

Author's Introduction

Some people know what it's like to be utterly alone. I am one of those people. When my mother died unexpectedly in 2002, I was a psychology major in my senior year at the University of Las Vegas. As a child of a mother in the limelight, I had developed deep uncertainties in the shadowy intersections of my soul. Muscular Dystrophy had deprived me of my brother and fractured my heart at an early age. After the accident on my eighteenth birthday paralyzed me from the waist down, and left me in a wheelchair, I became an academic recluse. Studying the intricate workings of the mind attracted me, even helped me open a few of the smoldering wounds that kept me locked in my shell.

By the time of my mother's formal viewing, thanks to the help of my professor, I had learned how to talk to strangers without breaking out in a shower of sweat. Seated beside her casket, I greeted a stream of important people for hours, my hand dry as bone. After the viewing, as I sat alone next to my mother in a windowless room, I realized how the fragrance of too many flowers and the velvet draperies lining the walls increased my despair. To my relief, the attendant brought me a box of tissue and lent me a sympathetic ear.

I examined the gold nameplate pinned to his black suit. "Thank you, Dalton. Your kindness is most appreciated."

I found out later, he worked at Sunset Funeral Home part time to support his passion for writing. How strange to think of it now. Dalton is actually the person responsible for the turn in my life that sent me to a far off land in search of my family history.

You see, even though my mother's death had an eerie pattern to it, I knew enough about her past problems with the Mafia to realize it wasn't safe to dig up the details. Following her instructions, I buried her unpublished manuscript with her, thinking that would seal any temptation to publish it. Fate apparently had a different plan. After several months of persistence, Dalton persuaded me to give him permission to exhume the manuscript and publish it under a pen name. I insisted he change the names of the characters and sell it as a work of fiction rather than as the expose she had written. He agreed to give a substantial percentage of the proceeds to my mother's favorite charity. Even with all the precautions we put in place, I still felt uncomfortable living in the same town and under the same roof where everything had happened. I sat down at my computer one day, searched for available positions elsewhere, and penciled out a plan. After my graduation, I intended to begin my career as a psychologist far across the ocean in Honolulu, Hawaii.

After probate and all the legal details, I put my mother's house on the market. Inch by inch, item by item, I went through the house and examined what remained of my mother. Even though she had lived an unconventional, precarious life, I loved her beyond measure. She was my best friend, my solace. Each time I recall the fear written in the sad spaces of her eyes it makes me quiver. I still hear her words ringing in my ears, "You have a spiritual gift like your grandmother. I know God sent you to me as my special guardian angel."

Discarding the little treasures of her life was like throwing her away piece by piece, and I found myself tearfully packing far more than I should into wooden crates for long term storage. After her clothing and the linens, I removed the family photographs from the walls. My heart sank, realizing it all over again: I was the only one left of this family. As I removed the painting at the end of the hallway and read the words etched in neat script around the frame, I felt my heart slipping.

As the book of life closes, secrets lose their significance, lies their comfort.

The year before she died, my grandmother had suffered over every detail of the canvas for months. I'd seen it a million times, but this time the faded face beyond the dismal grays and charcoals of the frosted windowpane within the picture captured my heart. I stared at it for a long time before I wiped the dust off the top of the frame.

For a brief second, I saw her again in my mind's eye, there in the kitchen flipping pancakes for breakfast and smiling, lighthearted as an adolescent. As I ran off to school with my books under my arm, she often called after me, "Remember, Ziskeit. History should be more than only an endless, meaningless cycle!"

In the midst of searching for tape, I stopped with wonder, visualizing her face as she worked on this oil painting. I remembered her worn deep hazel eyes haunted by some mysterious inner anxiety. I studied the work of art again. Beyond the white puffs of train smoke drawn against a darkening sky, the constellations and the dramatic North Star exploded like a beacon for the apocalypse. Truly it was a masterpiece I knew I would treasure until the end of my days. Just as I began to wrap it in brown paper, I noticed a name concealed on the collar of one of the frozen shirts hanging on a clothesline that stretched from building to building within the painting. *Rolf Brandt*. I didn't know what to make of it, but a question lit up in me. Would I ever find out about her early life or discover her secrets?

About an hour later, while I packed up books from the bookshelf, I found my answer: an old blue journal, the edges yellowed and tattered, but the pages intact. How had I forgotten her

ritual? Every Sunday afternoon, before the cancer weakened her, my grandmother implemented a quiet time for us to read or write poetry. After my brother and I settled down, she encouraged us to stay silent for an hour and let our thoughts come out only on paper. Her voice was like steel wrapped in silk, hard and determined and yet extraordinarily benevolent. In order to compose her own thoughts, she retired to our basement, her blue book in hand.

I abandoned my task of packing, sat down on the dated sofa, put my feet up and began to read. It started in German, but about a quarter of the way through it changed to English. Much of the writing had the lyrical quality of a poet. There were references to several books by Charles Dickens. Most of it was written in letter form, each one addressed to a man named Rolf. She referred to another child, not my mother. During the next few minutes of reading my grandmother's entries, I felt my chest expand with a fiery desire to know more about her, more about her lineage, more about her life in Germany and Poland during the Nazi era. If there were other relatives, I had to find them. By midnight, I knew she'd buried her early poetry and diaries behind a barn somewhere in Warsaw. A detailed map begged pursuit.

