

If I Die

By: Amber Perry

9th Grader at Kamiakin High School;

Librarian, Mrs. Nobbs

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If I Die

(HÜRTGEN FOREST, GERMANY)

Clark violently slammed the book at the door.

“It’s worthless!”

Jamming his palms on the door frame for support, he watched the book. Creased pages gripping the ground and almost tearing at the impact. Scrawled notes and hand written letters scathed the pages that leaked out the sides. And Clark witnessed it all. He crumpled to the ground next to the book. He sunk his head in his arms, his back forcing the door shut. Violently shaking and heaving, Clark broke. Out came the cries of a broken man. And in his hand, he clasped a page.

“Henry- why did you have to go?”

* * *

“Clark- stop beating yourself up for the past.” His mother clutched his shoulder. He wrenched it away, his eyes in rage.

“Stop telling me what I shouldn’t do! You never knew him the way I did!” Clark strained to keep his eyes dry.

“Clark; listen to me. I didn’t come to argue.” She shamefully pulled a book from off the counter, and turned Clark around and placed it in his fists. “I came to give you this.”

Clarks’ lip turned in a half snarl. He didn’t want some lousy book.

“Please Clark,” She begged with her eyes.

“It’s from Henry.”

* * *

September 6th

When Clark and I went to the woods, he told me to never leave him as we heard the bombing off in the distance. I saw only truth. I asked him why. He said he could never part from his one and only brother and friend, not when those horrible enemies were there attacking our country. I didn’t know what to say. So I promised to never leave him. I don’t know how to tell him I lied.

November 18th

Mother didn’t understand when I told her.

“You don’t have to,” She would whisper. And then softly,

“I can’t bear to lose another son.”

Clark didn't know. That was the worst part. But today I told him. He didn't even say goodbye. He looked hurt; and there was no perfect way to explain to him about Frank. There was no time to say why I had to go to war for him and Frank.

* * *

“How is this supposed to help?” Clark slammed the journal closed and pushed the wooden chair back. “It only makes it worse, mother. It hurts.” She calmly handed him a coat. Looking up into his blue stormy eyes cut her deep to her soul.

“We need to take a walk.” Also grabbing her coat, she took his arm and strode evenly out the door into the snow.

The crisp air didn't bother either of them as they ponderingly stepped farther from the comfort of home, and into the forest. It was almost impossible to tell where you were because of the white haze that covered every square inch. The silence was mocking to Clark. Long were the days he remembered the airplanes shooting through the forest. The sound of tanks advancing. For Clark, the forest was full of Henry he almost burst; till mother stopped. And if she hadn't, Clark would've missed the little gray stone projecting its humble presence in the wintry wood. On it were simple words that gave a thought-provoking name into the still air.

Frank B.

“Where ever he lay, may he rest in peace”

Clark stiffened and folded his arms. Not sure of this headstone, and whose life was lost. He turned to her, his eyes full of remorse.

“Why are you showing me this? I hurt enough already.” He shrugged his shoulders roughly, almost mocking her. She stood motionless and her eyes fixed on the stone. Her face showed no emotion, not even a flicker of hurt. Her eyes though could have written volumes.. He stared at her hard, more of frustration building inside his body. Clenching his fists, he closed his eyes and breathed deeply. His mother just stared blankly as she led him to the house. Clark went straight to his room, opened the pages once more.

* * *

November 30th

He liked to stumble through the forest growth behind me while I carried the wood. I had to watch that he didn't get too close to the edge of the safe zone. Once, he had picked a dandelion and squealed as he struggled to give it to me. I kept on walking, ignoring the toddler. He would follow me wherever I went. I would push him out of reach, or yell at him for something so simple. He wouldn't understand why. Mom always cradled him tight, giving me a sad look. I really did love Frank- but he was mom's favorite. I was neglected- mom was always taking care of Frank.

But it's true you don't know what you have till it's gone.

It was another day in the forest. The black smoke from the war seemed more prominent today, but I didn't notice as I headed down our path. My only thoughts were of all the chores. Frank giggled beside me, waddling with a stick. My body quivered from the lack of sleep, thanks to Frank's cries. I held my head with my hand; sure I could faint at any moment. Then Frank started jabbing me with the stick. I couldn't take it. I yelled at the little guy. His fingers swiped at his teary eyes, and I didn't care. I just walked faster and didn't look back. I heard snuffles, and slowly nothing. As I neared the porch I felt sorry, but when I glanced back, he wasn't there. Or anywhere.

After a while my throat was hoarse from crying his name. But on I sprinted into the woods, covering my ears while the planes passed overhead. They would swoop so low and let off horrible shelling or bombs. I hadn't even considered what would happen if Frank went to the 'danger zone.' My cries got louder. I was just a quarter mile from the danger zone when I saw Frank. A small figure racing to the other side of the forest. I howled at him, running furiously, but the drone of the planes was too loud and he was too far away.

I jolted to the ground as a dark shadow covered my body. My eyes dazed as I jarred the ground looking face-up at the bottom of a fighter plane. I remember that moment so clearly. I meekly tried to stand but was too weak from my fall. I felt my hands sticky with blood from my forehead. And my eyes- what they saw I wish could be washed away with time.

Frank had been pushed to the ground too by the force of the air current. First his head went down, and then his feet. I don't know how, but I heard him squeal, right

before the sound of bullets exploding all around us. I couldn't take my eyes away from Frank. I yelled his name one last time. I saw his body get hit; once , twice- I stopped counting. It was red.

I layed in the grass waiting for my turn. My heart whacked my rib cage with every breath I took. My ears stung with trying to hear any sound. I heard the plane gun it out of the forest, out of league. My mind numb, I stumbled getting up. I didn't look back. I didn't want to see the undergrowth stained with the blood, shed from my neglect. I told myself I was a murderer.

I had killed my brother.

November 31st

Clark, I know you must have hated me for joining the war, and you must think I am a fool. But please, if you read this, just understand I didn't do it for any honor. I did it for you, not to hurt you. I was so disgusted by the time wasted with Frank, I vowed I would spend every waking minute with you. To keep you safe, I joined the ranks. I did it because I had to, and if I die,

It is for the both of you.

As Clark slowly finished reading the handwritten scrawls, his face brimmed with tears. For so long he had loathed his brother- for entering into the war and leaving him alone. Alone,

when Henry never came home. Alone at nights when he dreamed he was still alive. Carefully taking a pen, Clark purposefully began writing.

Henry you did everything you could. You are not a murderer to me. You are my hero, my friend, and my brother forever. I wish I had the courage you have, keeping everyone safe. I wish you knew how much I really appreciate you taking your life for mine. I think Frank would say the same. I hope that if I die, Clark, it will be for you.