

## The Choice by Edith Eger

### Intro:

In 1944, sixteen-year-old ballerina Edith Eger was sent to Auschwitz. Separated from her parents on arrival, she endures unimaginable experiences, including being made to dance for the infamous Josef Mengele.

When the camp is finally liberated, she is pulled from a pile of bodies, barely alive.

In *The Choice*, she shares her life and how, by helping others with their own versions of trauma, she discovered an honesty, strength and empowerment within herself.

### From Chapter 3: Dancing in Hell

“ALL YOUR ECSTASY in life is going to come from the inside,” my ballet master had told me. I never understood what he meant. Until Auschwitz.

Magda stares at the chimney on top of the building our mother entered. “The soul never dies,” she says. My sister finds words of comfort. But I am in shock. I am numb. I can’t think about the incomprehensible things that are happening, that have already happened. I can’t picture my mother consumed by flames. I can’t fully grasp that she is gone. And I can’t ask why. I can’t even grieve. Not now. It will take all of my attention to survive the next minute, the next breath. I will survive if my sister is there. I will survive by attaching myself to her as though I am her shadow.

We are herded through the silent yet echoing showers. We are robbed of our hair. We stand outside, shorn and naked, waiting for our uniforms. Taunts from the kapos and SS officers swarm us like arrows grazing our bare, wet skin. Worse than their words are their eyes. I’m sure the disgust with which they glare at us could tear my skin, split my ribs. Their hate is both possessive and dismissive, and it makes me ill. Once I thought that Eric would be the first man to see me naked. Now he will never see my flesh unscarred by their hatred. Have they already made me something less than human? Will I ever resemble the girl I was? *I will never forget your eyes, your hands.* I have to keep myself together, if not for myself then for Eric.

The contradictions in this place unnerve me. Murder, we’ve just learned, is efficient here. Systematic. But there seems to be no system in place for distributing the uniforms for which we’ve been waiting most of the day. The guards are cruel and rigid, yet it seems that no one is in charge. The scrutiny they give our bodies doesn’t signal our value, it signifies only the degree to which we have been forgotten by the world. Nothing makes sense. But this, too, the interminable waiting, the complete absence of reason, must be part of the design. How can I keep myself steady in a place where the only steadiness is in fences, in death, in humiliation, in the steadily churning smoke?

Magda finally speaks to me. “How do I look?” she asks. “Tell me the truth.”

The truth? She looks like a mangy dog. A naked stranger. I can’t tell her this, of course, but any lie would hurt too much and so I must find an impossible answer, a truth that doesn’t wound. I gaze into the fierce blue of her eyes and think that even for her to ask the question, “How do I look?” is the bravest thing I’ve ever heard. There aren’t mirrors here. She is asking me to help her find and face herself. And so I tell her the one true thing that’s mine to say.

“Your eyes,” I tell my sister, “they’re so beautiful. I never noticed them when they were covered up by all that hair.” It’s the first time I see that we have a choice: to pay attention to what we’ve lost or to pay attention to what we still have.

“Thank you,” she whispers.

The other things I want to ask her, tell her, seem better left wordless. Words can't give shape to this new reality. To the gray coat of my mama's shoulder as I lean on her and the train goes on and on. To my papa's face overgrown with shadow. To what I wouldn't give to have those dark and hungry hours back again. To the transformation of my parents into smoke. Both of my parents. I must assume my father is dead too.

We hear clipped voices speaking German outside the barracks. The kapo pulls herself straight as the door rattles open. There on the threshold I recognize the uniformed officer from the selection line. I know it's him, the way he smiles with his lips parted, the gap between his front teeth. Dr. Mengele, we learn. He is a refined killer and a lover of the arts. He trawls among the barracks in the evenings, searching for talented inmates to entertain him. He walks in tonight with his entourage of assistants and casts his gaze like a net over the new arrivals with our baggy dresses and our hastily shorn hair. We stand still, backs to the wooden bunks that edge the room. He examines us. Magda ever so subtly grazes my hand with hers. Dr. Mengele barks out a question, and before I know what is happening, the girls standing nearest me, who know I trained as a ballerina and gymnast back in Kassa, push me forward, closer to the Angel of Death.

He studies me. I don't know where to put my eyes. I stare straight ahead at the open door. The orchestra is assembled just outside. They are silent, awaiting orders. I feel like Eurydice in the underworld, waiting for Orpheus to strike a chord on his lyre that can melt the heart of Hades and set me free. Or I am Salome, made to dance for her stepfather, Herod, lifting veil after veil to expose her flesh. Does the dance give her power, or does the dance strip it away?

“Little dancer,” Dr. Mengele says, “dance for me.” He directs the musicians to begin playing. The familiar opening strain of “The Blue Danube” waltz filters into the dark, close room. Mengele's eyes bulge at me. I'm lucky. I know a routine to “The Blue Danube” that I can dance in my sleep. But my limbs are heavy, as in a nightmare when there's danger and you can't run away. “Dance!” he commands again, and I feel my body start to move.

First the high kick. Then the pirouette and turn. The splits. And up. As I step and bend and twirl, I can hear Mengele talking to his assistant. He never takes his eyes off me, but he attends to his duties as he watches. I can hear his voice over the music. He discusses with the other officer which ones of the hundred girls present will be killed next. If I miss a step, if I do anything to displease him, it could be me. I dance. I dance. I am dancing in hell. I can't bear to see the executioner as he decides our fates. I close my eyes.

I focus on my routine, on my years of training—each line and curve of my body like a syllable in verse, my body telling a story: A girl arrives at a dance. She spins in excitement and anticipation. Then she pauses to reflect and observe. What will happen in the hours ahead? Whom will she meet? She turns toward a fountain, arms sweeping up and around to embrace the scene. She bends to pick up flowers and tosses them one at a time to her admirers and fellow revelers, throwing flowers to the people, handing out tokens of love. I can hear the violins swell. My heart races. In the private darkness within, I hear my mother's words come back to me, as though she is there in the barren room, whispering below the music. *Just remember, no one can take away from you what you've put in your own mind.* Dr. Mengele, my fellow starved-to-the-bone inmates, the defiant who will survive and the soon to be dead, even my beloved sister disappear, and the only world that exists is the one inside my head. “The Blue Danube” fades, and now I can hear Tchaikovsky's *Romeo and Juliet*. The barracks's floor becomes a stage at the Budapest opera house. I dance for my fans in the audience. I dance within the glow of hot lights. I dance for my lover, Romeo, as he lifts me high above the stage. I dance for love. I dance for life.

As I dance, I discover a piece of wisdom that I have never forgotten. I will never know what miracle of grace allows me this insight. It will save my life many times, even after the horror is over. I can see

that Dr. Mengele, the seasoned killer who just this morning murdered my mother, is more pitiful than me. I am free in my mind, which he can never be. He will always have to live with what he's done. He is more a prisoner than I am. As I close my routine with a final, graceful split, I pray, but it isn't myself I pray for. I pray for him. I pray, for his sake, that he won't have the need to kill me.

He must be impressed by my performance, because he tosses me a loaf of bread—a gesture, as it turns out, that will later save my life. As evening turns to night, I share the bread with Magda and our bunkmates. I am grateful to have bread. I am grateful to be alive.