

KADDISH

by marci stillerman

KADDISH* * * Friday night, my mother lights the Sabbath candles but she does not say the Sabbath prayer. Instead, her head covered with a clean linen cloth, hands shielding her eyes, she intones five names in eerie monotone, her voice wet with tears: Abrams, Alter, Bergmann, Brounstein, Cohen. We sit, heads bowed a silent moment. Then my mother removes her hands from her eyes and they shine star-bright in the candle light. She smiles around the table, and we eat our Sabbath meal. Every Sabbath is the same but for the names. Next week: Duber, Ehrman, Epstein, Feldman. Fink. Before I know who the names belong to, I know them all by heart, an alphabetic ballad: Gelberman, Guthman, Hornstein, Huber, Hess. They are names my mother must remember, for if she does not remember, they never lived, they never died: Immerman, Israel Issacs, Jacobs, Kahn. My mother was a child of the death camps, passed her adolescence there. Survived. The people of the names did not. Levin, Lewitz, Marks, Newmann, Opher. A blue number was burned into my mother's arm: D347950, and, a shameful tattoo, is imprinted there forever. On her mind, imprinted there forever are the names of those sent to the left. To death in the ovens: Rosenberg, Silverman, Sturm, Tannenburg, Taub. The names have a terrible power over me. They echo in my brain, a weird alphabet: Uhelmann, Unterman, Voss, Weinstein, Wax. I am told, in time, the stories of the camps. Every child must know so it will not be allowed to happen again. We must never forget. As I grow older, I hear of children's brains bashed against walls, mutilations, starvation, inhuman beatings. Sickness, darkness, cold, and prayers unanswered. The stuff of nightmares. I survive the nightmares. But the names hold me in awful thrall. Werner, Wessel, Youngman, Yaeger, Zeiss. Names I know from earliest childhood, from even before I was born. Names I know in perfect order but can never say aloud. I form them with my lips each Sabbath Eve when Mother lights the yarzeit candles, and recites the Kaddish in their memory:

Axelrod, Buehler, Crystal, Dorff. * * * Hebrew prayer for the dead

