

Prompt 4

Tick. Tock. Tick. Tock.

My sister and I stare at the face of our great-grandfather's old clock. Our mother should be back from the shops by now. She said she'd return at four, yet the clock's shorter hand has now passed the five.

"The Nazis got her, didn't they?" Milka asks, her dejected voice breaking through the clock's tense ticking. "Just like they got Michał."

"No," I respond quickly. "Mother has her papers. I made sure of it."

"Yes, but what if they see through them?" She frets. There are tears sprouting in her dark eyes.

"They can't have," I reply, "No one else with falsified papers has been seen through yet. Mother won't be the first."

I can tell my words have not comforted my sister. Her lips press into a taught line, turning white, yet she falls silent. I exhale.

Tock. Tick. Tock. Tick.

The short hand is edging closer towards the six now. Our mother still has yet to return. If it reaches six without word, my sister and I will hide ourselves in the attic. The entrance is hidden behind a cupboard, and Mother and Father stocked it with foods and jars of water. We will be safe there.

Milka and I both agreed to this plan. I can see on her face her hesitation. Her eyebrows press together and crease her forehead, and she is wiping tears from her eyes every few seconds.

"Milka, we agreed to follow Mother and Father's plan." I remind her as gently as I can.

Through a watery, wavering voice, she murmurs, "I know. I just don't want to believe it."

I wrap my arms around her. My baby sister, how much grief she has to go through. I feel her warm tears stain my blouse as she squeezes me.

“It’s okay.” I murmur, though it isn’t and we both know it. Like lightning’s sudden strike, an idea lights up my mind. “I will go look for her. I will be back as soon as I can. You have to promise me you will stay in the attic while I search, though, alright?”

Her head nods up and down against my chest, and together we stand and we walk to the cupboard. She helps me heave it to the side. A small door, the attic door, reveals itself. Milka hugs me one more time before unlatching it and climbing into the attic. I double and triple check it is latched tight, then shove the cupboard back to its place. As I return to the family room, six chimes ring out. Mother is two hours late. I take a breath in and out, calming myself. I slide my jacket on, one arm after the other. It helps to conceal the tears that stain my blouse, I realize as I button it up.

I sling one of Mother’s purses over my shoulder. Carefully, I place my falsified identification in the side pocket where she normally keeps hers. Only then do I pick up the house keys my Father had hurriedly made when all of this began happening. The way they clank together tells me my hand is shaking. I do not pay it any attention. Instead, I exit my house and lock my door.

Luckily, we live close to Mother’s favorite shops. She wouldn’t have ventured out if they were much further. I know her. She is careful and strategic. The Mother I know wouldn’t have let herself get taken.

A few of my Mother’s friends nod in greeting to me on the street. Their eyes betray the fear their bodies do not portray. I am sure mine look the same, if not more obvious. I nod back before ducking into the next store and rushing out equally as quickly. Three Nazi men are talking to the poor boy behind the register. My hands grasp the frontward strap of my purse as I hurry to the next store Mother frequents.

And the next. And the next.

By the time the sun has fully set, I have visited all of Mother’s favorite stores and she is nowhere to be found. Though tears are forming in my eyes, I cannot let them fall. I cannot risk one of the numerous Nazis that prowl the streets seeing my despair. It will take about ten minutes to return home, I suppose. Ten minutes to figure out how to tell my dearest Milka that Mother is almost certainly gone. Ten minutes, in the grand span of everything that has happened today, seems so infinitesimal.

All of a sudden, my face finds itself in the back of a wall of a man. As I begin to apologize, backing up, I notice the painfully familiar red band around his arm and my mouth dries instantly.

“Hello, Miss.” He turns to greet me, studying my face. “May I ask you a few questions?”

References

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