am or have and only a measure of what each of my parents is missing.

“Good night, Dicuka,” my father says at last. He uses the pet name my mother invented for me. Ditzu-ka. These nonsense syllables are warmth to me. “Tell your sisters it’s time for lights out.”

As I come into the bedroom, Magda and Klara greet me with the song they have invented for me. They made it up when I was three and one of my eyes became crossed in a botched medical procedure. “You’re so ugly, you’re so puny,” they sing. “You’ll never find a husband.” Since the accident I turn my head toward the ground when I walk so that I don’t have to see anyone looking at my lopsided face. I haven’t yet learned that the problem isn’t that my sisters taunt me with a mean song; the problem is that I believe them. I am so convinced of my inferiority that I never introduce myself by name. I never tell people, “I am Edie.” Klara is a violin prodigy. She mastered the Mendelssohn violin concerto when she was five. “I am Klara’s sister,” I say.

But tonight I have special knowledge. “Mama’s mom died when she was exactly my age,” I tell them. I am so certain of the privileged nature of this information that it doesn’t occur to me that for my sisters this is old news, that I am the last and not the first to know.

“You’re kidding,” Magda says, her voice full of sarcasm so obvious that even I can recognize it. She is fifteen, busty, with sensual lips, wavy hair. She is the jokester in our family. When we were younger, she showed me how to drop

grapes out of our bedroom window into the coffee cups of the patrons sitting on the patio below. Inspired by her, I will soon invent my own games; but by then, the stakes will have changed. My girlfriend and I will sashay up to boys at school or on the street. “Meet me at four o’clock by the clock on the square,” we will trill, batting our eyelashes. They will come, they will always come, sometimes giddy, sometimes shy, sometimes swaggering with expectation. From the safety of my bedroom, my friend and I will stand at the window and watch the boys arrive.

“Don’t tease so much,” Klara snaps at Magda now. She is younger than Magda, but she jumps in to protect me. “You know that picture above the piano?” she says to me. “The one that Mama’s always talking to? That’s her mother.” I know the picture she’s talking about. I’ve looked at it every day of my life. “Help me, help me,” our mother moans up at the portrait as she dusts the piano, sweeps the floor. I feel embarrassed that I have never asked my mother—or anyone—who was in that picture. And I’m disappointed that my information gives me no special status with my sisters.

I am used to being the silent sister, the invisible one. It doesn’t occur to me that Magda might tire of being the clown, that Klara might resent being the prodigy. She can’t stop being extraordinary, not for a second, or everything might be taken from her—the adoration she’s accustomed to, her very sense of self. Magda and I have to work at getting something we are certain there will never be enough of; Klara has to worry that at any moment she might make a fatal mistake and lose it all. Klara has been playing violin all my life, since she was three. It’s not until much later that I realize the cost of her extraordinary talent: she gave up being a child. I never saw her play with dolls. Instead she stood in front of an open window to practice violin, not able to enjoy her creative genius unless she could summon an audience of passersby to witness it.

“Does Mama love Papa?” I ask my sisters now. The distance between our parents, the sad things they have each confessed to me, remind me that I have never seen them dressed up to go out together.

“What a question,” Klara says. Though she denies my concern, I think I see a recognition in her eyes. We will never discuss it again, though I will try. It will take me years to learn what my sisters must already know, that what we call love is often something more conditional—the reward for a performance, what you settle for.

As we put on our nightgowns and get into bed, I erase my worry for my parents and think instead of my ballet master and his wife, of the feeling I get

when I take the steps up to the studio two or three at a time and kick off my school clothes, pull on my leotard and tights. I have been studying ballet since I was five years old, since my mother intuited that I wasn't a musician, that I had other gifts. Just today we practiced the splits. Our ballet master reminded us that strength and flexibility are inseparable—for one muscle to flex, another must open; to achieve length and limberness, we have to hold our cores strong.

I hold his instructions in my mind like a prayer. Down I go, spine straight, abdominal muscles tight, legs stretching apart. I know to breathe, especially when I feel stuck. I picture my body expanding like the strings on my sister's violin, finding the exact place of tautness that makes the whole instrument ring. And I am down. I am here. In the full splits. "Brava!" My ballet master claps. "Stay right as you are." He lifts me off the ground and over his head. It's hard to keep my legs fully extended without the floor to push against, but for a moment I feel like an offering. I feel like pure light. "Editke," my teacher says, "all your ecstasy in life is going to come from the inside." It will take me years to really understand what he means. For now all I know is that I can breathe and spin and kick and bend. As my muscles stretch and strengthen, every movement, every pose seems to call out: *I am, I am, I am. I am me. I am somebody.*

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Memory is sacred ground. But it's haunted too. It's the place where my rage and guilt and grief go circling like hungry birds scavenging the same old bones. It's the place where I go searching for the answer to the unanswerable question: *Why did I survive?*

I am seven years old, and my parents are hosting a dinner party. They send me out of the room to refill a pitcher of water. From the kitchen I hear them joke, "We could have saved that one." I think they mean that before I came along they were already a complete family. They had a daughter who played piano and a daughter who played violin. I am unnecessary, I am not good enough, there is no room for me, I think. This is the way we misinterpret the facts of our lives, the way we assume and don't check it out, the way we invent a story to tell ourselves, reinforcing the very thing in us we already believe.

