

Bogdan

Bożena's in a bad position. She's married to a Jew. And she's pregnant. And the Nazis are on their way to Poland. They have spies here already, now that they own the Czech Republic. Well, I guess it's no longer a republic. Bożena's part of the resistance. Her husband is too. This is bad, about as bad as it gets. I really wanted her to leave, to go to safety in Sweden. But would she go? Not for me. Oh no! I'm just her baby brother, though she's only a year older, for Christ's sake.

And I'm not the only one who's been nagging her to flee. Mama and Papa have been after her for months. But she won't leave without her husband and that prince of a man won't entertain the slightest concept of going. He's a German refugee and has an all-consuming need to save his people, and I understand that. But I honestly can't fathom why he won't let her go. What good could she do if the Nazis shot her down or if they dragged her to some horrifying place? And he has a child now, or he will pretty soon. He has more to think about than mere heroics. So does she. But neither one will pay attention to us. In all truth, those two deserve each other. I would have washed my hands of them if I didn't love them so. But I do, so I've harangued them without mercy.

I cornered him last night while we were forging Polish passports for German Jews so they can travel unmolested. "You need to tell her to get out. You need to threaten divorce—whatever it would take to keep her safe."

"We Blausteins never get divorced. Bożena's place is here with me. And my place is with my people, and that's that."

I could have knocked his self-righteousness clean across the room. "Go back to Germany then if your place is with your people. What an ass!" I had to leave before I killed him. I threw the papers to the floor, stomped across the tiny room and up the steps and out onto the cobblestones.

Punching blameless air, hissing curses at myself and at Gerhard and even at Bożena, I shoved their arguments aside, kicked their excuses to bits, battered all their lame defenses to a mash. At some point in the trek, I imagined myself throwing her over my shoulder. I would personally haul her pregnant ass off to Sweden. I'd swim the Baltic Sea with her if I had to.

Blindly letting my rage take control of my route, I failed to feel the change from cobblestones to dirt. With no sense of time's passing or the distance I had gone, I had not noticed that I'd trounced past the town's limits. Only when I smelled the leafy fragrance of the woods did I stop to realize that I'd been quarreling for hours. Every muscle I owned ached. My eyes burned. My chin was bristly. I needed a bath. Oh hell, I needed my bed. But worry for my sister pushed me toward the forest's edge.

I was close to Judy's house, or at least close enough. I'd gather myself and ask her to intervene. She'd still be up. And if she wasn't, I would bang on her door. She'd understand once I'd explained the situation. She'd be happy to help out. She'd convince my stubborn sister to seek refuge in Sweden or have the baby in the woods. She and Babcia would midwife. They did it all the time. Somehow, I was sure, Judy would keep Bożena safe. They're very close, as tight as peas. My sister listens to her. For the first time in my worry, I had formed a concrete plan. All I had to do was make it to her house.

I thrust my hands out and groped, but I couldn't see a thing in the impenetrable blackness of the trees. I felt around for a trunk and pressed my back against its bark,

slowly lowering myself to the ground. My body begged for a nap. But knowing if I slept, I would waste time that I could use to help my sister, I fought to keep myself awake by rehearsing my speech, being careful to exclude my rage at Gerhard.

The night narrowed to shadows, giving way to blots of light. A sparrow woke with a start, chirping other birds awake with a warning that a stranger was lurking. My head reflexively jerked in a rapid search for Nazis. Then I breathed. I was the threat who'd scared the birds. "I'm way too tired to harm you," I muttered to my chest, licking the fuzz from my front teeth. I heaved myself to my feet. I was so achingly exhausted that I doubted I could take a single step. And so, reminding myself of the importance of my quest, I drew upon Božena's name to press ahead.

"Božena Blaustein," I whispered to inspire my weary legs as I bullied them to put one foot in front of the other. "Božena Blaustein," I repeated again and again, ducking boughs and shoving smaller limbs aside. "Božena Blaustein." The name had become a mindless chant, a rhythm for my feet to live up to. Stumbling over stones and wind-strewn branches and roots, plowing forward through soul crushing fatigue, I kept on keeping on until the little log house winked through the trunks of the maples, elms, and oaks.

When Judy opened to my knock, she looked as weary as I felt. "You look like hell!" The insult elbowed past my teeth. I would have given everything to have been awake enough to bite those words off and to start out with my plea.

"Thanks. You have a way with words." She raked her hair. My muscles tensed. I swallowed hard. This wasn't going very well. "Come on in." She stepped aside and shut the door after me, rubbing her eyes and blowing out the lamps and throwing a few thin logs at the coals. Had she been up the whole night too? She pumped the kettle full of water and hung it on the trammel to make tea.

