

The Hero

Every morning, seven-year-old Steven and his mother wake up earlier than everyone else so she can tell him a story. She whispers in the dim morning light so as not to wake their frail, shallow breathing bunkmates. The story is about a hero, a man who faces danger every day and wins the battle every time. It's Steven's favourite part of the day because he can imagine that he is this hero, that he is out on an adventure and doing something new every day.

Mother says the war is what is responsible for where they live. She tells Steven that he is lucky to be living in the Camp. Having arrived there two years earlier, Steven can barely remember a home that was not the Camp, even though mother says one existed. This does not bother Steven, he loves his home anyway.

The sound of the door opening and Kapo's* harsh, commanding voice fills Steven's ears. It is time to start the day. Steven gets excited, as he always does. Mother says their work is very important, and if he does it well enough and quietly he will be like a hero from her story. Though he cannot wait to start, Steven and Mother must wash before roll call. Steven doesn't like washing very much, but mother tells him water is like the potions from her story that bring the hero back from the brink of death at the last moment. It is magical and will heal you from the inside out. This makes Steven feel a little bit better.

Roll call begins, and some of the bunkmates have taken longer to finish washing. The guards start yelling and Mother grabs Steven and tells him to hug her and cover his eyes. She tells him not to listen to any sound but her voice. She repeats to Steven that he is so lucky, that he is living a perfect life. She tells him nothing bad can ever happen to him as long as he remembers the story of the Hero. Steven can sometimes hear a pounding sound, muffled grunts

and something about filthy Jews over mother's voice. He still doesn't question her. Whatever Mother says must be true.

Food is Steven's second favourite part of the day. They aren't given much, but Steven never asks for more. He sees other children, even some adults on their knees, crying and begging for more food even though they have already eaten. Steven tried once too, a long time ago, and Mother shushed him. She told him he should never ask for more out of life. This life was safe and good to them, and he should be thankful. Even still she will sometimes give him a little bit extra from her portion. Steven never asks again.

After eating, Steven always feels stronger. He is ready to start working. When Steven starts his work he feels important, like he is contributing. To what he is contributing, Steven doesn't know. He does labour; he moves heavy things where they need them. Though Steven is one of the younger children to be doing this, he is in better health than most of the workers. Steven credits this to his sheer determination and devotion to his work, although it probably has more to do with the scraps of food Mother sneaks to him from her own plate during meal time.

When Steven looks around he doesn't recognize most of the people around him. There seems to be new people to replace ones that disappear every day. Steven does not work with Mother, she goes somewhere else with other women. He's never asked what it is they do.

Steven remembers a time when he had a friend in the Camp. His name was Abarron and he was very quiet and much bigger than Steven. One morning when Steven began working he looked around and didn't see him. He asked Mother about it later and she told him Abarron had gone to take a shower up on the hill. Mother said Abarron would not be coming back down and he should never make friends again. They do not last. She said that some people get sent away because they don't appreciate their home enough. It is because they complain, cause problems

and are weak. She told Steven that a hero walks alone, and if he wanted to be one he would have to do it on his own. She repeated to him again that his life is perfect and safe as long as he remembers the story.

Steven looks up from his work and sees a group of campers being shepherded together by some German soldiers. Steven listens in and hears one of the guards say something about the showers. This makes him pause. Steven is curious where these infamous showers are. He also thinks about Abarron there, and is suddenly filled with an overwhelming need to see him again. Mother says not to make new friends, but that doesn't mean Steven can't visit old ones! She also says showering is a good thing and he should be excited for the people who get to go. People are happier after their shower; it sends them where they belong. Finally Steven thinks of her words when they were washing up this morning, *Water is like the potions from the story that bring the hero back from the brink of death at the last moment. It is magical and will heal you from the inside out.*

With a strengthened resolve and his determination pointed somewhere new, Steven drops his work and walk over to the pack of campers. Though healthier than most, he is small for his age, and manages to sneak into the group unseen. Steven stays as quiet as mother always told him to be. He thinks about Abarron and being clean. He thinks about the Hero's story, because mother always told him that would keep him safe from every danger. Finally Steven is doing something new, just like in the story. Slowly, with a newfound excitement, Steven walks with the rest of the group toward his first adventure as a true hero.

A **kapo or prisoner functionary was, "a prisoner in a Nazi concentration camp who was assigned by the SS guards to supervise forced labour or carry out administrative tasks" (Google definitions).*