

Freedom Runners

Eve wailed, her cry breaking through the darkness of the night. In the bed next to me, Abigail shifted restlessly. I sat up slightly, enough to see Mama rocking Eve in her arms as she walked back and forth in our cramped room. Daddy stood up and walked over to them. He placed his arms around Mama, comforting her and the baby. I lay back down. Eve eventually fell back into a deep slumber, and I did the same.

I awoke again, a few hours later. Ruth, who slept on the other side of the pallet, was crying in her sleep. I ran my hand against her hair until her breathing turned even. She snuggled up to me, as we both slept.

The sun dimly lit our cramped apartment when I awoke. I pushed down my blanket, surprised to find that Ruth was no longer asleep next to me. I looked around the bedroom, and I noticed she wasn't in it. I could hear Mama cooking in the kitchen, and I figured that Ruth would be in there. I pulled on a dress and stockings, accidentally waking Abigail, my oldest sister, process. I darted from the room.

"Good morning, Mama." I kissed her cheek. I surveyed the room. I have ten siblings, but I can always tell when just one is missing. That morning, two were gone. "Mama, where're Ruth and Jonah?" I asked as I sliced a piece of bread.

Mama choked back a sob and wiped her eyes with her apron. Samuel and Daniel, my twin brothers, came over to us. "Not here, Lila." Samuel whispered as he patted Mama's back. "Not now."

"When?" I asked.

"Soon." Was his only reply.

I waited most of the day. I helped Mama bake bread and cook dinner. I worked on my schoolwork. Hours passed. It was almost evening when Samuel took me out onto the apartment's tiny balcony and explained.

"Where are Ruth and Jonah?" I asked. I'd missed my little sister that day.

“They’re on their way to England. In a truck, with a man and his wife.” Samuel whispered. Although we kept to ourselves and our neighbors didn’t bother us, the walls were thin. “They will keep Ruth and Jonah safe. They will not let them be hurt.”

“But Ruth and Jonah are our siblings.” I cried.

“Hush. For now, they are Emily and Oscar. We must talk of this no more. The walls even have ears.” Samuel replied. “It’s time for dinner, little sister. Let’s go in.”

“I’m not hungry.” I replied. Samuel left me be. I glared at the distant horizon. My grandmother was not German. My grandfather was not Jewish. My mother was Jewish, and I’d lived in Germany all my life. But living in Germany since I’d been born was not enough for Hitler. If anyone knew my mother was Jewish, we’d disappear like everyone else had been disappearing. I didn’t sound German. I didn’t look German. My hair was long, golden, and curly. My lips were red as roses, and my eyes were as blue as the sky. I looked British, if anything. I didn’t look German or Jewish, and neither did Mama nor Daddy. I couldn’t understand why Hitler didn’t like us. We hadn’t committed any crimes.

“Delilah, come inside for dinner.” My mother called to me. I looked at the crowded buildings around me once more and turned to go into the house.

“Put the water on the table, Lila. And help the little ones wash up for supper.”

I looked around the table at the faces of my siblings, from the stern, sharp face of my oldest brother to the babyish smile of my littlest sister. How could we act like Ruth and Jonah weren’t missing? My gaze rested on my brother Obadiah, who was eight.

Of all the people in Germany, my brother Obadiah was probably in the most danger for being who he was. Obadiah is different. I don’t know what he has, or why he has it. It’s something he was born with, something I think he’ll always have. Even when Obadiah was born, it was dangerous being a kid like him. So, Mama and Daddy have kept him hidden. Amos and I are his best friends. We stopped going to synagogue after he was born. I don’t know what people thought happened to Obadiah, but they’ve never met him. Only our most trusted friends and family know him. He’s eight, and I think he’s brilliant. But that’s just me. And my opinion doesn’t matter to Hitler.

Daddy came home from work when it was dark. He didn't say anything about Ruth or Jonah. He kissed Mama and the little girls. The night before, Ruth was one those little daughters whose foreheads he'd have kissed. Mama murmured something to him as he sat down at the table. He nodded his head and announced. "Delilah, Amos, I'd like to talk with you after dinner."