Depending on sheer will for every breath my lungs took in, I paced in front of her hearth, afraid that if I sat down I'd just collapse and sleep for days or maybe weeks. "The Czech Republic has collapsed. Hácha signed an agreement. With Hitler. Damned corrupt politicians!"

"What kind of agreement?" She plopped into a wingback and, leaning on her palm, closed her eyes. "Please stop your pacing and sit down. It's been a difficult night. It's too much work to watch you go back and forth."

"I don't know." What could she do to help Božena in that state? She was too tired to move. We were as useless as two dolls. "I wasn't there when they signed it." My bitterness seeped through. Why was I talking about Hácha anyway?

"Bogdan, Czechoslovakia is loaded with Germans. Hácha's old. This may not be about corruption. Let's not make judgments. We don't know all the facts about the signing." Was she mad? Was I out of my mind? I had backed myself into a political discussion when all I wanted was Božena's safe escape.

"Well, I'll tell you what I know." My words were spiky and cold. "On the day that Hácha signed, the German army moved in!" Her muscles twitched as if the news had startled her. "I think the press is closed down too." Oh who cared about the press? Nonetheless, not knowing what else to do, I blundered on. "Pani Pohronezny can't get Czech magazines. The Czech papers have stopped coming in too. Božena has to get out!" I had done it at last! I waited, willing her to offer to help. She didn't utter a word. I had to make her understand that these developments posed a dreadful danger. "Poland

will be next.” My voice was like a rusty gate. I cleared my throat. “But she’s too pregnant to travel. I’ve been after her for weeks, well, for two months, actually. But it’s too late. She just can’t travel safely now.” The realization of that truth sucker punched me in the gut. I needed a moment to recover my breath. “Can you take her in, Judy? Just until the baby’s born? Maybe then she and my nephew can get out.”

“Well, of course, if she’ll come. And her baby is a girl. Please sit down. You make me dizzy with your pacing.” Ignoring her plea, I continued my march across the front of the hearth and back again. She patted the arm of the other wingback chair. I let that gesture go unheeded as well. “She’ll want her mother with her when she goes into labor. Women do the first time they give birth.”

“Well, you can take Mama too.” I stopped and pivoted toward her. Would she actually consider doing this? Why not? They were friends. And yet she looked so skeptical.

“We could.” She bobbed her head but made a list of household chores that Mama did to keep the family fed and clothed. What the hell! Just like a woman. What if the family fell apart? Who cared about that if Bozena would be safe?

“Oh her work would get done.” My words chiseled through clenched teeth. “I have sisters.” Did she think they were all helpless? And then she had to mention Gerhard. I’d expected her to, but I didn’t have an answer about him. I mumbled something inane. I tried again and again. But even to my ears the words were senseless.

“Look, Bogdan, I understand you want your sister safe. I want that too. Please sit down. I really need you to stay put. I’m much too tired to keep up with your pacing.”

I had to please her. My sister’s life depended on her. If she’d asked me to lift her house and move it to the right, I would have tried. I would have done anything. I eased myself down to the chair, parked myself on its edge, and waited, trepidation sour in my mouth and belly.

“Look, go talk to her Bogdan.” Did she think I hadn’t tried? “And if she’ll come, bring her here. She’s more than welcome in my home. And if the whole family comes, we’ll find housing for them too.”

Slumping into disappointment, I fell back into the chair. She had closed the conversation. Yet I had to push her harder. “Can’t you come? You could talk to her woman to woman. You’re not her brother. She would listen to you.”

She laid her head to the chair’s back and, letting out a sigh, closed her eyes. She breathed the slow deep breath of sleep. She fluttered back to wakefulness but then drifted off again, and I knew that our discussion was over. “The kettle,” she slurred. Her eyes flickered anew. “Please,” she burred before nodding off once more. “Please—” she labored one more time “—get—” her voice was too heavy. “—the kettle.” She was gone and snoring lightly.

I had failed, and that failure was a weight I could not carry through the woods without a chance to get some rest. Wrapping myself in the mantle of depression, I allowed my eyes to close and plunged deep into a grim sleep. When I awoke, she was still snoring. I tucked her throw around her shoulders, plucked the kettle from the hearth, placed two logs onto the fire, and, as softly as I could, tiptoed out. I didn’t have the strength to nurture outrage toward her. The fault was mine. I’d been unable to convince her.

Blindly stumbling through the trees, I wallowed in my devastation until I reached the forest's edge and had to choose which way to go. I couldn't go back to the office and face a confrontation with Gerhard or with anyone who knew him. And I couldn't go home and admit to our parents that I'd fallen so abysmally short. I went over to Cezar's. I knew he was away, and I knew the hiding place where I could find his extra key.

To finish the story, pick up *Short Stories*, It's only 99 cents!