

Joseph fiddled with the dial on his watch, changing the time so it matched the clock on the wall. He was in his grandfather's hospital room waiting for him to wake up from his nap. Grandpa Joe had recently suffered his third heart attack. The room was small, smelling of antiseptic, the perfume his grandmother always wore too much of, and the strong will of a survivor. When Joseph looked up from his watch, Grandpa Joe was wide awake. Joseph jumped, eliciting a hoarse laugh from his grandfather. "Didn't mean to scare you Joseph," he said. Joseph liked the way Grandpa Joe said YO-zef instead of JO-sef. "Turn CNN on for me, son."

"Sure thing Grandpa," Joseph replied, standing up from the chair. Joseph was not surprised that Grandpa Joe wanted CNN- the man was a news junkie. Joseph stood on his toes and pressed the power button on the TV. The television was already on CNN. A reporter was standing in front of a hospital discussing the bombing of the Boston Marathon with a blond woman back in the studio. Suddenly, a picture of the bombing suspect, Dzhokhar Tsarnaev, flashed onto the screen. Joseph and Grandpa Joe watched in silence for a few moments while Grandpa Joe shook his head.

"That boy is going to give the ignorant an even worse impression of Muslims." He sat up in his bed, waving Joseph off as he adjusted his own pillow and pulled the sheet further up his body. "Turn the television off. I have a story to tell you."

"Okay Grandpa." Joseph said, sounding a little incredulous. Grandpa Joe usually spent at least an hour at a time watching the news and he hated interruptions. Joseph slowly walked over to the television, glancing at Grandpa Joe over his shoulder.

"Turn it off already! If I wanted it to take ten years I would have done it myself." Grandpa Joe was not known for his patience. Joseph turned off the TV. "Sit down. This may take awhile" Grandpa ordered. Joseph dragged the chair out of the corner and nearer to the bed. He looked at the old man expectantly, his chair angled towards the bed. Joseph expected a story of his grandfather's younger days, usually his short-lived job as a traveling salesman or about the day Joseph's mother was born. So

when Grandpa Joe started off with “When I was a little boy...” Joseph was shocked. Joseph knew his grandfather was born into a Jewish family living in Germany in the early thirties; Joseph understood the significance of the fact. Joseph had no idea what to expect. Not many happy stories came out of the Holocaust.

“When I was a little boy, maybe five or six, my family moved to Albania. It was near the end of 1938, after the Kristallnacht pogroms. The king of Albania opened the borders to Jews. Germany was not a good place to be for a Jewish family. My parents had the foresight to get us out. We were going to go to America, but that plan changed when the borders were closed. Then the Italians invaded in '39. Although Albania was supposed to be a stop along the way, my parents realized we would have to wait out the war there.

We lived in Tirana, the capital city. Albania was very different from Germany. The majority of people were Muslim. My parents were religious, and the Muslim traditions seemed very foreign to me at the time. I think it was 1941 when the Germans took control of Albania, but it's not easy for me to remember. That was a scary time. I remember how afraid my mother was. The older members of my family tried to spare me pain by not telling me what was going on. Children are more perceptive than people give them credit for. Though I was just a child, I was old enough to know that something bad was happening.” Grandpa Joe paused, staring off into space. Joseph tried to wait, but he was impatient to learn what happened next.

“Then what, Grandpa?” Joseph asked feverently.

“Then some of the best people I have ever met came into our lives. The Shalabs were our neighbors in Tirana. Rea, the wife, was friends with my mother. She often popped over to our house in the evenings to check in on us and bring us news about the political situation. I remember one night she told my mother something that made her cry. Looking back, it had to have been something about the Nazis. My mother's biggest fear was that we would be deported. Rea whispered with my parents while

my older sister and I washed dishes. Later that evening my father announced that we were going to go and live with the Shalabs.

The Shalabs were Muslim. They gave us Muslim clothes and Muslim names. We all celebrated Ramadan and, in secret, Passover. When the Nazis made sweeps looking for Jews, all the neighbors helped hide us. They kept us safe. I remember my father asking Rea's husband why they put their own lives at risk for our sake. I will never forget what he said, 'Albanians believe in a principle called Besa. Besa is a promise to help those in need, to give your own life for someone before you will break your promise to protect them.' The Shalabs and their neighbors put themselves in mortal danger to protect my family, people from a different country and of a different faith. They saved us. Without their help, we would not have made it through the war alive.

