

Hidden in My Heart

By Ella Prisk

The old man always made sure he drank a cup of coffee before they arrived. The smell of freshly ground coffee beans wafted up from the steaming cup as the man eased his creaking joints into the worn sofa. Settling back with a sigh, he took a sip from the mug and gazed out the open window at the German countryside. Spring had finally breezed in, and her gentle touch had awakened the world. As if overnight, colors exploded outside, from the new leaves unfolding on the trees, to the waving wildflowers and swaying grass. With his one good ear, the old man could hear the twittering and chirping of birds, but not the sound he was waiting for. He took another sip of coffee as he watched the sunlight dance across the wooden floor, always with one eye fixed on the path outside. Suddenly remembering that he forgot the plate of cookies, the man slowly set his cup down, grasped his cane, and shuffled back to the kitchen. Bang! The cottage door flew open as the old man picked up the plate of cookies. Smiling to himself, he cocked an ear, listening to the lively debate in the living room. They were here.

“You should have helped him!” an indignant ten-year-old Julia Meyer shouted at her brother.

Alexander stood with his arms crossed. “He deserved it,” he remarked with the superiority of a thirteen-year-old boy who is arguing with his little sister, “Besides, his mother would have heard his howling eventually.”

“Ya! He’s a mean bully,” little seven-year-old Ben chimed in, siding with his brother.

“Well, you still should have helped! I bet that’s what Grandpa will say!” Julia’s dark curls whipped around as she shook her head at Alex.

“Grandpa will agree with me! I’m sure of it!” Alex retorted, his blue eyes flashing.

“My, my! Is that a flock of birds I hear squawking at each other?” Grandfather interrupted as he entered the room with the cookies. Ashamed, all three grandchildren mumbled sorry. Then, Ben and Julia hugged their grandfather hello while Alex set the plate on the table. “Now, you three put your book bags down, get a cookie, and tell me what all this is about.” Grandfather’s faded blue eyes sparkled as the children raced to grab the snack. Once they were settled—Ben snuggled beside Grandfather on the sofa and Julia and Alex on two other chairs—Grandfather asked Alex to tell him what had happened.

“What about me?” Julia whined.

“You’ll get your turn,” was the gentle rebuke.

“We were walking home from school on the path through the woods...” Alex began, “when we heard a hissing sound coming from a bush beside the Weber family’s fence. Then, a snake poked its head out from under the bush. It looked just like the poisonous black-patterned one that you warned us about. Julia and Ben were scared, but-”

“Was not!” Julia protested. “Were too! You screamed so loud,” Alex proudly continued, “but I grabbed a stick to smash the snake if it came any closer. Then, we heard laughter coming from inside the bush, and Lukas, the boy who makes fun of us because our father is American, poked his head up. ‘Got you,’ he taunted, ‘It was just a toy snake!’ But when he tried to pull his arm through the fence, it got stuck. You should have seen him! His

face turned purple as he continued to pull on his arm. I started walking away and told Ben and Julia to come with me, so we left Lukas standing there hollering for his mother.”

Grandfather’s face was stoic, “Julia, Ben, is that what happened?”

“Pretty much, but I told Alex we should go back and help. He didn’t listen, as usual!”

“Why should we have helped the big bully?” Ben countered, his long bangs shadowing his brown eyes.

“Alex, why did you walk away?” Grandfather solemnly asked

“Lukas is so mean to us, and I figured that he deserved it. Anyway, he would have gotten out eventually. Right Grandpa?” All three children’s eyes were fixed on their grandfather as they waited for his answer.

Grandfather searched each grandchild’s face before he sighed, saying, “I think I should tell you all a story.”

Confused, all three children glanced at each other and shrugged; but after all, grandfather was a great storyteller. They settled into their seats as the old man began his tale, “The story begins in Germany a little before the terrible war that I told you about.”

“The Cold War?” Alex interrupted. “

No, son, World War II. A little boy, close to Ben’s age, lived happily with his parents in a cozy apartment in the city of Aachen. Even though Germany was under the thumb of Adolf Hitler, this boy’s life was not much different than yours. He went to school, played soccer, and had a few close friends.”

“What did he look like, Grandpa?” Julia asked. “Well, he looked a lot like Alex, blonde hair and blue eyes. He was taller than most boys his age, but as thin as a string bean,” he winked.

“Ok,” she giggled, “Keep going.”

“One ordinary day, the news that Hitler had invaded Poland spread like wildfire. Great Britain and France soon declared war, and World War Two began. Suddenly, the boy’s life completely changed. The air at home was tense and filled with worried glances and sighs. Because his parents had never agreed with Hitler’s regime and were adamantly against his hunger for world power, the boy’s family was cut off by some of their closest friends. German propaganda tripled overnight in his school, and more and more troops began marching into the city. Even though Aachen was bombed more than once, the boy and his family did not leave like the many others who became refugees. War weaved its way into every aspect of his life, but it wasn’t until the boy was about twelve years old that World War II finally hit home...”

