



As winter drags on, I mark off what I think are full days in my book, feeling for the right place to make the mark in the dark. Few words are spoken between us.

Movement is sparse. We conserve energy.

Sleep takes up most of our hours, sometimes an entire day and night, so we can avoid feeling hungry and stretch our meager supplies.

I begin to fear that this is how it will always be.

The fear of death by the SS above or starvation below.

I no longer have a physical reaction to Leon. When he is near, nothing registers like before. We speak little.

The months are like dark dreams, the kind that carry over into that just-waking state, when you are unsure where you are, who you are, and whether you are awake or asleep.

We run out of candles and become so low on kerosene that we are forced to make rules as to when we are allowed to use light.

We become experts at moving about the caves in total darkness, memorizing cracks and crags and turns, even more so than before.

The children try to find their way to the Land of Israel, but are not allowed to wander too far and are sad when they can't find it.

Cooking is one of the few times when light is allowed.

I take my egg in my front dress pocket to the cooking cave and pull it out, to gaze at Alla's gift again. It is the only thing of beauty in that dark place. It feeds my eyes.

But the egg isn't just a thing of beauty.

It tells me someone up there cares for me and would welcome me back.

Auntie Maya holds on to her rumor. I hold on to Alla's *pysanka*.

1944—

The dirt-bitter taste of potato skins that give brief resistance to the teeth as you bite through them (we no longer peel them, we need every bit of what is edible); the burnt taste of fried centipedes; the creaking of wood pallets as family members turn over; the soft sighs of the weary adults; the half-hearted cries of hungry children; the murmurings of *tefillah* as the men pray; the high-pitched ringing when no sound can be heard—this is what our days and nights are made of.

Even the stories are worn out, repeated so many times they have become ordinary and predictable.

We lose track of days. I now make marks in the margins of *Joan of Arc*, having run out of room on the back covers and endpapers. They are guesses by now. But it feels like an obligation to mark off something. A weary accomplishment.

We walk back and forth in the cave rooms, pacing slowly like weak, caged animals, so we won't lose our ability to walk. Muscles are losing their tightness. Knees are creaking and calves are shaking.

Soon, our limbs begin to bloom roselike splotches, especially on those of the younger children. Teeth become loose, and gums bleed into the white potato flesh. We can't see the blood, just taste its metallic liquid as it mixes with the food and has to be swallowed.

Papa loses two teeth somewhere in the dirt when they fall out. If something falls on the soft ground and you step on it, it is gone forever in the dark.

“I’m losing my teeth, but I still have my family,” he says quietly, after the second one falls.

We become more sensitive to the cool humid caves, and push our pallets together for warmth. Our empty bellies swell.

We suck on small stones to pretend we are eating something. They roll around in my mouth, taunting my tongue, not fooling my brain.

I start to not feel “real,” like I am made of air.

Sonia’s milk has dried up. She nursed Arashel as long as she could, for many weeks, as a way to keep her baby nourished and not be an extra mouth to feed. But bread is running low. Eventually, the adults and Leon and I give our allotments, which amount to the size of a large marble, to the young mother. She refuses when she has stored up a handful, but we have to offer. She chews them to mush, then transfers bits to the baby.

Mama, trying to stretch out our few remaining supplies, boils an extra pair of Uncle Levi’s leather boots, and we drink the foul water for whatever animal fat is left in the hide.

We don’t find any more centipedes—we’ve eaten them all up.

Even the animals outside, above us, skittering around in the earth and in the meadow, have more food in their bellies than we do.

Malnutrition is going to do what the Germans could not do to us, break our spirit and take our lives.

Our natural instinct is to save the young first.