

In Elie Wiesel's memoir Night, one of the greatest scenes of dehumanization and horror is when Elie's family first arrives at Auschwitz and he is abruptly separated from his Mother and sisters. The entire scene takes less than a page, but it is one of the most devastating scenes of the book. As Elie's family walks into the concentration camp, a guard "quietly, indifferently" says, "Men to the left! Women to the right!" (29). At the time, Elie has no idea what is happening; only later does he realize "that this was the moment in time and the place where I was leaving my mother and Tzipora forever" (29). I can only imagine how terrifying that experience must have been: to be only 14 and to be separated from one's mother. Elie captures the coldness and cruelty of the emotionless guard through the sparseness of his own narration. His language is stark and simple; he reports no emotion. Although this is not the first cruelty Elie and the other Jews experience, it does mark the beginning of a central aspect of their dehumanization: becoming numbed to the horrors around them. He knows (and we know) what is happening is horrible, but he has no words to capture his emotion. The scene also introduces another central theme of Night – that of Elie's and his father's desperate clinging to each other: "I kept walking, my father holding my hand" (29). Until his father's death, Elie is driven to stay by his father; along with the sheer animal will to survive, this is his only remaining motivation. As Elie loses one member of his family, he clings ever more fervently to what remains of it. This scene is powerful and crucial because it introduces two major themes and concerns of the memoir. On one hand, it presents the loss of his mother and sister as representative of all the losses he will experience: loss of innocence, childhood, faith, hope for the future. At the same time, it also shows the meager hopes that help him survive: hope to stay with his father, hope to live, hope for some goodness and charity. This early scene sets up what Wiesel will explore and dramatize throughout the rest of the book. Its simplicity and power capture the horror and (slim) goodness of the Jewish experience of the Holocaust.

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In Elie Wiesel's memoir Night, a scene of great compassion and goodness is when the Jewish prisoners aid each other by eating snow off the blankets draped on their shoulders. The scene occurs when Elie, his father, and the other prisoners are on their way from Auschwitz to Buchenwald. The prisoners are resting with their meager ration of one piece of bread; they could eat the snow to quench their thirst, but Wiesel tells us, "We were not permitted to bend down" (96). So, instead, they "took out their spoons and ate the snow off our neighbors' back" (96). In the midst of all the horror and deprivation, the Jews find a way to be humane and compassionate toward each other. It is a small scene, easily forgettable. But, for me, it captures the hope and goodness that Elie and many of the other Jews cling to. While some of their fellow prisoners become cruel and insensitive, even tearing bread away from their own fathers, the Jews in this scene show that – even in the concentration camp – they still have some freedom: here, the freedom to choose to help a fellow human being. Throughout the memoir, Elie is motivated to stay by his Father and to help him survive. Their love of and care for each other are part of what allows Elie to survive. At the end of this scene, Wiesel reports how absurd the prisoners must have looked to any outsider: "The SS men who were watching were greatly amused by the spectacle" (96). To the guards, eating snow off someone's shoulders is ridiculous. But to the prisoners, it is yet another act of goodness and grace. Without explicitly rebelling, they find a way to defy the guards and to help each other. The scene reminds me that, even in the most desperate situation, human beings can find a way to hold onto their humanity. Horrible things happened in the concentration camps, but beautiful things happened as well. This scene is one of beauty, goodness, compassion, and the triumph of the human spirit.