...Hans Neumann was finishing his homework at the kitchen table when the apartment door flew open with a bang. “We have to leave now!” Hans’s father was breathing hard, but he captured the gaze of his wife and son with eyes that were haunted by fate yet filled with strength, “They’re here.” Dread wrapped its cold tendrils around his heart as Hans turned to see his mother’s eyes widen and her face turn ashen. The glass she had been holding slipped from her hands and dropped to the floor, shattering into a million pieces. This must be more than just another bombing, Hans thought, watching his mother seem to awaken as if from a dream.

“Honey, go to your room and grab the bag that we packed,” she told Hans, determination filling her eyes. While his parents rushed to get together the bags they had filled with their absolute necessities and most treasured possessions, Hans pulled the straps of his bag over his shoulders and slowly sat down on his bed. This was the room where he had spent so many moments of the twelve years of his life. He had made so many memories here. In this tiny room, he had laughed and learned, hid and cried, won and lost. Tears filled his eyes, because he knew that it was the last time he would sit in this place. The city of Aachen, his home, was under attack, and his family was evacuating. Hans bit his lip; his greatest hope and fear was coming true. This isn’t just another bombing. The Allies are here, and they will win.

“Mami! Papa!” Hans was crushed in the stampede of Germans evacuating the city, “Anybody! Help!” His father had told him to hold onto his belt, but the jostling and pushing of the crowd caused him to lose his grip, and his parents melted into the mass of bodies. “Anyone! Please, I lost my parents!” Hans’s terrified shouts were lost in the deafening noise of a thousand pounding footsteps frantically running to the countryside—running from the war, running to safety, running for their salvation. Heart pounding and panic squeezing his chest, Hans grabbed the people nearest to him, “Please, I need help!” They shook off his grip, and like a boat without an anchor, Hans reeled in the churning sea of people, clutching at any hope of the shore. “Someone has to help me!” The mob ran on, blinded by their fear, hardened by their troubles, and so desperate for their own salvation that they ignored everything else in their path. Hans’s eyes overflowed, but driven by his despair, he wiped away the salty tears. Seeing a tall, burly man, he latched onto the German’s arm as if it were

a lifeboat. “Sir, can you please help me find my parents!” The man’s dark eyes narrowed, and he glared at the boy who was dragging him down.

“Find them yourself!” he snarled and slung the boy towards an alley. Hans’s body slammed into the brick wall. Then, everything went black.

Hans awoke to the sound of explosions. Smoke hung in the air, and the ground trembled as the Allied troops released bomb after bomb on the perimeter of the city. His eyes tearing with every minuscule movement, Hans cautiously pushed himself up, gingerly touching the bloody knot on the back of his head. Dazed, he leaned against the cold stone of the building behind him, What happened? Where are the explosions coming from? He closed his eyes, willing his brain to remember, hoping to remember, praying to remember. Minutes passed. Suddenly, Hans’s eyes snapped open. The evacuation, the mob of people, being separated from his parents and thrown into the alley—it all came rushing back. He struggled to stand, but the buildings spun. Another explosion rocked the city, and Hans crawled behind a trash can in the back of the alley. What am I going to do? He rested his head in his hands, I can’t get out of the city with the Allies attacking, and I can’t go back to our apartment while they are dropping bombs. Hans squeezed his eyes shut as the sickening realization came upon him, I’m stuck here, in the middle of the city of Aachen, with no escape, and the battle has begun. He curled up against the wall and listened to the sound of his city being destroyed until, against his will, he fell asleep.

Red flames licking the apartment building, his parents calling, bullets whistling through the air, and the sound of his screams... “No, no...” Hans struggled to wake up from his nightmare, but when he opened his eyes, he was hit with the fact that the nightmare was

real. While he had been sleeping, the Allied troops had begun their foot invasion of the city, attempting to flush out all of the German soldiers still hiding in the buildings. Through the haze of smoke, Hans could see a small group of Allied soldiers, their weapons aimed at the building on the right of the alley. The crack of the guns filled the air, and the windows of the building shattered. Heart racing, Hans huddled further into his corner. He rapidly blinked his stinging, watery eyes, unable to pull his gaze from the ghastly scene. The German soldiers holed up inside of the building returned fire. An Allied soldier was flung back. His gruesome screams rang over the explosions, blood pouring in rivers of red over the cobblestones. Hans bit his lip until the metallic taste of blood mixed with the acid taste coating his tongue. This can't be happening! One Allied soldier, a tall man with an unflinching stance, shouted something to the others, and each ripped a hand grenade out of his belt. His life flashing before his eyes, Hans watched in terror as they raised their arms. Then, the world erupted.

