

We All Want Heaven

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1945

Heroes

The trip is taking much too long.

‘Martin, where are you going?’

‘To the john. Be right back.’

I feel her eyes on me. I turn to look at her. She smiles. A fat man on her right, a small gray-haired woman on her left. The empty seat opposite her is mine. For the rest, two women in our compartment. Suddenly their heads turn towards me. Our eyes meet. I feel them taking in my every feature.

My face tenses. I can’t help it. Isa nods at me, she’s still smiling. I don’t know anyone who can smile like Isa.

I pull the door closed behind me and walk into the aisle. The train is going fast. I hold on to the railing under the windows in the aisle as I walk towards the restroom.

It’s ‘unoccupied’.

I stand in front of the mirror.

Heroes never tell their own story. They get their story from the people around them. Once upon a time, and then the hero did something really brave, and then he or she lived forever.

I’ll never get a gift like that.

My name is Martin Lenz. I was born in Berlin. Our neighborhood is gone, but I'm still here. My parents are gone. My grandparents, my friends, the house where I once lived, all gone. There's only me.

I'm still here.

They were English bombs. Last October, when I was at the front fighting the Russians. I wasn't home, I was lucky. Pure stupid luck.

My accent? My mother came from Flanders. My first language was Dutch, I learned German later on. I had a German father. I was raised as a German.

These are my papers. Twenty. That's how old I am.

Of course I miss them. I miss them every single day. But a person has to move on with his life.

We're on our way to Cologne, Isa and I. Isa Hofmann. I'm going to marry her some day. She is from Cologne, the past few years she has been working at the front as a nurse. I was wounded in Dresden, ended up in the field hospital, Isa was the nurse who took care of me, and we fell in love.

I don't have to go back to the front. I'm no use to them anymore. As soon as I was able, we left for the west. Isn't everyone heading west these days? I'm glad we can go to her parents'. As I said, a person has to move on with his life.

I don't stammer anymore when I tell the story. I've told it so many times, one day it will be all mine. But let me tell it again anyway. My name is Martin Lenz. I was born in Berlin. Our neighborhood is gone. Along with all the rest.

The mirror reassures me. I don't blink so much anymore. Don't tilt my head. I look people right in the eye, but not the whole time, back straight, arms at my sides. No fidgeting.

I'm still here, but a little less each day. Less and less, until I'll be nothing but my story. This one story. I could live with that.

Medal

My brother Jef is a hero. A real one. It was even in the paper. He got a medal, too. It has been hanging on our wall for a week now. It's really shiny. 'Don't touch, Remi,' says my mother, if I reach out even a finger. My mother polishes the medal every day. 'What our Jef did – there are simply no words to express it,' she has said about fifty times.

Whenever my father walks into the house, he stands in front of the medal, his arms crossed, and gives a deep sigh: 'Yes. Ah, yes.' At least a hundred times a day.

Our Jef is lucky. With that medal, he'll definitely go to heaven. However much he swears or lies, they'll have to let him in, they won't have a choice. All good people go to heaven, says our pastor, but heroes go first.

I wish I had a medal, like Jef. But if you're ten, you can't be a hero. I don't think. I have to be patient.

The house smells of cigarettes, of pipe and coffee. It's Saturday, and my mother has baked four cakes to celebrate the medal. Our house is full of people. My father and my mother, me, Jef of course, my sister Renee, a few of the neighbors. The medal has been taken down from the wall so we can look at it more closely. It has the king on it, and something in French. Something about being brave, my father says.

A hero is brave, says my mother. Otherwise, he's not a hero.

'He'd better not come back,' she says suddenly.

The house goes silent.

'He' is Ward. Ever since the medal has been on the wall, they sit around all day whispering about him. But not a word when I'm in the room.

'If they catch him, there'll be hell to pay,' says my father. 'Just look what they did to his mother! That woman is still in jail, and she certainly didn't do anything serious.'

My mother gets up and wipes her hands over and over on her apron. 'Who knows if he's still even alive,' she says.

I look at her, shocked.

'Of course he is,' says my father. 'If he were dead, we would've known by now. In a village like ours, nothing stays secret for very long.'

'It's all his own stupid fault.' Renee gets up, her chair scrapes loudly across the floor. She goes to the window and looks out. As if there's something really amazing to see out there.

There's another silence.

'Who wants more cake?' says my mother suddenly. Before anyone can speak, she has put another piece on each plate. It's my third. I'll get a bellyache from eating so much.

'What's his own stupid fault?'

'You're too young,' says my mother, smiling.

'I'm ten!' I say angrily.

