

### The Woman Who Did Not Know

Two years ago my great grandmother, Abbey, died of old age. She was a sweet lady, who loved her family very much. We would spend holidays at her house, and even if there was not a special occasion she was more than delighted to have my family over to visit. To this day I reminisce fondly on the past with her. I was particularly close to my great grandmother. Whenever I had the time I would ask my mother or father to drive me to her house. Abbey and I would sit on her white and green floral couch and talk for hours and sip tea. Most of the time she would teach me how to cook. Her food has always been the finest, most flavorful. We would talk about anything and absolutely everything. From her school days to my school day, my pets, and her past as a professional chef. She would always tell my family about her stories as a young chef. She was the best chef for miles and miles and everyone knew it. Her restaurant never had a seat empty.

Three days after she had passed away, after our eyes were not capable of crying anymore, my family had begun clearing out her house. There were three plies, one marked GIVE AWAY, one marked KEEP, and the last, PERSONAL POSSESSIONS. On the final day of clearing her house my mother told me to see if we had missed any boxes in the attic. I took a brief look, expecting it to be empty but noticed a lone box far off in a distant corner. As I brought it down to my mother, I was sneezing from the amount of dust that lay on the surface of that cardboard box. I dug through it, finding mostly old shirts and cooking aprons that she had sewn herself; along with a gold candlestick that seemed out of place. As I got to the bottom of the dusty box I found an old tattered looking journal. I flipped through it, surprised that it belonged to my grandmother. Her handwriting was normally perfect; there was never a flaw. But in this journal every word was sloppy, as though she was in a hurry to get the entry finished. In fact, as I flipped through the journal I realized that every page had a napkin with writing taped onto each page or a piece of paper not from the notebook was folded in between the pages. I read the first entry to see what time period it was from or what it was about. Maybe cooking recipes, her childhood, or daily life?

#### DAY 1

“I am titling this entry day one because I know it is the start of something I do not want to begin. I am also writing on a piece of paper instead of a journal because I have not had the chance

to go to the store and buy another journal. Today they forced me out of my family's restaurant. I was cooking when they came barging in. When the door swung open and I saw their stone cold faces, my whole body went numb. I was frozen in place. They threatened us and said that if we did not close down by dawn they would kill me and my family. I poured all my love, every hour of every day into that restaurant. And just like that with a few words by people I have never seen before, it was gone. All of it. I was not entirely surprised, I knew they would come but I would never have thought that they would come *this* soon. It will be just a few miserable days, maybe a week, before those animals, those Nazis will force our whole village out. To where? That part is unclear. But the word has been spreading that Nazis are arriving to every village and forcing the people of the Jewish faith, out of their own homes."

I was shocked, startled, bewildered. There were no Nazis here in the US, so how could this all be possible? I had learned about the Holocaust in history class not too long ago, and this sounded like the beginning. But it didn't make sense, it didn't add up. Abbey and I had spent hours upon hours talking about her past and never did she once mention Nazis, the Holocaust, or even living in Europe. I kept reading.

#### DAY 2

"Everyone is being forced out of their stores and homes. The Bergstein's next door have lost almost everything. I went over there this morning and Dalia Bergstein was pouring her eyes out. This town, once a merry, upbeat town, now has all of its pride and characteristics drained from it. I am praying every night that this war will end soon, that this will not get worse."

#### DAY 6

"I apologize that I have missed the last few day in my journal, but these days have been the worst that anyone will ever go through. Our town has gone wild. Everyone was forced out, only allowed one bag per person with personal items. The Nazis made us form into lines, then pushed us onto a train like a herd of cattle. One hundred people to a car, Far more than should have been. No one knew where we were going but we all knew that it would not be in our favor. After three days of being packed inside a dingy, humid, dark, train car, we arrived. There was an intimidating tall brick wall with an iron spiked gate. At the top of the gate was the name Flossenbug. In the distance I could see a big wooden watch tower. My Mother, Father and I refused to think of the possibility of