One of the grenades missed its target, smashing into the alley. The trash can Hans was hiding behind exploded in flames with the sound of a thousand thunderclaps. A loud pop, then searing pain filled Hans's right ear as he was thrown out of the way by the force of the explosion. He picked himself up and began running away from the blaze, dashing right into the open street just as the Germans were preparing to fire. Hans saw the world as if it were in slow motion.

"Don't shoot!" the tall Allied soldier screamed, throwing his gun down. The Germans in the windows seemed surprised but narrowed their eyes, each setting his finger on the trigger. The Allied soldier rushed towards Hans, slung him over his shoulder, and bolted, just as the storm of bullets began. Hans felt the man shudder each time a piece of wrath found

its mark, but he did not slow down. The man raced away from the shooting, down a side street, and into an abandoned building, Hans bouncing the whole way. As they flew through the gaping doorway, the soldier gasped, stiffening as he collapsed to the floor. Stunned from the flight and the fall, Hans slowly straightened up and cautiously made his way over to the Allied soldier. His helmet had fallen off, revealing a young man with dark hair and strong features. His body lay twisted on the floor, and crimson blood had started to seep through his shirt. As Hans tiptoed over, the man's eyelids fluttered open, his kind brown eyes resting on the young boy. Hans stared in shock, his lower lip quivering, but his savior gave him a gentle smile before breathing his last. For hours, Hans sat curled up in the corner of the room, his pounding head on his knees, until the figure of another soldier darkened the doorway. The short Allied soldier examined the body of his fallen comrade and friend before noticing the boy hiding in the corner. Carefully walking over, he knelt beside Hans. The soldier said something, but Hans could not hear a word. He turned his head so that his painless left ear was facing the man.

"You, ok?" the soldier slowly pronounced in broken German, his green eyes searching Hans's blue ones. Hans gulped and broke down under the compassionate gaze.

"He saved me," was all that he could manage to say, "He saved me..."

"...The little boy was found by an Allied soldier who took him back to the camp outside of the city and brought him to the captain of the regiment. There, the boy received medical help for his head and his ear. The explosion had ruptured his eardrum, and the boy would never hear out of his right ear again. He was later reunited with his parents, who had been desperate to search the city for him but were held back by Allied troops in another

area. Eventually, the Allied forces won the Battle of Aachen and, finally, the war. The boy and his parents moved to a little cottage in the countryside of West Germany. Throughout his life, the boy would always remember the battle he had witnessed and the man who had given his life for him, hiding those memories in his heart for all of the years to come..."

As Grandfather's voice trailed off, the three children sat in shocked silence.

"Grandpa?" Julia's voice wavered, "Is that a true story?"

"Yes, it is, little one." No other sound was heard except the singing of birds outside the window.

"I just don't get it!" Alex exploded, shattering the silence, "Why would the soldier risk his life to save the enemy, even if it was a kid? He died to save someone who could have grown up to become another Nazi!"

Grandfather was still, gazing off into the distance as if he were in another place and time, "I believe that the soldier had a kind heart. He knew and believed that saving that little boy was the right thing to do, no matter what side the boy was on or who he would become. His selfless act stemmed from his love for others, and he realized that his death gave the boy another chance at life. That's why he did what he did."

"I think I get it..." Alex said slowly after a moment of meditation, "Wait... are you trying to say that I should have helped Lukas, even if he didn't deserve it?"

Grandfather's face curved up in a gentle smile, "My boy, it is always better to show kindness to others, no matter what you receive in return."

Remorse was written on Alex's face, "I understand, and I won't do it again." The wiser, older eyes locked with the young ones. A look full of meaning was exchanged, and all was forgiven.

"Who was the boy in the story?" Ben piped up. Grandfather hesitated, looking at each of his grandchildren in turn, "That little boy was me."

The children's eyes lit in surprise and wonder. "It was you?" Julia whispered in disbelief.

"I still remember every detail as if it were yesterday," Grandfather's voice trembled, and his eyes filled, "That soldier saved my life, and I will never forget what he sacrificed. Because of that day, I have and always will keep a little kindness hidden in my heart to share with those around me in the same way that his selfless kindness was given to me." Grandfather's eyes cleared, and his words embedded themselves in each child's soul, "I hope that you will hide a little kindness in each of your hearts. You may find that your actions will have an impact on others that will last the rest of their lives." The children solemnly nodded, and Grandfather watched the last rays of sunshine light each of their faces, a smile creasing his own countenance. This moment, like many others, would be one that he would treasure in his heart forever.