The Shalabs kept their promise throughout the German occupation of Albania. They became our family, but we could not stay with them forever. My parents were desperate for information about the relatives they left behind in Germany. We went back long enough to find that the rest of our family was devoured by the hate I was so fortunate to avoid. Then, we left for America.”

Grandpa Joe let out a long sigh and closed his eyes. His story was incredible. Joseph knew enough about the Holocaust to realize that. But how could the story be over? His brow furrowed, Joseph fired a question at his grandfather. “But what about the Shalabs? Did you ever see them again? Have you stayed in contact?”

Grandpa Joe opened his eyes and whispered with a rueful smile, “No. Albania was under Communist rule for decades. We couldn't contact the Shalabs. I haven't heard from them or seen them since the day we said our tearful goodbye back in 1945.” Joseph frowned.

“That isn't a very good ending.”

“If you want a happy ending, go read a novel. Real life has loose ends. I wish I could see the

Shalabs again and thank them for what they did, but I don't think it's ever going to happen. I hope they know how grateful I am. I will never forget them.” Grandpa Joe closed his eyes again. As the door creaked open, Joseph caught a whiff of his grandmother's strong perfume. She smiled at her husband and then at her grandson.

“Thank you for coming to see your grandfather, but he needs to rest. You can come back tomorrow.” Joseph nodded. He stood up and hugged his grandmother. She patted his back, glancing over at Grandpa Joe when Joseph pulled away. Joseph looked at Grandpa Joe for one long moment before waving goodbye. He paused at the door, looking back over his shoulder at his grandparents. Grandpa Joe looked peaceful, already asleep in the hospital bed. Grandma stood next to the bed as she carefully adjusted the sheet covering her husband.

Joseph thought about his grandfather and the Shalabs as he drove home. The radio was on NPR, and there was more talk about the bomber. Joseph was glad his grandfather trusted him with his story, and he got the impression Grandpa Joe told him the story to make sure his grandson knew that not all Muslims were like the bombers on the news. There are Muslims like the Shalabs and their neighbors who saved people when no one else would.

Joseph parked in his usual spot at home. The dashboard was littered with empty water bottles and old trigonometry homework. He got out of the car and went in through the back door, going into the kitchen. His mom was talking on the phone, holding up one finger to show she would be done in a minute. Joseph wandered into the living room looking at the pictures over the mantel. Many of them included Grandpa Joe. His mother came in and stood behind him.

“How's the old man doing?” she asked gently.

Joseph shrugged. “He's tired, but he seems fine. I didn't realize he was so old. He told me about how his family left Germany and ended up living with a Muslim family in Albania.”

Joseph's mother nodded knowingly. "Yes, the Besa story. It's incredible, isn't it? I was wondering when he would get around to telling you."

"Yeah, that's the one. Do you know anything about the Shalabs?" Joseph asked. His mother shook her head.

"Sadly no. Though I do know some things about Albania that you may be interested in hearing."

Although Joseph was disappointed that his mother didn't know more about the family, information about the country was the next best thing. "Sure, go ahead."

"Albania is a country with a Muslim majority. It was one of the only countries to actively resist against the Germans. After the occupation, the Germans asked for lists of all the Jews residing within the country's borders, but the citizens refused. Our family was not the only one saved. Before the war there were only about two hundred Jews living in Albania. Afterwards there were two thousand. The citizens hid or disguised the Jews, preventing them from being deported and sent to concentration camps."

Joseph's eyes were wide as he absorbed this information. "So there were ten times more Jewish people living in Albania after the war instead of less? That's awesome!"

Joseph's mother chuckled. "Awesome is a pretty good word for it. In most European countries the majority of people who weren't Jews turned a blind eye to the sufferings of our people. Their Jewish populations were decimated. In Albania most of the country came to the aid of the Jews, even if it meant risking their own lives."

Joseph was silent as he thought about everything he had learned about his family's past. Without the Shalabs, Albania, and Besa he wouldn't have been born. He owed his life to the kindness and bravery of others. Joseph resolved to make Besa part of his life. Joseph would never be able to directly thank the Shalabs; however, he would thank them indirectly by standing up for those in need.