

At War's End

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The Holocaust Writing Competition

794 Words

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It was dark, and she was alone.

She was young, scared, hurt, and she was all alone in the shadows of what once was and never would be again.

*He* was there. Sitting in the chair. Slumped. Fragile. Lashes casting shadows over gaunt cheeks, as though sewing his eyes shut.

She took a step forward. "Erik?"

No response. He didn't even move. The silence seemed to echo her: *Erik, can you wake up? Erik, can you open your eyes?*

She stepped again. It was calm as snow and dark as sin. "Erik?"

He moved.

He sat straight up and grabbed her wrist, her thin wrist, her malnourished wrist, and dug broken nails into the flesh.

“Blind,” he rasped, his cracked, blue lips twisting into a smile. “It should’ve been you, Ellie, should’ve been you.”

She was screaming now, screaming and screaming and screaming, screaming for those days and these days and all days and Erik’s eyes and Erik, and voices were screaming along with her, the voices of *them*, and it was deafening oh Erik it should’ve been her should’ve been her-

“Mom!”

But there was no Erik, only her son Max, and there was no other voice, only her own.

“Mom, are you okay? Can you breathe? Deep breaths, like me, do as I do. Deep breaths.”

“I can breathe,” said Ellie, sniffing and sobbing and trying to get a hold of herself. “I’m all right...”

Max pursed his lips, tilted his head to the side in that odd childish way that reminded her of a confused puppy. “Mom, do you need anything? Hot chocolate, maybe? Tea?”

She started to answer when she heard something else.

“Grandma?”

“Shh, Grandma’s busy now, go back to bed,” Max murmured to his son, Alex.

“Grandma, are you okay?”

“Yes, I’m okay,” said Ellie, even though she wasn’t.

“Alex, it’s late. We have to get up early tomorrow. Go back to sleep...”

But Ellie’s small grandson shook his head somberly and marched into the bedroom, climbing up next to her. “Did you have a bad dream?” he asked, tilting his head like his father.

“Yes,” said Ellie, even though it was worse than just a bad dream. It was pure concentrated terror and hysteria inflicted upon her while she slept. But she couldn't- she wouldn't- explain that to Alex, who was only eight years old and had only known smiles and hugs instead of shouts and blows.

“Do you want to talk about it?” Alex asked.

“Alex,” his father repeated. He sounded strained. “Please.”

“No, it's all right. It was a very bad dream, Alex, I don't think you want to hear it.”

“Then tell it like a story.”

A story.

A small story for her small grandson, late at night, in a small bedroom with a small wind rattling the windows. Tell it like a story.

“Once upon a time,” began Ellie, “there was a little boy and a little girl. And they were different. And everyone was scared of them because they were different, and they didn't know what to do because of it.” Yes, different, odd, strange. Dangerous. “So they took them away and put them in a bad place.”

“What kind of bad place?”

A horrible place, Alex. A place where dreams are ripped like ribbons and people are beaten and bruised and blinded and broken.

“A very bad place. And they kept them there for a long time, alone with mean people to watch them.”

“And did they ever get out?”

One did, and one did not. One should've, and one shouldn't have. “The girl got out. Some men in uniforms told her that she could, and they took her to a safer place.” A warmer place. A better one.

“And the boy?”

Ellie allowed her eyes to flutter shut. She'd done it often to see what Erik must have gone through. When they blinded him. She'd seen it happen, heard the screams, the way he'd wept from burnt eyes in her lap afterwards.

“He went away to someplace better.”

Silence crept in again, though was it a friend or a foe? Ellie kept her eyes shut. Deaf and blind. But not broken. Never broken.

“During the war?”

She looked up, surprised. “Yes. During the war.”

Alex carefully took her hand. She, for once, did not flinch away.

“The war's over,” he said, with his big dark eyes. Eyes that only a child could possess. Probing and old as the world. Innocent and young as a passing butterfly. He knew, he knew everything, and yet he knew nothing.

“I know it is.”

“You're okay now.”

“I know.”

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They sat together, in the midnight darkness, cloaked in comforting silence and the reassurance that the world was now at war's end.