I glanced at my nine-year-old brother. He squirmed in his chair. I knew he thought he was either in trouble or going to be. His longer, golden-brown locks fell across his face. I always thought Amos needed a haircut, his hair grew so quickly.

"Let us pray." My father reached out his hands, and my mother took one, my oldest brother the other one. We all joined hands as my father prayed, asking for protection and good health.

After dinner, Daddy took me and Amos outside onto the balcony. He handed us a paper to silently read. It said:

"It is no longer safe for us to stay in Germany. I have found a way for you children, and hopefully your mother and me, to leave the country. You will not leave together. We will tell you the night before you leave. Do not say anything. When you get to England, for that is the place you are to go, find the house of your grandmother. You will be safe. I trust you to keep this a secret."

I wanted to say something, to protest. Why did our family have to separate like this? Why was it always us? Life hadn't always been this way. I could remember a different house, where we were happy. But we'd had to move. I didn't want to move again.

"Go help Mama, Lila. Amos, help Daniel." Daddy's voice warned us not to speak of what we'd read. I gave Amos a serious look and brushed my curls out of my face. The unspoken words between us remained, and we knew we would discuss this later.

Later, after the dishes had been washed, and stories read, and the littlest ones put to bed, I sat at the table, watching. It was later than I normally stayed up, but I wasn't tired.

"Dalilah, you should go to bed." Mama barely looked up from her knitting. The half-finished sock continued to grow. I didn't move. Abigail, my oldest sibling, focused on the worn dress she hemmed for Rebecca.

“Esther and Isaiah weren’t at school today, Father.” Samuel finally looked up from his sums. “Neither were Dinah, Adam, Jacob, Noah, and Jonathan.”

“What? Are they sick?” I asked, for these absences were news to me. Esther Goldberg and Jacob Biderman had been in my class at school before I stopped going.

“Let’s hope for that.” Mama’s forehead creased into lines of worry. We had gone to synagogue with the Goldbergs and Bidermans.

“Lila, time for bed now. You too, Samuel, Daniel, Abigail. Mama and I must talk.”

“Come, Lila. Goodnight.” Abigail put her knitting away and stood up, kissing our parents goodnight.

“Goodnight.” I wandered into the bedroom and lay down on my bed, which seemed too big without Ruth. When I finally slept, it was a fitful sleep filled with nightmares and sorrows.

The next few weeks were busy, but we children were always alert. We were prepared, in case it was our turn to join Ruth and Jonah. But the next separation came too soon and hard.

Mama wrapped a length of cloth around Abigail, securing tiny Sarah against our oldest sister’s pixy-frame. Samuel dutifully handed Abigail a bundle of clothes and food and supplies. Mama brushed Sarah’s hair away from her face and kissed the sleeping child’s forehead.

“Godspeed.” Mama wished Abigail as she hugged her close.

“My daughters.” Daddy murmured and embraced them tightly for a long time.

We all kissed them goodbye and wished them a good journey. Abigail looked both scared and brave, defiant and submissive, fearful and hopeful as Papa directed her into the darkness outside our apartment, leading her towards the start of a very long journey.

“Dear God, please watch over my children.” Mama prayed, her voice catching. I slipped my arm around her. I would have to be strong for her, strong for the little girls that were left. I leaned my head against mama’s head and felt a warm tear against my forehead. Mama quickly wiped it away.

“We will have to move. People will become suspicious soon.” Father cradled Rebecca in his arms protectively. “Our new neighbors will not notice that there are less children.”

I glanced around the night, watchful for glowing eyes and listening ears. All I heard were crickets and the wind ripping through the trees. I pulled my knitted shawl tighter around my shoulders. The darkness seemed to nearly swallow my surroundings. A cold shiver ran down my spine. Samuel wrapped his strong arms around me and Mama. He'd grown so tall recently.

"Tomorrow, I will go look for a place." He told Daddy.

"But, what about school, Samuel? Is learning not important anymore?"