One day when I am eight, I decide to run away. I will test the theory that I am dispensable, invisible. I will see if my parents even know that I am gone. Instead of going to school, I take the trolley to my grandparents' house. I trust my grandparents—my mother's father and stepmother—to cover for me. They engage in a continuous war with my mother on Magda's behalf, hiding cookies

in my sister's dresser drawer. They are safety to me, and yet they sanction the forbidden. They hold hands, something my own parents never do. There's no performing for their love, no pretending for their approval. They are comfort—the smell of brisket and baked beans, of sweet bread, of *cholent*, a rich stew that my grandmother brings to the bakery to cook on Sabbath, when Orthodox practice does not permit her to use her own oven.

My grandparents are happy to see me. It is a wonderful morning. I sit in the kitchen, eating nut rolls. But then the doorbell rings. My grandfather goes to answer it. A moment later he rushes into the kitchen. He is hard of hearing, and he speaks his warning too loudly. "Hide, Dicuka!" he yells. "Your mother's here!" In trying to protect me, he gives me away.

What bothers me the most is the look on my mother's face when she sees me in my grandparents' kitchen. It's not just that she is surprised to see me here—it is as though the very fact of my existence has taken her by surprise. As though I am not who she wants or expects me to be.

I won't ever be beautiful—this my mother has made clear—but the year I turn ten she assures me that I won't have to hide my face anymore. Dr. Klein, in Budapest, will fix my crossed eye. On the train to Budapest I eat chocolate and enjoy my mother's exclusive attention. Dr. Klein is a celebrity, my mother says, the first to perform eye surgery without anesthetic. I am too caught up in the romance of the journey, the privilege of having my mother all to myself, to realize she is warning me. It has never occurred to me that the surgery will hurt. Not until the pain consumes me. My mother and her relatives, who have connected us to the celebrated Dr. Klein, hold my thrashing body against the table. Worse than the pain, which is huge and limitless, is the feeling of the people who love me restraining me so that I cannot move. Only later, long after the surgery has proved successful, can I see the scene from my mother's point of view, how she must have suffered at my suffering.

I am happiest when I am alone, when I can retreat into my inner world. One morning when I am thirteen, on the way to school, in a private gymnasium, I practice the steps to the "Blue Danube" routine my ballet class will perform at a festival on the river. Then invention takes hold, and I am off and away in a new dance of my own, one in which I imagine my parents meeting. I dance both of their parts. My father does a slapstick double take when he sees my mother walk into the room. My mother spins faster, leaps higher. I make my whole body arc into a joyful laugh. I have never seen my mother rejoice, never heard her laugh from the belly, but in my body I feel the untapped well of her happiness.

When I get to school, the tuition money my father gave me to cover an entire quarter of school is gone. Somehow, in the flurry of dancing, I have lost it. I check every pocket and crease of my clothing, but it is gone. All day the dread of telling my father burns like ice in my gut. At home he can't look at me as he raises his fists. This is the first time he has ever hit me, or any of us. He doesn't say a word to me when he is done. In bed that night I wish to die so that my father will suffer for what he did to me. And then I wish my father dead.

Do these memories give me an image of my strength? Or of my damage? Maybe every childhood is the terrain on which we try to pinpoint how much we matter and how much we don't, a map where we study the dimensions and the borders of our worth.

Maybe every life is a study of the things we don't have but wish we did, and the things we have but wish we didn't.

It took me many decades to discover that I could come at my life with a different question. Not: *Why did I live?* But: *What is mine to do with the life I've been given?*

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My family's ordinary human dramas were complicated by borders, by wars. Before World War I, the Slovakian region where I was born and raised was part of Austro-Hungary, but in 1918, a decade before my birth, the Treaty of Versailles redrew the map of Europe and created a new state. Czechoslovakia was cobbled together from agrarian Slovakia, my family's region, which was ethnically Hungarian and Slovak; the more industrial regions of Moravia and Bohemia, which were ethnically Czech; and Subcarpathian Rus', a region that is now part of Ukraine. With the creation of Czechoslovakia, my hometown—Kassa, Hungary—became Košice, Czechoslovakia. And my family became double minorities. We were ethnic Hungarians living in a predominately Czech country, and we were Jewish.

Though Jews had lived in Slovakia since the eleventh century, it wasn't until 1840 that Jews were permitted to settle in Kassa. Even then, city officials, backed by Christian trade guilds, made it difficult for Jewish families who wanted to live there. Yet by the turn of the century, Kassa had become one of Europe's largest Jewish communities. Unlike in other Eastern European countries, such as Poland, Hungarian Jews weren't ghettoized (which is why my family spoke Hungarian exclusively and not Yiddish). We weren't segregated, and we enjoyed plenty of educational, professional, and cultural opportunities. But we still