

“My Mama’s Jewelry Box”
Word Count: 998

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My mama’s jewelry box.

It sat in the dusty corner of my shoebox room for three years.

Until I found a reason to use it.

Until we moved into a tiny apartment next to the ghetto.

Mama gave it to me when she had to sell all her jewelry.

She said, “I cannot use this, *mein kitze*.

You take good care of it, *verstehe?*”

I used it for my string dolls when I was a small child.

But we had to sell those too.

When my best friend Matya and her brother Josef
moved into the ghetto, I was heartbroken.

Who would I play with now?

Matya and I would spend nights and days together.

I would secretly admire Josef.

When they moved away, we continued.

But it felt empty.

Hollow.

Years went on.

Things changed. But still feeling hollow.

Mama said we had to move.

I was scared. I liked our home.

It carried smells of better times.

But we packed up the little things we had.

And we walked to our new house by the ghetto.

Some nights I would hear screams.

Gunshots.

Torture.

One day I saw a little boy get beat. He lay motionless.

Empty.

Lifeless.

I never really understood.

The ghettos.

The trains.

The deaths.

But I told myself I was safe.

One day when Mama was away, I wandered out to the ghetto.

I sat on a bucket.

Just watching. Listening.

I did this for days.

Until I saw someone I recognized.

“Josef?” I whispered.

He looked so skinny and weak.

Not the fun-loving, happy boy I used to know.

But his curly black hair and dark hazel eyes were the same.

“Gisela? What are you doing here?” He asked, looking around.

“Uh...I was just sitting,” I stuttered, “Are...you okay?”

He broke down crying.

“Matya is sick. She can hardly get up and move. There are eleven of us in one room. Our parents are gone.”

I sat there. Stunned.

What was I supposed to say?

I wanted to help them.

He said no.

I said yes.

He handed me a scrap of paper through the fence.

134 Dunmow Street, second room on the left.

The next day, I cut up a strip of an old canvas bag.

I used some of Mama’s mascara and drew on a Jewish star.

I was going into the ghetto.

Josef told me that everyone wears a white armband.

Everyone in the ghetto.

He said if the SS sees someone without one, they will ask questions.

Questions never end well.

I’m not sure what made me do it.

I’ve seen people get shot for trying to sneak into the ghetto.

It didn’t matter.

I put the note in Mama’s old, dusty jewelry box and locked it.

I would save this.

It felt special.

Like it was meant to keep.

I knew that one day, it would be important.

I made sure Mama wasn’t looking and I gathered up some pieces of bread.

Hopefully, this will help.

We weren’t the wealthiest people on the street.

But we managed.

Plus, Mama would just think that I got hungry.

I strolled around to the back of the ghetto with bread bulging in my pockets.

There was a small hole in the gate.

But I was thin.

I quickly looked around.

And squirmed under the fence.

I tied on the fake armband I had made while crouching behind a dumpster.

It was harder than I thought.

I skimmed the note again.

Even though I had already memorized it.

I put my head down and started walking.

One foot in front of the other.

The streets were in alphabetical order.

Ascott Terrace.

Brookhead Lane.

Cranford Grove.

Dunmow Street.

I made a sharp turn and held my breath.

12...

The bricks looked like they were about to collapse.

47...

The stink was sickening.

85...

Everything was gray and depressing.

113...

When I got to 134, I stopped.

I slowly turned the knob and tiptoed inside.

At one of our meetings at the fence, Josef had said his neighbors were nosy.

That I needed to be extra careful.

I came to the second door on the left and knocked.

I could hear some moving and muttered curse words through the paper-thin walls.

The door opened a crack and a single hazel eye peeked out.

“Oh, it’s just you.” Josef sighed.

He pushed me inside.

I saw twenty, hopeless eyes staring up at me.

Matya sat up in her collapsing bunk and smiled.

“Gisela! I’ve missed you so much.”

Before I could respond, a skinny man in his sixties hobbled up to me.

“What in the world is she doing here?” He coughed with a scratchy voice.

“I...I’ve come to help.” I said, intimidated by him.

“You could get us all killed!” He shouted.

Josef stepped in.

“Heidi is here to help,” he said, “We can trust her, I promise.”

“Don’t mind Old Edwin,” he whispered to me, “He’s kind of...losing it.”

I gave everyone half a piece of bread, and instantly regretted not taking more.

They all looked so defeated. Lost.

I needed to help them.

As I was about to leave, Josef handed me another note.

Come back tomorrow night. Careful. Dress in black. No one can see you.

I did.

And I did again.

Over and over.

Josef would give me a note, and I would come.

I didn’t know it yet. But I loved him.

Matya and I started hanging out again too.

It was just like before.

Happiness.

After the war.

Josef and I.

We grew up.

Got married.

Had a family.

Everything started with those notes.

With me sneaking into the ghetto.

I kept the notes.

All in Mama’s jewelry box.

I felt a special connection with them.

Along with the armband, I kept all of them.

Because I knew that people eventually needed to know about everything.

That we were a part of something that needed to be remembered.

We would be forever remembered by those notes.

Works Cited

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