

## One Hundred Moons to Go

“The light in her eyes, the sound of her laugh, the way her lips subtly tilted into a smile... I remember it all, my boy. Every last detail.” The old man bent down and ruffled his grandson’s thick, golden curls with a muted sigh.

“What happened, Grandfather? Please, please tell me! I’m old enough!” Peter’s blue eyes widened with pure childlike excitement; his hands twisted as an effect of extreme anticipation.

The man pretended to ponder this suggestion; he playfully cocked his head to the right and tapped an index finger gently against his cheekbone.

“Alright, Peter,” he drawled with a slight wink. “On one vital condition. You must listen with all your might- every word holds meaning, my child.”

His request was met with an eager nod.

The white-haired man smiled softly, a paroxysm of memories reentering his mind. The jubilant mood quickly escaped the room as he begun his unbelievable tale:

“I was a Nazi Soldier in Adolf Hitler’s army during 1933 when I turned twenty-four. I watched as children, women, and men were murdered. Slaughtered. And although those memories haunted me for many years after, I-” He paused, took a breath, and wiped the unshed tears in his eyes. He looked at his beloved grandson. “I am so very thankful that I was the one who encountered death numerous times and not you. So extremely grateful.”

A dramatic pause. Peter looked at him for confirmation.

“This... this killing went on for six whole years. My commanding officer, General Theodor Eicke, led my troop out to find Jews and ordered us to drag them off to the horrid concentration camps. These concentration camps were the most horrible thing that one could ever imagine- Jews were captured and taken against their will, beaten, and forced to work in despicable places. Sometimes, the people that were captured were so injured that they perished because of fatigue, starvation, or worse. Children were separated from their mothers; husbands were torn apart from their wives. But you must know, my boy, that I found absolutely no delight in watching this. I was depressed; I considered myself a murderer of thousands. I didn’t think that I was even slightly worthy of life.”

The old man’s eyes still held an impossibly large amount of conviction as his gaze locked onto a pair whose color mirrored his own. His grandson placed a tiny hand on top of his grandfather’s rather scarred one as a gesture of support.

“On one fateful night in December, I was ordered to show my presence at the book burnings. Nature itself appeared to be unsupportive of Hitler’s ways- lightning scorched the ground every minute and high winds made it nearly impossible for the fire to start. Eventually, everything started to go according to plan, when I heard a feminine cry and witnessed the most beautiful woman being dragged to her knees by soldiers-”

“Was that Grandmother? Who was that woman?” Peter’s words came out in a tumble.

The elder squeezed the youthful hand with love.

“Yes, my dear boy. That was Adina Birnabahul. Now hush, Peter. Let me finish,” he said, poking his grandson’s shoulder.

“In continuation, your grandmother grasped a book from the scorching fire and clutched it desperately to her chest, saying, ‘Why have you destroyed these beautiful things, these gifts from God? Have you no respect for knowledge? If you are to burn books, then I will surely burn with it.’ Adina looked at each of the nazi soldiers dead in the eye and whispered, ‘You will pay for what you have done. For what you will do. One hundred times and then some.’”

Peter’s mouth dropped open and his eyes filled with the sense of awe. “Grandmother was feisty!” he exclaimed. His grandfather laughed and bent over, slapping his right knee while Peter grinned enthusiastically. The story continued:

“Everything after that was quite a blur, to be perfectly honest. I remember my fellow soldiers lifting your grandmother and preparing to throw her into the fire. And I-

“I just... I just reacted. Her words struck something deep in my soul; my heart longed for forgiveness. Not only from her, but from every family, every soul, every child that I might have affected. I sprinted to the guards that were holding her captive and knocked them out by hitting their head with the butt of my gun-”

His grandson’s mouth slackened with surprised shock. The man made an effort to sooth him.

“Nothing harmful, my dear boy. It probably just left a bruise on the skin of their temple.” Peter blew out a sigh of disappointment and was rewarded with a rather cheeky grin in return.

“Anyway, I released Adina and shoved her onto the open, neglected countryside that contained the Jew’s houses, and silently begged her to escape. After a moment of contemplation, I decided to run, too. Because I knew- I knew that I would be killed as a punishment for rebellion and disobedience. As we ran, our breathing became more and more labored; we heard bullets be released from their guns as soldiers made an effort to end our lives. My adrenaline rush came so quickly...my body failed to recognize that I was on the edge of collapsing. Adina, however, never looked so strong. So determined. So very beautiful. Her black hair was flung behind her shoulders as the wind pushed it back violently; the length of her eyelashes pressed against her tan skin, and small streaks of blood lined her clavicle and palms. I could practically distinctly make out the shadows of rectangular structures when my left shoulder felt like it was on fire. The pain was almost unbearable. Even more so when we ran, for the blood came in gushes of red and black.”

Silence.

“By the time we reached her house, my lungs were about to burst; my legs were on the verge of collapsing. I don’t remember Adina’s house very well... a few of my memories are disoriented, and I am old, my boy. All I can recall is that it was small- very petite. Simple. Plain. And, dare I say it, I think that was why it was the most beautiful thing I ever found comfort in. After she ushered me inside, Adiana locked the door and said, ‘Thank you for what you have sacrificed.’”

Peter puckered his lips and raised his eyebrows. "What happened next, Opa?"

The old man bit his lip to suppress laughter.

"She knocked me out," the grandfather said bluntly. "And when I woke up, I was wrapped in blankets so tightly that I feared my blood flow would stop. There was a crackling fire to my right; fresh bread and water rested to my left. My arm-" He touched his shoulder in remembrance- "My arm was bandaged and the bullet was taken out of my flesh. I knew that Adina had done what she had done so that I would not have to be conscious when the pain started. And although we constantly hid in fear of being caught, our time was spent preciously. Over the next eight months, she looked over me, protected me, fought with me, laughed with me. It was at that point that we started falling in love."

Peter started to purse his lips in a ridiculous, flirtatious way. His grandfather lovingly smacked the side of his head.

"During the second month, we were sitting by the fireplace when I mentioned that I was mostly illiterate. Your grandmother had a fit, my boy. I wish you could have seen it. 'How could you not be able to read? Books are vital for survival, my love. My heart is in anguish!' she mourned. So, as a gentleman, I allowed her to teach me to read and write. It was the most difficult thing that I ever conquered, Peter. But Adina revealed to me a passion that I would never have discovered if I hadn't met her. I found such joy when skimming over words on parchment. On her birthday, I asked her to marry me, and Adina neither accepted or declined. 'I'll marry you if you learn to read perfectly within one hundred moons from now.' So I did. And she finally married me."

The boy's countenance expressed a sense of humor.

"Your mother was born a year later. After the second World War, your grandmother and I moved to America to start a new life... to forget our past."

The younger boy gazed up at his role model with a new-found admiration.

"Twenty years later, you, Peter Abraham Schmidt, were born into this world. But on the same day, your grandmother suffered a heart attack; she died four days later."

Tears escaped from the old man's eyes.

"Forgive me, my dear boy, if I may have avoided you for the first few years since your birth. I blamed you, as wrong as it was. *I'm sorry*. I was being unreasonable and my heart was hardened. But when you were four years old, I remember you walking up to me and saying, 'Stop moping. You're not very fun at all, Opa.'"

A soft smile lit both faces.

"On that day I smiled for the first time in forever. I see her spirit in you, my grandson. Don't push it away. Let it guide you for as long as you live."

And with those few words, the story was concluded.

"I love you, Grandpa," whispered Peter. "And Grandma loved- loves- you, too."

Peter's grandfather tilted his head and placed a kiss on a head full of golden curls.

"I know, my dear boy. I know."