

# Blinded

Jane Saginaw

*This passage is excerpted from the manuscript of Because the World is Round, a memoir that chronicles the author's trip around the world as a fifteen-year-old with her father, brother, and mother who was wheelchair-bound from polio.*

**T**EL AVIV, MARCH 1970. THE SUNSHINE OF TEL AVIV never reached the Hausmans' grocery store on Sirkin Street. Even though our rented apartment shared a courtyard with their shop, our place was sun-filled in the mornings, while the Hausmans' store stayed perpetually dark. When the couple noticed me crossing the courtyard, they slowly looked up, synchronizing the lift of their chins. They sat crouched on the shaded pavement in low plastic chairs reviewing a Yiddish daily. Mr. Hausman folded his newspaper and passed it to his wife. He clapped his hands to his knees and stood, opened the screen door of his grocery. I followed him inside.

"Ach," he gasped as he flicked on the table lamp that sat on his counter. Always *ach*—never *shalom!* never *boker tov!* or any other pleasantness when I came on my daily errand. *Ach*. I didn't like venturing into the gloom of his store any more than he liked the inconvenience of having to attend to me. Boxes of crackers and soup nuts were scattered across the shelves next to cans of sardines and jars of pickled herring. The dairy case was a jumble of wrapped cheeses and cartons of yogurt.

Mr. Hausman sighed, "Nu?"

"Nescafe, please," I said and smiled. I pointed to the label on the empty glass jar that Mom had given me to replace. Mom told me not to be bothered by Mr. Hausman's sullenness. "It's his prerogative to be grumpy," she insisted. "He doesn't mean any harm." She suggested that he understood more English than he let on. "Just show him the jar and be nice," she said. "He deserves some respect."

“Yah. Yah. Farshteyn. Farshteyn.” *I understand.* Mr. Hausman replied to me in Yiddish. He had a stubbly growth of beard but he was dressed neatly in a brown cotton sweater that he tucked into high-waisted trousers in an old-fashioned European style.

He removed a coffee jar from a shelf and tapped it onto the Formica counter at the side of his cash register, its label facing out in case there was any doubt that he had understood my request. He pulled a pencil from a tin can holder and scribbled the cost of the Nescafe onto a stapled pad of scratch paper that was our family’s running tabulation. The sleeve of his sweater was pushed up toward his elbow and I saw numbers tattooed on the skin of his inner arm above the wrist. I had never noticed them before: five numbers, unevenly spaced, thick and greenish-black. I glanced away, down at the countertop, and searched for a pattern in the cracks in the Formica.

## **I felt less like a nuisance and more like an intruder now, entering personal territory where I didn’t belong and wasn’t wanted.**

Mr. Hausman tugged briskly at his sleeve and covered up his numbers before he handed me the Nescafe. The impenetrable expression that had seemed permanent on his face softened slightly. The tension in his jaw loosened, as I felt mine tighten. I wished I hadn’t seen his tattoo. Why didn’t he keep his arm covered? I felt less like a nuisance and more like an intruder now, entering personal territory where I didn’t belong and wasn’t wanted. I knew so little about the Holocaust. My parents only talked about World War II in whispers and euphemisms: “The Camps.” “The Germans.” “The Horror.” “The Refugees.” I didn’t have enough information to develop a full impression out of the words I heard, but I received the message not to ask any questions. I understood that the topic of the war was off limits, kept mysterious and hidden on purpose in the same way that our neighbor’s diagnosis of cancer was. Don’t ask. I knew that Mr. Hausman’s numbers were a reminder of something unspeakable.

I paused before I left his grocery store and looked up at the brusque man in the thin brown sweater, curious to know more about him. I wanted to understand what happened, what he had survived, how he had survived it, and why the topic was taboo. I smiled at him again, this time without the residue of sunshine on my face and without a request for assistance. Mr. Hausman considered my smile. It seemed like the first time he ever really looked at me. He muttered something in Yiddish and I didn’t respond. He knew I didn’t understand him so he repeated himself in a slower, louder voice. But his words were beyond me.

“Toda,” I said in Hebrew and lifted my jar of coffee.  
“Thank you, Mr. Hausman.”

\* \*

Leah Steinwasser was the only other person I'd ever known who had numbers tattooed on her forearm. She was an artist who had lived in Dallas. Mom befriended her when Leah showed up for services at our synagogue on a Friday night—alone, bewildered, a refugee from Germany. Mom invited her to join us for dinner one evening at our house on Royal Springs when I was six years old.

“Don't stare at the numbers on her arm,” Mom warned me as I folded paper napkins into triangles and set them on the table by the side of our dinner plates. “She's from Europe. She's had a very sad life. Very difficult.”

I had been around Leah several times before. Mom would call her sometimes and invite her to parties. “It's not good for her to be by herself all the time,” Mom would say and lower her head. She and Dad would pick Leah up at her apartment on Walnut Hill and I would curl up in the backseat of the car and watch her double lock her door and then slowly descend the metal stairs of her building while glancing around as if trying to avoid detection. She always looked slightly disoriented—not shy—just vaguely disconnected. My parents would introduce her to their friends and Leah would smile politely and shake hands but not fully engage, even with people who spoke to her in German. It must be because she lived alone, I thought.