'Exactly,' she smiles. 'Anyone for more coffee?' She gets up and fills each cup to the brim. Soon the room is filled with chattering again, as if I haven't said a thing, nothing at all.

I have to know. What's going on with Ward. And if he's ever coming back. I get up and go over to Renee. Ward was her sweetheart, so she should know. I tug at her arm. 'When's he coming back?' I whisper.

'How should I know?' she whispers back.

And she really doesn't know. She doesn't care, either.

'He promised me,' I whisper.

She shrugs her shoulders.

'He was going to teach me saxophone,' I say.

She shakes her head. 'Oh, Remi.'

'What's going on with Ward?' I ask loudly.

'Shut up, pipsqueak,' says Jef. He looks at me like I'm dirt. When all I did was ask a question.

'Ward is my friend,' I say angrily.

My mother smiles at me. 'One day I'll tell you everything.'

One day, always one day. As if I'm just a big baby.

'Let's drink a toast to Jef. To our Jef, and his medal,' she says.

I walk outside. It's drizzling.

I haven't seen Ward for a long time, but I haven't forgotten him. He taught me how to whistle through my fingers. We practiced for hours, until I could do it. And once I could, it was forever.

Jef can't whistle at all, let alone through his fingers.

What I want

Another four months and I'll have my high school diploma. It's up to me what I want to do after that: work or college.

My mother says I'm very musical and that I should do 'something with music'. Go to Hasselt, Renee, she says, to the music school, then you'll find out for yourself.

My father says I'm lucky, because I have a choice. And he doesn't mind telling me that I owe it to my mother. Because if it were up to him, well! And he doesn't quite understand. Why women are always making it so hard on themselves, when they've got plenty of work around the house.

‘You’re not a woman, so you can’t understand,’ my mother said to him.

So here I am waiting for the train to Hasselt.

What I myself want, I don’t know yet.

Jef could’ve gone to college, too, but he went to the mines. Everyone worked in the mines, he said, so it couldn’t be that bad.

My father works there, too. It is that bad, he said, Jef would find that out for himself, he was just scared to spread his wings, there was no bigger scaredy-cat than our Jef. A teacher, that’s what he should be, or a lawyer. A notary public, or a doctor. Those were the men who kept the world turning, said my father.

The world would turn without him, said Jef. He’d spread in his wings in the mine. And he was sick and tired of being called a scaredy-cat.

Ever since the picture in the paper and the medal on the wall, our Jef can do no wrong. My father walks around singing his praises, while Jef keeps grumbling that it’s enough. He still has to get used to being a hero. Because that’s what he is. Even though he works in the mines and never became a doctor. But Ward. What a coward. If he ever comes back, they’ll shoot him, says my father, because that’s what happens to traitors.

He says things like that when Remi isn’t around. Remi still lives in a fairyland, where friends stay friends forever. And Ward was his closest friend. And my love. My first, my dearest.

I can’t even remember what his sax sounded like.

My mother, last night.

And Renee, how much did you love him?

Very much.

How much is that? If the house were on fire and he was inside, what would you do?

In the old days, I would’ve run in and saved him.

In the old days?

Of course. Now he doesn’t have to bother coming back.

Never again?

Oh, Mama! Of course never again.

The way my mother began nodding, until her head nearly fell off. She was nodding at me and at herself. Dear girl, she said after a while, things should’ve worked out differently.

But things worked out the way they did.

The tram is here, I get in.

A few stops on, a man sits down next to me. He looks about twenty-five, but could just as easily be thirty. 'Do you mind, Miss?' he asks.

It's Renee, not 'Miss'. I think it, I don't say it. He's not getting my name. 'Go ahead,' I say, and turn my head to the window.

I've brought along my trumpet, just in case. I figure I'll have to play something, how else will they know what year I should be in?

'Are you going to Hasselt?' he asks.

None of your business, I want to say. I nod.

'Me too,' he says.

Big deal, I think.

'So, are you from around here?'

I sigh. Why doesn't he just shut up?

'Are you?' he repeats.

If I don't answer, he'll just keep asking. I tell him.

'I know the name,' he says, 'but that's it.'

I nod again and turn back to the window. Of course he doesn't know our village, it's no bigger than a pocket handkerchief. A few houses, a few shops, a square with a church, a town hall and a brass band. Our Desire – that's the name of the hall, and the brass band.

We all belonged to Our Desire, my father, Jef, and me. And then Ward joined. If anyone ever had a gift for music, it was him. That was something I could never understand later on. How someone could play so well and at the same time have such strange ideas.