"I will catch up, Mama, in England. Besides, school isn't safe anymore. We should not return. Headmaster has agreed to tell the board that we are sick. It will give us a few weeks."

"The schools are not even safe anymore?" Mama whispered, barely a question, nearly a statement. "Do only the rich and prominent have the right to education?"

"Oh, Mama." I buried myself in her embrace and cried.

"Hush, Lila." Mama herself cried as she brushed away my tears. "Hush. Hush." I knew that, as Mama comforted me, she was comforting herself, and I breathed a sigh of hope, knowing there was comfort, even in such times as the ones that fell hard on us then.

Days would pass without mention of the ones who were not home. Weeks could go by without any of us mentioning the dangers. The dangers always loomed in the dark corners of our minds, threatening the fake peace we presented the world.

"Amos, after dinner, you and I are going on a walk. Okay, son?" Daddy said calmly as he placed a napkin on his lap one evening at dinner, five months after Abigail and Sarah had left.

My breath caught as I understood the secret meaning of my father's words. Ten-year-old Amos nodded his head sharply, and then he took another helping of food. We all knew that Amos might not have another warm meal for weeks, or even months.

My hands trembled as I reached for the two extra loaves of bread my mother had cooked that week and placed them on the large cloth. Then I added some apples and cheese and other foods and tied the cloth up. "Here, Amos."

"Thank you, Delilah." Amos stuffed the pack into his school bag. "I'll miss you."

“It’ll only be a short time.” Was my too-quick reply. I still couldn’t help but think of Jonah and Ruth, who’d left almost a year earlier. “I’ll see you in England, little brother.”

“See you there, my sister.” Amos wrapped me up in a tight hug. “See you soon.” He emphasized the last word. Then he bade goodbye to our siblings and mother and walked out our front door as if he had not a care in the world.

Daddy woke me up in the middle of the night nearly three months later. He helped me into a car and then out of it again. Then I was carried upstairs and into a room that was not my own. I was too tired to care, and I fell back asleep.

“Wake up, daughter of mine.” Mama’s voice sounded too bright, like it did when she tried to show that she wasn’t upset when she was.

“Where are we?” I asked, rubbing my sleepy eyes.

“Our new apartment. You have a room almost completely to yourself!” Mama was trying to be happy.

I sat up and yawned. The room around me was barely more than a closet with a tiny window. There was just enough room for the large pallet I lay on and several boxes with my things and Eve’s things. Too tired to understand, I started asking where Rebecca would sleep. Mama’s eyes started filling with tears when I woke up and realized what had happened the night before. I stopped talking.

It didn’t take long for me to notice that Daniel was gone, too, and to guess as to who had taken Rebecca to England. I could tell that Samuel was sad about not being able to escape with his twin, but he tried to put on a brave face. I hoped that he would be able to come with me when I escaped.

While we were living at our new apartment, Mama gave birth to a baby boy. I loved and cared for him.

“Hush, little one. Do not cry. You’ll wake the neighbors.” I rocked baby Micah in my arms and tried my best to sooth him. “Shh.” Micah had grown louder and louder, and I feared that, soon, he would be so loud that neighbors complained.

“Delilah.” My father startled me as he walked into the room. “Micah is growing too loud.”

“I’m trying.” I wanted to cry.

“No. You and Micah and Obadiah and Samuel are leaving.” My father’s words surprised me.

“When?” I barely dared to ask.

“Very soon.”

Soon turned out to be two days later. Daddy took all of us kids to a market, where he was leading us to the truck that would take us on the start of our trip. In the mud, we kept slipping and nearly falling. When Samuel finally did fall, he hit his arm on a rock, and I could see blood pour from his cut. Daddy helped him up, and then he turned to me with a new urgency in his voice.

“Take Obadiah and Micah to the medical truck for transporting contagious bodies. Do not tell the driver to wait. Ask the driver where the closest bus stop is to the northwest. He’ll help you from there.”

“What about you and Samuel?” I did not trust myself to lead my brothers to safety.

“I need to get Samuel help. I love you, Delilah. And Obadiah.” He kissed us three children on the heads. “Never forget that. I love you.”