I liked to trail behind Leah and watch the manner of her movement. She was quiet and gentle and there was such ease in the way she drifted through a room of strangers, elegant and detached, as if she could dissolve if she wanted to, like a cube of sugar in a cup of tea. She had thick red hair with gold strands shining through, which she pulled tightly to the back of her head in a low ponytail. She didn't wear makeup and the skin on her face was pale and pockmarked, her eyes a luminous grey-green. She only opened her eyelids halfway, which heightened her mystery and enhanced her beauty. I liked to look at her eyes when she wasn't looking at me. Her gaze was fixed and turned inward.

Leah painted a portrait of King David that hung over the piano in our living room between a set of antique Russian zithers. The biblical king wore a tarnished-gold crown and held a harp high to his chest at an exaggerated angle. His fingers were thin and tapered and they rested on the instrument over his heart. King David's face was box-shaped and tilted to the side, cast in shadows. He stared into the corner of the canvas as if he were searching the stars in a bleak black sky. But his eyes were hollowed out. King David looked blind.

I counted out the forks, spoons and knives for the dinner table as Mom poured Chianti into the spaghetti sauce that simmered on the stovetop. Our house smelled warm.

“Can Leah speak English?” I asked.

Mom stirred the pot. “She understands a lot. She’s smart. She’s very creative and sensitive. But she doesn’t like to talk too much.”

She tapped the wooden spoon onto the side of her cookware. “She’s an orphan, Janie. She’s got nothing. No one.”

I set the forks on top of the napkins, careful that each one was upright and in its proper place. I knew Leah was an orphan. Grandma was an orphan in Europe, too. *We were five children. Orphans.* I knew that Mom considered being parentless as the worst fate imaginable. I had a doll called Poor Pitiful Pearl. Her wide eyes spread to the far sides of her face and her dress was tattered and she wore a scarf that covered all her hair and knotted under her chin. Mom had explained that Pearl was pitiful because she didn’t have a mother to take care of her. “But when you play with her it cheers her up!” Mom said when she bought me the doll for Hanukah. I liked Pearl. I liked her better than my stuffed standard poodle and the other toys that I lined up on the carpet next to my bed. She had a straightforward gaze that was honest, not like my other dolls with pretend smiles and vacant-looking eyes. Pearl may have been pitiful, but her sadness made her more real. I never felt sorry for her. We kept each other company.

I didn’t know about war orphans, though. And when Mom said Leah was an orphan she didn’t mention Hitler or gas chambers or concentration camps. She never said Auschwitz. Why would she have? It’s not as if I could have understood what happened there. But I knew there was tremendous misery in the world. And even at age six I understood that what happened in the past lingered and stayed present, even if it wasn’t talked about. Things were reminders. Things I could see—Leah’s tattoo and Mom’s wheelchair and Pearl’s tattered clothes, things I couldn’t ignore. They were like Grandma’s Yiddish accent—remnants that conveyed stories without using words. When I thought about Leah, I sensed that history was inked onto her arm.

“Why doesn’t she take the numbers off?” I asked.

“Jane—”

Mom lowered her spoon.

“They don’t erase. She can’t get rid of them. The numbers are left from her childhood in Europe.” Mom flattened her hand over her leg brace to straighten a pleat in her skirt. “They’ll never go away,” she said.

I finished organizing the dinner table and didn’t ask anything more. When the doorbell chimed, I ran from the kitchen to answer it. Leah stood at the threshold in a green sleeveless sundress that matched the color of her eyes. She smiled and I noticed how the expression stopped at her cheeks and only registered slightly in her eyes. When she stepped into the house, I held myself back and followed behind her. She wore sandals with hard leather soles, but her footsteps didn’t make a sound on our tile floor. I followed her, just as quietly and just as light on my bare feet.

“Guten abend,” she greeted Mom in German.

“A guten tog,” Mom replied in Yiddish.

I climbed onto Mom’s lap and listened to the two of them speak foreign languages. Leah had brought some flowers from her garden, and Mom arranged them in a glass vase. Their conversation trailed off into silence.

“Come on,” Mom said in English now. “Let’s have a drink while we wait for Sol.”

Leah pushed the two of us in Mom’s wheelchair from the kitchen to the living room. Mom had set out a crystal decanter of sherry, two miniature wine glasses and a box of Winston cigarettes on the marble coffee table near the front window. Evening light angled through the shutters and hit the side of the decanter so that the amber wine glowed. Mom patted the side of my waist as a cue for me to move away, but I wanted to lean back into her chest and lose myself into her body. I wanted to make myself invisible and watch the two of them talk and try to uncover the secret of how they could be friends if they didn’t speak the same language. But Mom tapped my waist again and I slid to the floor.

“L’chaim!” the two women said and they touched the rims of their glasses together.

“To life!” Mom said in English.

Leah pulled two Winstons from the box, placed them parallel between her lips, lit them together and puffed. She handed one to Mom and the two women sat side-by-side, sipping wine, pulling drags on their cigarettes, and staring at an unmarked spot in the grey striations of the marble tabletop.

I walked over to the yellow tufted sofa near the piano and sat down facing the portrait of King David. Mom and Leah seemed like life-long old friends, sitting and waiting, lost in their own minds. Each of them had a story that they didn’t want to talk about. And they knew they didn’t have to because they understood each other’s silence. The cigarette smoke mixed with the smell of spaghetti sauce and I pulled my legs into my chest and cupped my ankles in my hands. I stared into the hollow eyes of King David, wondering what it was that he couldn’t see.