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Bittersweet Stars

7th Grade

1,998 words

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“Shh, Dalia, it’s okay.” Mama says. She is trying as hard as she can not to cry, but I see the tears pooling up in her eyes. I want to reach out and touch them, wipe them from her gorgeously brown eyes, like the freshly brewed coffee she used to drink. Mine are green, and my hair is blond, so Mama says I am very lucky. She says that I am going to a nice place where I can hide from the Nazis, but I am leaving my family behind. Who will play with baby Ora when I am gone? Who will help Mama make dinner?

The train rumbles to a stop. A man about Papa’s age steps on.

“Good morning.” He says quietly in accented Polish. Mama is crying uncontrollably now. The man takes my hand and slowly pulls me off my seat.

“Mama?” I do not know if it is okay to leave with this man. “Mama?”

“Go, my *kochanie*.” Mama smiles through her tears. “I love you forever, Dalia.”

“*Kocham Cię, Mama!*” The door closes and the train starts to move. I wave as hard and as long as I can but Mama does not wave back. She just sits and cries. When the train is long gone, the man and I start to walk to his house. The man does not say anything, so I just look at my dress and repeat the words Papa said to me in my head.

“Be careful, Dalia.”

“Papa, why are you rubbing my star off my clothes?”

“Because the Germans must not know you are Jewish. If they do, we will be in grave danger.”

“But Papa, I liked my star.”

“Dalia, we must follow the rules to keep you safe. You must be very quiet and never say a word about being Jewish, do you understand?”

“Yes, Papa, I do.”

If I concentrate hard enough, I can imagine my six pointed star still on my dress. I liked the yellow color, bold and bright in a world full of grays. But Papa and Mama always warned me about the Germans, and they told me that if they knew I was Jewish, they would hurt me. So I’d watched Papa scrub off all my stars.

“We’re here.” The man says. I look up. The house is big and white, like my dollhouse I got for my 4th birthday. It has lots of windows, and I wonder what I would see if I looked through them. The door opens and a plump woman with blond hair heaped into a bun welcomes us.

“Walther, you *faul Person!* What took you so long?” The woman says in German. I can make out bits and pieces. “Never mind, where is *das Mädchen?*” The girl. Is that me? The woman sees me and sighs. “Ah, there you are. Come along, follow me.”

She leads me into a dining room complete with a sleek wooden table. On it there is a small bowl of thick soup and some bread.

“Eat this *Suppe*. Then we can go to your room.”

She stops and looks at me intently. I push back my blond hair and sit uncomfortably for a while. She smiles.

“You can call me Yetta. Yetta Kappel. And you, *kleine?*”

“Dalia. Dalia Milstein.” I say.

“Hmm, a very Jewish name, no?” Yetta chuckles. “Well, eat up, Dalia Milstein.”

As I gulp down the thick, creamy soup, I think I may like this Yetta Kappel.

Later we go upstairs to my new room. It is pink and gorgeously decorated with frilly furniture.

“Here it is, *Hasi*. Do you like it?” Yetta says.

“I love it, Yetta. Thank you.” I say, being polite. But the truth is I miss my old room, the one with peeling wallpaper that Papa tried so many times to put back up. I miss my family, even Ora, who kept me up at night. I miss my star on my dress, and even though I know I am lucky to have blond hair and green eyes, I miss Mama’s brown ones. All this missing is making me sad, and I start to cry. I cry because even though Mama said we would see each other again, I know she was lying. Because I’m scared of being caught by the Nazis and getting hurt.

Yetta stands and watches me awkwardly, and then puts her chubby arms around me.

“I know what you feel like, Dalia. I understand.” I look up into her sky blue eyes. They are watering as well. “I have a daughter, you know. She was about 16 when they took her. She had the most beautiful blond hair, and the most gorgeous *blau* eyes. Hitler took her away from us because she was so beautiful. I do not know why, but rumors say he is “breeding” girls like her with Aryan boys, *das Ungeheuer*.” She smiles a sad smile. “I see some of her in you.”

“What was her name?” I ask quietly.

“Eseld.” Yetta says. “Even her name meant beauty.”

“Could my German name be Eseld too?” I wonder. Yetta laughs.

“Of course, *Liebling*. Of course.”

I am now Eseld Carlotta Kappel. Dalia Milstein is someone I do not know. I am 8 years old, and I’ve been going to Edelflingen Primary School for 3 years. I was born to Yetta and

Walther Kappel on May 20th, 1932. I do not know anything about Jews, except for that they are bad people.

These are the answers rolling in my head that I am supposed to say if a Nazi or a neighbor questions me. It is very confusing. I do not know if I am Eseld or if I am Dalia. When I sleep at night, I savor my name on my tongue. *Dalia. Dalia.* I speak Polish to myself in efforts to not forget it. My German has increased rapidly from listening to the radio and staying with Yetta and Walther.