I looked at my father, unsure of what to say or how to act. “Daddy...”

“No buts. Keep them safe.”

“I love you, Daddy.” I hugged him.

“Hurry.” He tur me towards the truck. I focused on putting one foot in front of the next and not looking back. I was almost at the truck when a man called out to me. He wore the uniform of Hitler’s soldiers.

“You. Girl. Where are you going?”

“My father sent me. To buy food.” I pointed at the worm-filled apples and hard pears.

“But I’ve seen your brother before. In the Jewish neighborhood. Why are you here?”

“My father sent me to buy food.” I stubbornly said, not budging on my story.

“I do not believe you. You will come with me.” With that, he roughly took me by the arm and led me away from my chance at safety.

I knew where the man was taking me. I knew what happened to the children who went to the train stations. I knew what happened to the children sent to the camps. I knew what happened to children like my brother. I couldn’t let that happen. But I couldn’t see how to stop it.

Soon we were just three children in a crowd of many. I recognized a few of them. My heart sank deeper with each step. I knew that Obadiah and Micah probably wouldn’t last long at any camp, both small and unable to work, but I didn’t know what to do.

When I saw the train, I wanted to cry. I was going to die. I knew it. I wanted to scream when someone grabbed Obadiah away from me, and then Micah. I didn’t know what to do. I looked and looked, but I couldn’t see them. They were gone, lost. I had failed my father and my brothers.

“When they are not looking, put this on. Then slip into the crowd over there.” A harsh voice whispered, handing me the nicest dress I’d ever have worn. When I looked up to where the calloused hand pointed, I saw a crowd of school children, and all the girls wore the same dress.

“Thank you.” I whispered back.

“Do not look interested or scared. They will know something is wrong.” Then the lady was gone.

I glanced around and pulled the large dress over my head. As we stepped by the school children, I stumbled, then stood up, the dress pulled down. I quickly turned around and walked down the street, close the back of the group.

I turned down a street with two of the girls when I caught sight of the woman. She and an extremely lumpy man were walking into a house near the end of the block. I followed them and turned up their path, ready to give the dress back.

The door opened before I could knock on it. The lady greeted me, welcoming me into the house as if I were her daughter.

I walked into the house just as the man appeared again. He and the lady both looked much skinnier than earlier. “Bring the girl to the room.” The woman ordered.

The man nodded and led me down the hallway to a bedroom. Then he pulled up the rug and opened a trap door. “You’ll be leaving tomorrow. Get some sleep.”

I climbed down the ladder, and, to my delight, saw Obadiah and Micah waiting for me. They had been the odd lumps under the couple’s clothes. We were safe, at least for then.

The next day, we were sent off in a truck filled with old furniture. We drove for hours and hours, never stopping. When we did stop, the sun had gone down, and it was dark. The driver had only one instruction for us.

“Go that way for about half a mile until you get the farmhouse. They’ll take you in.” Then he drove away, and we walked and walked.

The man who grabbed me placed a hand over my mouth so I could not scream. I tried to thrash out, but he held me tightly. And gently, too. When a woman’s hands reached out to calm me and cradle Micah, I stopped kicking. The hands over my mouth dropped away, and I gasped in the air.

“Calm down, child. You are safe for now.” The voice was quiet and French.

“Was I really in France?” I wondered. *“Had I made it that far already?”*

“Come, children.” An aged lady motioned towards the house. “Let’s get you warm.”

Inside the house, we met the family. The man who’d grabbed me was Louis, and the lady was Adaline. The older woman was Colette. Louis and Adaline had three older children: Louis III, Julian, and Ariana. Ariana fed us warm bowls of soup, and Julian found blankets for us to wrap around our trembling shoulders. Adaline fed milk to Micah.

Much remained unsaid. The house was quiet as we ate, and, when we finished, we were simply beckoned deeper into the house.