Nobody knows where he is now. He has probably heard what happens to people like him, he won't come back, he's not stupid. People like him. Never thought I'd talk that way about the boy I loved.

I've always known, says my father, whenever Ward's name is mentioned.

He never knew a thing. He loved Ward as much as the rest of us. Everybody loved him.

'What instrument is that?'

I jump at the sound of his voice, too close to my ear. Why doesn't he just leave me alone? 'A trumpet.'

'I love music.'

I look at him, as uninterestedly as I can.

He nods to himself, moves three inches away from me, as far as the seat allows. He gets it. Finally.

My hands glide over the trumpet case in my lap.

The war is over, Ward is never coming back, and my mother is right: I have a gift for music. I'm going to play like I've never played before, and my head will be filled with music again.

My Secret

Last week they gave me a medal.

The men from the Secret Army arranged the whole thing. They were grateful to me. That would've been enough. I really didn't need a medal.

The ceremony was in the town hall. There were five of us. Four men from the Secret Army and one civilian. I was the civilian.

The village heroes, they called us.

Before that, nobody knew I was a hero. At home I was just Jef. Jef who worked in the mines. My boss was happy with me, I didn't drink like a fish, and I went to bed on time. I wasn't involved in any monkey business. I was nothing special.

Until one day, without any warning, there they were. In the middle of our living room. Three big men, with guns in their belts.

It was September '44, the war had just ended and the village had to be cleared of everyone who had sided with the Germans. People were dragged out of their homes, shoved onto a cart, their heads were shaved, their faces and skulls painted with swastikas, and then, with the whole village dancing and cheering, they were taken off to who-knows-where.

It didn't make sense that those guys had come barging into our house. We hadn't had anything to do with the war.

'There must be some mistake,' my father stammered.

'We're here for your son,' they said.

Everyone turned to me, my mother, my father, Renee, Remi, and the three men. Seven heads staring at me as if I were from another world.

All I could do was stare back. 'For me?'

I saw the fear in my parents' eyes, but I myself was too surprised to be scared. 'For me?' I asked again.

The biggest of the three came and stood in front of me. He looked me up and down. 'Jef Claessen?'

'Yes, that's me.'

'Let's go,' he said.

'What do you mean, let's go?' asked my father, horrified. 'My son isn't going anywhere.' He planted himself firmly in front of the three men. My mother went and stood behind him. 'We're good people,' she said.

'We just want to ask him a few questions, and who knows, maybe he'll be right back. Or maybe not,' said the man. He looked at me closely. 'You were there,' he said. It sounded almost friendly, but I knew that friendliness was often a mask people wore to get to the bottom of something. My mind began to race. What on earth was he talking about?

He saw me thinking, and frowned. 'Or am I wrong?' He sounded hesitant, but still friendly.

'Let me refresh your memory. Last May, the soccer canteen.'

I was so shocked, my legs nearly gave way.

'Were you there that night, Jef?'

He knew. How could he? Nobody had seen me. I was sure of it.

'We just want to ask you a few questions about that night, Jef. We want to be sure we've got all the facts.'

The hairs stood up on the back of my neck. This was the moment of truth. Never before had I told anyone what had happened that night. It was my secret, I'd take it to my grave.

My legs were shaking as I followed them out the door. My father followed me. 'You stay here,' the men told him. 'We need your son, not you.'

My father nodded. He stood there in the doorway, biting his lip. As soon as we had turned the corner he started swearing till he was blue in the face. But only after we were gone. My father was the biggest scaredy-cat of us all.

I went with them to their headquarters. I was pushed into a little room. The three men disappeared. Two others came in. Wanted to know if it was true. If, on that May night, I had helped prevent a raid by the collaborators. And saved four Resistance men. Four men from the Secret Army. Four of their ringleaders.

I nodded. It was true, I said.

That was what they wanted to know, they said. They sounded relieved.

How had I known about the raid? they asked. Pure chance, I answered. No, I wasn't a member of the Resistance, and I wasn't a spy, either. My father would never have let me get mixed up in the war.

'But you did,' they said, grinning. 'And now we can tell the world. Jef Claessen is a hero!'

The months passed and I heard nothing more about it. Meanwhile, they were still combing the village for anyone who had helped the Germans. When the worst was over, it was time for the medals.

A few weeks ago my heroic deed appeared in the paper. My father memorized the article word for word, my mother wondered how I could've kept it a secret for so long. Said I was far too modest. Other newspapers came to get my story, so I gave it to them.

Last week they gave me the medal. My family was there. Everyone hugged me and said I was the biggest hero of all.

I hope Ward stays where he is, because here, they'll tear him apart. We all will.