Yetta and Walther are such kind people. When the war first started, Papa used to say that all Germans were bad. But Yetta and Walther are German, and they've treated me in the best way possible. They tell me stories of other Jewish children in hiding before I go to sleep, and if it's a good day with no soldiers, Walther and I will go outside and play hide and seek.

Yetta Kappel is very loud and expressive, while Walther Kappel is more quiet and observant. They are quite the pair. I have heard them arguing once or twice, speaking in rapid German that I cannot decipher. Yetta is always going on and on, using her hands in big motions, and after a while she will say, "*Stimmt's oder hab ich recht?*" Am I right, or am I right?, and Walther will look quietly at her and disagree with her in the kindest way possible.

They are so different from Mama and Papa, who were both very conserved and serious. They would debate quietly, whispering when they thought I was asleep. But I have come to love the Kappels very much. Yes, they are German, but how can a *kleines Mädchen* not love the people who treat her like their own daughter? I do not know what it right, to love my parents or the Kappels, so for now I settle for loving both.

“The neighbors are growing suspicious of you.” Walther tells me one morning. “We have told them we decided to adopt a child, but because of the circumstances, I don’t think they are very convinced.” I have heard about Jewish children who got caught and what happened to their guardians. I shiver to think about what will happen to me and the Kappels.

“Well they are incredibly foolish people. Nosing into other people’s business.” Yetta states. I stifle a laugh. Besides being extremely argumentative, Yetta is an extreme gossip.

“Well, the Hansens have threatened to bring in the soldiers to investigate. It’s not a light matter.” Walther says with a grim face. “We must keep perfectly quiet, and if they do come we must be prepared.”

I am suddenly nervous. What if the Nazis came and saw me as a Jew right away? What if they brought news of my family getting hurt because of me?

“Nazi Germans are horrible people, Dalia. You must avoid them as best as you can. Dalia, I am warning you.”

The knock is at our door. I straighten my new dress and let out a shaky sigh. My blonde hair is in curls and Yetta tied it up in pigtails this morning. She put powder that smelled like Babcia’s perfume on my face and then added some pink blush. I can tell she is nervous too, for she hasn’t said a word; very unlike Yetta. She has set the table with her best china and coffee. Walther has my false papers in his coat, ready to pull out when needed.

Walther opens the door, and two German soldiers walk in. I have heard about rude soldiers but these soldiers greet Yetta and Walther politely. “*Heil Hitler!*” they say, and we do the same.

“I’m sorry, sir, but we have been requested to do a search for hidden *Juden*.” One of the soldiers says. They are both tall and handsome with green uniforms and bands around their left arms. They walk down into the basement, searching for signs of life, but they find none. Then they scour the house for anything hinting at a Jew’s presence. I fidget with my collar, anxious that they may find anything to do with me.

Seeming satisfied, the Nazis walk into the living room.

“*Hallo*, little girl.” A soldier says. “What is your name?” I swallow hard. One mistake could give me away.

“Eseld. Eseld Kappel.” I smile up at the man, hoping he can’t hear my heart pounding.

“Well aren’t you a little sweet one!” He smiles. “I have a daughter your age. She is back at home, waiting for me.” He turns to the Kappels.

“I’m sorry, but it’s required that I see your child’s papers.” He says. Walther carefully hands them to him. The soldier skims over them, looks convinced and gives them back.

“Would you like some coffee?” Yetta asks, her relief showing on her face.

“Yes please, *Frau*.” I hand the soldier the coffee. “*Danke, Engel*.” He lifts me up and puts me on his knee. His blue eyes are smiling, like Papa’s when he told a joke. I giggle, comfortable now.

That day we spend talking with the two soldiers, who turn out to be very nice people. They tell stories about the war, and make us laugh with their clever jokes. When they leave, a soldier (named Marko) picks me up, twirls me around and puts something in my hand. “For later.” He winks.

That night, I am very confused. My parents had always told me the Nazis were monsters, people to be hated. But the soldiers that came tonight were so kind and funny. They had their own families that they had left behind. I can't help wondering what would've happened if they'd found out about me being a Jew. What would they have done? Would they have hurt me, like my parents said?

Maybe they would've. Maybe people make judgments right away. Maybe Mama and Papa were wrong about the Nazis, and the Nazis were wrong about the Jews. Maybe we were all just people doing what we thought was right. Yes, the Nazis had done horrible things to Jews. But each individual there was not a monster. They were compassionate people doing bad things because they had been brainwashed by Hitler.

I think of the soldier, Papa, and Walther. Mama and Yetta. So different, yet when they smiled, their eyes were all the same. Twinkling, like the stars in the sky.

I savor the chocolate the soldier gave me. It is bittersweet, like the world as I fall asleep.