“This is where you may sleep and stay, until it is time for you to go.” Adaline very carefully moved a large bookshelf from one wall in Ariana and Colette’s room. Behind it, a door hid. She opened that to reveal a study, with bookshelves lining three walls. Adaline moved a few books off of one shelf, then I helped her pull one end. The bookshelf was a door!

“This is Laura Anne, and Madeleine, and Mary.” Inside the tiny room sat three girls. Mary seemed to be the oldest, and I could tell she was pregnant. She fidgeted with the rings on her finger, her eyes uneasy. Madeleine was second oldest, and she looked very Jewish. Laura Anne was crippled. Her left leg seemed to be bent in too many places. “This is Delilah, Obadiah, and Micah.”

“Hello, children.” Laura Anne’s voice was clear, and American. I gaped at her. I hadn’t seen an American in years, or at least not knowingly done so. “Come. There is plenty of room.” She squirmed closer to the wall, gesturing to an open patch of floor. “I’m sure that there are plenty of quilts and such to go around.”

“Yes.” Mary whispered, hoarsely. “Come in. I will hold the child, so you may rest.”

“Please.” I sagged in exhaustion, and Mary lifted Micah to herself, cradling him gently. I sank to the floor and to sleep. In my dreams, I was being chased, and then hidden, but then they found me. The Nazis found me.

“Wake up, *siostra*.” Mary shook me early one morning nearly two weeks later. “Take Obadiah’s hand and come.” She whispered. She picked up Micah and murmured to him. “Shh, *dziecko*. Shh.” By now, we were all used to the Polish that was scattered throughout Mary’s sentences. I’d grown familiar with the word “*siostra*,” which meant sister, and the word “*dziecko*,” baby.

“What is wrong?” I asked, trembling as I did the buttons on Obadiah’s sweater.

“We’re leaving. The truck is here to take us to the boat.” Laura Anne was also trembling, but her eyes were filled with the excitement of looming freedom. She stood close to Madeleine as we waited. I nervously folded blankets. We were ready, each person carrying their own pack on their back, when Adaline came to get us. She led us out into the darkness of the pre-dawn morning. I shivered slightly, then I took baby Micah in my arms and held him close while Mary

and Obadiah were helped into a truck. Then went Madeleine, and then Laura Anne insisted I go. She slowly climbed in last.

The ride was bumpy and uncomfortable, and we weren't allowed to talk, but, as each second passed, it became a triumphant trip. Our timid smiles grew braver as we raced closer and closer to freedom. We were brave for leaving, and we would be brave, no matter what.

When we finally pulled up to the woods that separated us from our ride to freedom, we were all stiff as boards. I stretched my limbs and shook out my hands. I was nearly bouncing. I was this close to freedom and a life of not having to hide and being reunited with my siblings.

"Godspeed." Someone whispered. I was fairly certain it was the truck-driver. I wished it back, and then waited for everyone to get their bearings. With pounding hearts, we started on our journey through the woods and to the beach, hoping that we'd be safe, and being brave all the while.

Thick undergrowth and tired feet slowed our tiny group down. We walked as quietly as possible, but we still made a great deal of noise.

"Almost there!" Laura Anne whispered in delight as she pointed to a sliver of blue water far away. We all cheered quietly in delight, and I quickened my pace. At long last, I reached the end of the woods and showed Obadiah and Micah our ticket to freedom, the English Channel.

"Oh!" Madeleine cheered, surprising us all. She was normally so quiet. We all cheered with her as we raced down the beach to the boat waiting for us. Madeleine shocked us all by kissing the man standing by it. "My husband." She explained as she caught up his hand. He squeezed it tightly and she smiled.

"Nice to meet you." I shook his hand.

"Let's get all of us to safety." He replied, then he started to help each of us into the waiting sailboat.

"Oh, yes." Laura Anne agreed.

One by one, we climbed onto the boat and helped the others up. When Madeleine and her husband pushed the boat into deeper water, we all cheered them on. At last, Madeleine climbed

on, her husband close behind her. We all laughed and smiled as the wind filled our sail and we headed farther to sea.

We hadn't gone far before we saw the smoke. There was a great black cloud rising into the sky, and planes swarming around it. After a brief discussion, we decided to get a closer look.