what this place could be. Everyone was chased off the trains, some grabbed by the neck. They took our bags of belongings and promised they will be returned shortly. We were then met by a scary looking man with a long rusty iron pole. He looked everyone up and down, then asked for their age and profession. My father and I were ushered to the left and my mother to the right. I gave my mother a worried look. Everyone who was shoved to the left were divided into different blocks, my father and I separated. Later that night a soldier barged into the barrack and everyone stopped. He marched closer and closer to me and with each step he took my heart skipped a beat. His strong hand gripped my wrist and he dragged me out of the barrack. He leaned down and put his face so close to mine I could smell his stale breath. He whispered, "You are lucky, so very lucky. If it were up to me no prisoner would have this position, but the Commander insisted. He wants you to work in his kitchen. He claims you are the best cook from your village, is that correct?" I was frozen. "Is that correct!" he yelled so fiercely. I managed to slip out a quiet "yes." We walked quite a bit until we got to the commander's house."

#### DAY 9

"I have resorted to writing on napkins instead of paper because it is all I could find. Luckily I found this pencil in one of the drawers. Two days ago I got a tattoo on my arm with a letter and a few numbers. I do not know what they are for. I am more of a slave then a chef here. Yes, I do cook all of the commander's meals but I am treated and beaten like a slave. I was told that if any of the food that was in that kitchen was missing they would kill me. I sleep in a corner on the cold tile kitchen floor. I have no blanket and no pillow but I am thankful to be inside. The barracks did not seem much better. Often a smell would drift into the kitchen. A horrid stench. It reminded me of when I burn my finger on the stove. I wonder how everyone else is doing and what they are doing. What my mother is doing; what my father is doing? Hopefully we will leave this place soon."

#### DAY 25

"I have been so busy; tossed and pushed around - beaten up for making the slightest mistake or for not moving fast enough. I have not heard a word from father or mother, or anyone else for that matter. Often times I can hear the stories that the commander tells at dinner while I am in the kitchen. The stories are vulgar, inhumane, and hard to believe. I am not sure if I do believe them but I do not want to. They consists of campers, the Jews, digging their own graves and being shot into

them, beating and hanging campers for the Nazis' own entertainment. I was disgusted. Disgusted is a huge understatement. I cannot put it into writing."

DAY 304

"It has been awhile since I have written. I have attempted to write but I was so close to getting caught too many times so I waited until the time was right. That time has not come but I have managed to write a few sentences. But I have to stop writing now. Too much is happening. Too many stories I am hearing that give me nightmares. I am too confused with everything going on. I hear shrieks outside and gun shots too often. I do not know who it is coming from and who it is aimed at. So much is going on that I cannot map it out in my head."

AFTER THE WAR, DURING FREEDOM

"I cannot fathom it, how this affected so many and I had no idea of the extent of it. I was isolated in the commandant's kitchen. It is after the war and I have fled to America. I read all about the concentration camps. Everything that went on during the camps and I had no idea. Thousands and thousands of people getting killed. And I did not know. I was not aware because I was cooped up in the small kitchen for far too long. That smell, a crematorium. How did I not know. My mother was most likely sent there the first day and I did not know. Burning bodies, how could one burn bodies? I did not know of the harshness that these campers were going through. I did hear stories but I refused to believe that it was going on in the camp that I was in. I made it out alive, how did I make it out alive when so many did not? Everyone suffered through the marches, through the mass killing, the harsh weather and abusive work. Nazis acting as though dead bodies were dead fish, piling one on top of another. Worst of all, there are many of these death camps, not just one."

I stopped reading. I couldn't go on. I sat there, my eyes fixed on the journal with the corners of napkins poking out. I felt as though I was going to throw up. My mind wanted to cry but I couldn't. My father saw me and asked if I was okay. I sat still. My eyes met his. My shoulders felt like I had the weight of the world on them. "What's this?" he asked. He took the journal, the vault containing her secrets which I had just unlocked, and as he ran his fingers through it he squinted his eyes in confusion. Then he froze. "She kept this hidden from all of us. But we all knew about it. She wanted nothing more than to keep you from finding out."

Then he hugged me so tight. I had thought that I could cry no more, but I was wrong.

