

Eloise Anagnost  
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### **Chased by Darkness**

Dawn is supposed to signal a new beginning. Hope for the future. But for us, dusk was constantly chasing dawn. Becoming closer and closer until dawn was synonymous with dusk. Until the dark had consumed the light and we were left grasping for any semblance of sun.

It was May 13, 1939. Despite the bright skies, there was no sun among us. Our once lively bustling city of Hamburg, Germany was no longer lively in the way that suited my family. Or was it that my family was no longer needed for the liveliness of the Third Reich. Forgive me, I'm being cryptic. Whichever way you choose to put it, my family no longer had a home in Germany. Our very bodies that we were told, as children, were special, are deemed vile. Atrocious. Wicked existences and a threat to the Master Race.

The city I had met my wife in, had my two children in, was shutting me out after 43 years. There weren't any bombings yet but it somehow seemed worse. German was no longer a critical aspect of my cultural blend, but a coarse sound that brought destruction and pain. I didn't know how I would tell my children — Maria and Abraham, both a mere seven years old — that home was no longer safe. That home no longer wanted them. That our lives would become a constant chase. That our religion was not sacred, but a curse.

I couldn't tell them. But I also couldn't show them. I couldn't show them that I was breaking down. That their father, the one who greeted them with a broad smile and called them neshama sheli, my soul, shook with immense sadness and fear as he bought four boat tickets.

Just like I couldn't tell them that the "trip" I went on for two months wasn't a trip.

So, like thieves in the night, we crept out of our home into the dark city. The electric

lamps were no longer a beacon of hope. They simply seemed to illuminate the coveted evil that forced us to leave. The evil that tore me from my family two months ago; the same evil that consumed all Jews in Germany, wearing us down until our eyes could no longer see light.

“Why are we so quiet Mommy?” Maria tugged on my wife’s long scarf. Despite the bitter cold pinching my face, despite the darkness that grew within me — spreading like ink spilled on a paper — I almost laughed at the sight of that scarf. My wife, Shelda, didn’t quite have a talent for knitting, yet being confined to our home, she didn’t have much to do. But Shelda always had to have a project. Something she would put her mind and heart into. However, she quickly learned that having fingers deft at piano playing did not necessarily translate to a deftness in knitting. Each time she ran out of a certain color of yarn, she had to switch to another as going to the store to purchase yarn was not a pleasure worth the risk. And so, the scarf was made of many different yarn colors and materials. It was a horrendous scarf really, patchy and fraying (even though she just recently finished it!), yet she insisted on displaying her accomplishment. It’s funny, in a way, the scarf was her one final goodbye to Hamburg. It told the story of isolation, of persecution. The scarf told the Nazis, “I am capable, you tried to leave me with nothing yet I made something.”

“We are being secret spies neshama sheli...” Shelda whispered tightening her grip on Maria’s small fingers. “Daddy is taking us somewhere very special, but it’s a surprise so no one else can know but you!”

“And you too,” she freed her hand from Maria’s grasp and brushed Abraham’s small nose, already red from the cold. I closed my eyes as I walked in front of them, suppressing an urge to scream and cry. The spies weren’t my children. The spies were the SS. The spies were lurking in the corners of streets, branding Jews with symbols. The spies were infiltrating businesses, breaking windows and peaceful nights. The spies were shoving us from Hamburg

without even laying a hand on us.

“Right Max?” I faintly heard Shelda’s voice, tinged with worry, behind me. I tried to relax my tensing muscles because I knew she saw them. I opened my eyes. I needed to try to be enough for my children. I had already done enough damage letting myself be hauled away and dehumanized. I needed to try to be strong. Shoving my trembling hands into my pockets, I turned around.

“Yes, and you know what? We are going on a big ship!” I measured my voice, trying to add the right amount of enthusiasm despite the whisper.

“A ship!” Abraham ran to catch up with me, his wide brown eyes trying to pierce the darkness in order to find the boat.

“Yes, a big boat that will take us somewhere new and exciting!” Shelda whispered, knowing that I was unable to say anything else.

I hated it. I hated knowing that I hadn’t always been enough for my children. That I was weak enough to let Hitler’s henchmen drag me off. That I was selfish enough to not resist when they grabbed the back of my neck, their hands more confident than my body could ever be. I hadn’t been strong when I didn’t say goodbye when I left the house that morning because I believed I could continue to manage my store even though the buildings around me were broken and signs plastered across the shattered windows reading “schmutzige Juden.” Dirty Jews. I was stubborn, foolish even, to think that I would be exempt from the Nazi terror. That for some reason the Nazis would find it in themselves to spare my small grocery store. To spare my family. I had faith. But faith isn’t smart.

I stopped. I heard nothing, not even the hum of the electric lights. I knew we were at the dock. A silence that intense is the sound of hundreds of Jewish families walking without steps, praying without voices, and whispering without opening their mouths. I put my arms around

Shelda, Maria, and Abraham, guiding them into the line of Jews filing on to the passenger ship the St. Louis. As we made our way to a section of the ship, I repeated the facts in my head. We would arrive in Cuba. We would use the visas to get into Cuba and then wait for approval from the United States. And maybe then. Just maybe, we could stop being chased by perpetual darkness.