Another boat met us before we could get too far. The man in it saw me and called out to us.

"Stop! That is not a safe place for young ones or women." He yelled.

"What is wrong?" Madeleine's husband, named Adam, asked.

"A boat's been shot. It's on fire and sinking fast. We're trying to get as many people out as possible. I've got some here." He motioned to the tired and sick men in his boat. "I'm bringing them to England, then coming right back to help." He explained.

"Let us take them. Then you can get more, and more men will get there faster. I'll drop your passengers and mine off in England and join you." Adam called out in response.

"Thank you." The men set to transferring the injured into our boat, where we set to making them as comfortable as possible. I listened to them, and decided that I loved English accents.

"Thanks, missy." One of the men said as I gave him a sip of fresh water.

"Welcome."

"You German?" He asked.

"I'm Jewish, and I was raised in Germany, but I'm not German." Was my fierce reply.

He nodded sympathetically. I focused my eyes on the horizon, as England appeared and grew larger and larger and closer and closer. When, at last we reached the sandy shores, my heart was alighting with joy and anticipation. My siblings had made this journey before me, and now two of my brothers and I had completed it.

"Welcome to England, missy." The man said. "Welcome to Kent."

On the shores, many people greeted us, taking the injured men away, and bring the rest of us to shelter. Madeleine bade a tearful goodbye to her husband, then followed the rest of us to the little town nestled nearby.

The town was a mess of crazed chaos. Everywhere there were people, bustling about, doing things. A mother pulled her young daughter towards me, to the path leading out of the village, a worried expression on her face. The little girl stumbled along slowly, more interested in what lay behind than ahead.

“Emily Ruth, hurry up. The village is not the place for a little girl right now.” The woman chided her. I blinked several times. With her short, curly blonde hair and pale blue dress, the girl looked like many I’d already seen in the village. But the name struck a bell in my mind. I grabbed Obadiah’s hand and held Micah closer as I ran after the woman.

“Stop! Stop, please! Wait!” I yelled, tripping over loose stones. The woman turned around and saw me, and the surprise expression on her face quickly faded into one of recognition.

“Delilah? Obadiah?” She asked.

I nodded as I panted next to her. “And baby Micah.” I finally added.

“Your grandparents and siblings will be so happy.” She said. “This is Ruth.” She pointed to the little girl I’d already recognized, despite the two and a half years that had passed since I’d seen her.

“Hi, Ruthie.” I gave my little sister a big hug.

“Let’s get you children home.” The lady said.

“Okay.” I blissfully imagined warm beds, warm food, warm baths, and the joyful family reunion awaiting me.

“I’m Jane, by the way.” The lady said as she took Micah in her arms.

“She’s the one who brought me and Jonah here.” Ruth happily explained. At almost-nine-years, Ruth looked just like Abigail had at the same age. I highly suspected I’d looked like that too, and that Jonah would look like all of my brothers.

“Let’s hurry. Your family is waiting!” Laughed Jane as we raced down the path towards the house they called home.

After the warmth of reuniting with my loved ones, the warmth of a good bath, and the warmth of good food, I was ready for the warmth of a soft bed. As I lay down and Grandma pulled the covers over me, we talked.

“You did a wonderful job watching out for Micah and Obadiah.” She whispered.

“Thank you, Grandma.” I whispered in reply, snuggling under thick covers.

“Did your father ever tell you about my brother?” She asked, and I could see the tears that pricked at her eyes.

“No. What about your brother?” I asked. I’d known my grandmother had lots of brothers and sisters, but I could tell that there was something special about this.

“He was taken away. My parents sent him away. To a place like where Hitler wanted to send your brother.”

“Was he like Obadiah?” I asked, barely daring to breathe.

Grandma nodded her head.

I contemplated this for a moment, but exhaustion blurred my mind. After a moment, Grandma rose to leave, but I had two more questions.

“Grandma, what was his name? What’s your name?”

“His name was Hugh. And my name is Alice.” She said, then she kissed me goodnight, and left me to sleep.