Within two weeks, I sold the house, cleared out the bank accounts, shut off my phone and moved to Europe in search of my grandmother's story and the family treasures awaiting discovery. How could I have known the complex psychological byways of this quest or how my grandmother's poignant tale would affect listeners with such awe? The unimaginable culmination of events, even to me, seemed unbelievable until I proved them out through a series of investigations. Her story is unique among war stories. Keep your eye on her. Her world unravels, changes, and challenges her with emotional earthquakes and the sharp sleet of hate, but somehow she is able to turn the senseless chaos into genuine dignity. She is turned inside out, tossed to and fro and even loses her bearings, but she survives while others dwell in doubt, depression and suicide. When she finds happiness in a most unexpected place, at a most unexpected time, and in an even more mind-boggling circumstance, I marvel with reverence and admiration and, I admit, a bit of envy.

In following her footsteps over a thousand dusty roads this past six years, I finally understand how the dimensions of the heart work, how a soul can undergo dramatic change with nothing more than sheer determination, and how, in the end what we think matters most doesn't matter at all.

My mother's death and my grandmother's history had forged a life of its own inside my heart, one that required sacrifice, contemplation and risk. The adventure was an enormous

gamble on my part, but it has changed my life forever. It was daunting to give up a new career and wheel across a foreign land in search of the place my blood began. The biggest challenge of all was how to bear witness to the value her story had. I tried, but it was impossible to sum it up in a few sentences, package it up like an herbal tonic. Yet, I'm not a professional writer. I'm only a psychologist hoping to displace the notion of our thick-skinned society which, all too readily, attaches a label of over-sentimental to any story of unadulterated, authentic feelings of the heart.

Although this one historical account shows how two opposing cultures can mend misunderstandings with compassion, love and respect for diversity, I don't know if it will change the hearts of mankind the way I wish it would, if it will cause people to think twice about the warped seed of ignorance that lingers among us, or if it will have any effect at all on the world. But if your heart is as willing as mine, I believe my grandmother can show you, as she has me, how to harness happiness, not the sort you can buy with riches and possessions, but the sort that comes bounding out of the heart when the heart is restored to its natural state. It's not the type of happiness that can be destroyed or stolen or beaten out of you, but the type that takes a man to his last breath with a hearty share of gratitude and grace.

As you enter this realm of shameful insensitivity and obstinate gentleness from my grandmother's eyes, you will smile with a weary heart, you will dance with feeble knees, and you will struggle along many hills and valleys before stumbling upon the path to the glorious stars. But, I promise you, in the end your heart will come apart; split between the joy of unexpected tenderness and the sorrow of unbearable wrongs, and then, as I – you may measure life quite differently.

Part 1 – Warsaw Tailspin

CHAPTER

1

Warsaw, Poland 1939

Against the backdrop of the Vistula River with its turbulent spume, the bride and groom exuded contentment as they faced the rabbi and exchanged vows. Sixteen-year-old Rena Anne Steiner tried to feel the excitement radiating from the bride in waves of joy and solemnity, but her mind refused to cooperate. A book slid off her lap and hit the floor with a thump. She stared down at the gold print against the burgundy cover: Charles Dickens. Like an assembly of wide-eyed owls all shifting simultaneously, the congregation pivoted in their seats and inspected her. She buried her hands in the fold of her dress, hoping no one noticed how much she trembled. Could she really go through with it? She had enough money, but tomorrow seemed too soon.

With a golden thread of kindness, Sarah tried to ease the situation and whispered in her ear, “Did you see that eerie darkness outside?”

The flush on Rena’s cheeks intensified her embarrassment. *Pestilence and wrath*. She whispered back, “A storm must be coming.”

“But it was sunny a minute ago.”

Rena’s stomach tightened as it often did at the slightest notion of foreboding. Dreary skies often forced her mind back to a dismal part of her history, a chapter she vowed to expunge. Her leg started a nervous quiver. She needed to share her secret with Sarah. Locking her fingers around her blue silk handbag, her arms went rigid.

Yesterday as Rena walked home from the hospital after a long day of changing dressings for wounded soldiers, wringing out bloody sheets and listening to rumors of war, she made a decision that would prove her mind sound and her heart genuine. It would cost her everything and everyone she loved, but her resolution was rock solid. After stopping to cash in all her coins, she went home and tied up her two-foot stack of poetry notes, packed them into a five-gallon milk can, and buried it with her diaries behind the barn. Someday, when this was all over, she would finish her verse.

For Rena, sitting still and quiet was akin to torture. She forced her attention to details like the bride's long tapered nails and the silver filament in her gold wedding band. The groom wore a white satin robe and black hat, and the bride was adorned in a white silk wedding dress with a facial veil of silk and lavender metallic fringe. Studying the groom, whose voice splintered with each word, Rena asked Sarah, "Do you think he has the makings of a good father?"

"They say he's very pious, studies the Talmud two hours a day."