My memories of the journey are dim. I remember that I wanted it to be silent, yet my hands kept trembling I couldn't get a loop of words out of my head.

“Beenoughbeenoughbeenough...”

But I wasn't enough. I was silent while Shelda consoled Maria when she cried about being hungry. I turned away, huddled against the wall when Abraham asked why the nice man next to him had been asleep for so long. I shrunk into myself when they asked, “Why is Daddy not talking?” and my wife replied, “He is tired from the journey neshma shali. He will be all rested once we reach the United States.”

“What is the Unit—ed state?” Abraham asked, tripping over his words. I closed my eyes, easily re-immersing myself in the loop playing in my mind as Shelda began to speak of new opportunities, places, and people we would see once we reached America. That's how I tried to be enough while not trying at all.

My mind awoke at the sound of voices. I didn't know how long had passed, yet we had reached Cuba. And that is when I made a fatal mistake.

I allowed myself to hope.

I allowed myself to believe in a future.

I dug faith from the depths of my body, dusting it off.

I think Shelda saw the nascent light behind my eyes, because she reached for my hand.

And I let her hold it. I let her hold it because I finally believed that I was worthy to be her husband. That I was worthy enough to be a father.

I should have learned not to put trust in faith. While I repeatedly gifted it my trust, it gave me nothing but regret in return.

Cuban government officials greeted us at Dawn when we arrived, but I was blind to the fact that this was yet another sign of the Dusk chasing us. They spoke to the captain in rapid, loud voices — harsh to the ears of those who lived in whispers. The hundreds of us crowded at the door of the ship, waiting for the word that we could disembark with our visas. I held the hands of Marie and Abraham, Shelda resting her chin on my shoulder. Some might say “I wish that moment lasted forever” or “I wished someone had framed us standing there.”

But I don’t want that moment in time captured. It already plagues my thoughts. It already reminds me of what I’ve done. Of what I lack.

I don’t want to frame faith. It doesn’t deserve it.

I don’t want to frame me. I don’t deserve it.

The captain turned around, his face stoic. “Will the families who have new visas come forward please,” he announced, his voice almost echoing in the silence. We all rushed forward, eager to see true light.

“No. No!” He raised his voice, his brow furrowing, the haggard lines marking his face more pronounced. “Only those who have *new* visas.”

We looked at one another in confusion. What *new* visas? We were given instructions to obtain a Cuban visa weeks before the St. Louis left. Several families pushed past us, holding papers that looked different from the ones I had secured for my family.

“Wait, wait, wait,” I touched a young man on the shoulder. “What does he mean, *new* visas?” The man looked at me in slight annoyance as the rest of his family moved towards the

door of the ship.

“I don’t know. All I know is my father had to get new papers because the old ones don’t work anymore.” He pushed past me, trying to catch up to his father and mother. Trying to reach a new life while we were left waiting. While we were left running away from darkness rather than chasing the light.

I pulled my hands sharply from the small ones that grasped onto me. I couldn’t hold their hands. I couldn’t protect them. I couldn’t. I couldn’t.

I couldn’t.

I heard the captain raise his voice, trying to explain over the muttering confusion of the 909 people that remained on the boat. “...we will have to return to Europe...” he explained, his voice devoid of remorse. He stated it like a simple fact. Like an order at a restaurant.

“Why can’t America just let us in? They have room!” a man shouted near me. Many shouted in words of agreement.

“The United States will not let you in.” The captain stated frankly.

“Why?” my voice sounded foreign, different from the loop playing in my head. “Why?” I repeated.

“Why do you think?” he responded, spitting out his words. “You are, you all are,” he looked at all of us, “900 something Jewish refugees. You are unwanted immigrants. Germany doesn’t want you. Why would the United States want you?”

Maria began to cry, and Abraham buried his face in Shelda’s scarf. But the scarf couldn’t dry tears.

“Did you actually think that America would let you achieve their ‘American dream?’ Pshttt. You people are a whole bunch of dreamers. Wake up already.” He turned back to the

Cuban officials, briefly conversing with them, before forcing the stunned crowd back onto the ship.

Wake up already.

Be enough.

Unwanted.

Useless.

Dirty.

Never enough.

I couldn't be there.

Maria and Abraham couldn't count on me to hold their hands. Shelda would never trust me to be a father. She would never trust me to love her enough.

I wasn't enough for faith

I wasn't fast enough to run from Dusk. To run from Darkness.

But I thought I could run from life.

So I pushed and fought to the front of the 900 people. The 900 souls just trying to hold on to what I had lost a long time ago.

"IT WON'T COME BACK" I yelled, willing myself to be strong enough to tell people not to repeat the same mistakes I did. "FAITH AND HOPE. THEY WON'T COME BACK." I ran now, my voice reaching a shrill scream. "STOP SEARCHING FOR THEM. JUST STOP." I screamed until my voice was raw and my head pounded from the loop that played through my mind at the same time. And I ran.

I ran to compensate for when I didn't.

I ran faster than I had run out of the death camp.

I ran from Marie.

From Abraham.

From my wife.

I ran because I hated that I would never, ever be enough for them.

I ran into darkness.

And I held my breath.

But I wasn't enough for the ocean either.