

Clinging to Hope

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Alfons fell to the cement floor in the old, red-brick apartment building he shared with Inge. Out of breath and filled with exhaustion, he dug deep in his pockets to retrieve his apartment key, but there was no key to be found. He remembered securing the key in one of his pockets, hoping he would not lose it, but now his torn pockets lay empty.

His eyes scanned the floor of the building. He blinked, trying to clear his blurred vision. The dim lights flickered above him.

Where was Inge, he thought?

“Help me,” he called out. No one answered.

He swallowed hard, desperately in need of water. It had been days since he had even a drop of water, let alone food. A wave of nausea hit him and a desperate cry escaped his lips. He leaned over and dry retched, his stomach heaving in turmoil. He placed his cheek to the cold cement floor. A short, somewhat refreshing chill spiraled through his tired and injured body. Exhaustion made his eyes heavy. He instantly drifted off to sleep, a tormented sleep that made him shiver from the inside out. His dream took him back to the place he would always fear, the place that would haunt him for the rest of his life.

Alfons was standing in the courtyard in the middle of a medieval fortress with walls built of huge blocks of stone, surrounded by a deep water-filled moat. He stood in silence; motionless facing the fortress wall, many men to his right and many to his left. His hands were stretched above his head and manacled. There, he stood for hours. He closed his eyes as he tried to drain out the yelling Nazi SS guards, and the terrifying sounds of gunshots as prisoners dropped to the ground.

Halfway between sleep and reality, he screamed out in pain. Quickly, sleep took control again. He was back in the nightmare he would always know. This time, he was harnessed to an enormous wheel, forced to push it around for hours on end, drawing water up from the well.

Unable to open his eyes, he felt someone's presence upon him, stroking his hair and face, as tears wet his cheeks.

"Darling, Alfons, please wake up," he heard the familiar voice, the voice that always soothed him and warmed his heart.

Inge held Alfons in her arms and sobbed.

"Inge, I am alive," he said, with all the energy he could muster up.

Alfons finally forced his eyes open.

Beaten, tortured, and almost killed, Inge cut the clothes off Alfons' bloodied body. He shuddered in pain as she washed him and bandaged his wounds. She fed him warm soup broth and bread, but he could barely keep any of it down. She let him sleep, waking him only to give him some food and water. After three days of sleep and barely moving, Alfons forced himself out of bed and sat with Inge at the table.

He held her hand.

Inge stroked his face. "Please tell me what happened."

As he traced back the events, his tone was frighteningly casual. Was he in shock?

He told Inge that he was rounded up the morning he left the apartment by the Belgium authorities because he was a German citizen. Being Jewish or not, the Belgium authorities rounded up all German citizens and kept them at the military barracks outside Antwerp. He spent two days at the military barracks under the Belgium authorities. Then, a group of men, all Jews, were given over to the Nazis. They were driven in a truck to a concentration camp. Not

knowing where they were, the prisoners eventually realized the Belgium authorities were Nazi collaborators and they were at a concentration camp named Breendonck, a fortress along the Antwerp-Brussels highway, 12 miles southwest of Antwerp. The camp was a waiting camp, designed to receive Jews and other prisoners before transport to Germany. At the camp, tortures, hangings and shootings were common daily activities among the Nazis. The prisoners saw shootings every day. It was like a sport for the Nazis; target practice, if you will.

One morning before dawn, Alfons and several other prisoners were led out of their cells. Walking in a single line at gun point, they were forced out of the fortress gates toward the railroad tracks. A sense of relief came over Alfons that he was leaving that awful place, but at the same time, he felt a sense of dread and fear of the unknown. Where were they going?

No less than 100 prisoners were forced into sealed cattle cars with enough room for only 40 people. They were packed in so tightly that they could not move and there was no room to sit down. They managed to sit by taking turns. A single bucket sat in the corner of the car for sanitation. The air was stale, smelly and humid. The light was faint. There was little conversation, a few whispers. Hours went by slowly and it became hard to determine time. People cried out; others sighed and grew impatient. Fear could be seen in everyone's eyes.

Tears rolled down Alfons' cheeks. He wiped his nose with a handkerchief.

"It's alright," Inge said. "You can tell me more later. Rest now."

Alfons shook his head and cleared his throat. He slowly continued telling Inge about his horror.

Hours followed hours, and darkness and cold filled the cattle car.

Swaying slightly, Alfons fell asleep in a standing position in the corner of the cattle car. He felt the rocking movement of the train under his feet. He tried to tune out everything that was

happening around him and focused his thoughts on Inge—her long blonde hair and the gentleness of her calm, blue eyes like a clear blue sky.

Tears rolled down Inge's cheeks.

"I can't believe this happened to you, Alfons," she said. "I couldn't live without you."

"Inge," he said, stroking her hair. "I am here. It's okay."

Then, Alfons started to laugh. Inge looked at him in utter confusion. "Alfons, what's so funny? How can you laugh right now? This is so terrible."

He continued to laugh hysterically.

She giggled, unsure how to respond to it all.

"You'll never believe what happened next," he said. "It's unbelievable!"

He patted her arm, trying to console her.

"Inge, by the will of God, I am here," he said. "There is something greater than us, Inge. A great power...something I never believed in before. When I was in Breendonck and in that train car, I hoped and prayed for a miracle. I never believed it would be possible. I wasn't sure if I would see you again."

He continued on with his story.

Gunshots cut through the air and the acrid smell of gunpowder filled the air in the train. Startled, Alfons opened his eyes from a brief sleep.

"What's happening?" someone in the train car exclaimed. Many in the car braced themselves and covered their ears.

"Silence!" another man yelled.

They all looked at each other in panic. They heard shouts from SS officers. The train

came to a screeching halt. Alfons remembered falling down and then trying to pick himself back up among many other fallen prisoners.

Moments of silence followed. The gunfire and screaming continued. A loud explosive boom shook the cattle car. Men fell to the ground, one on top of the other.

“The explosions were deafening” said Alfons. “My heart was racing and pounding in my chest. Then, there were other loud sounds that we could not decipher.”

All of a sudden, the air outside the cattle car was silent. Several of the prisoners tried to peer through the cracks in the car, but could only see grass and a small flutter of hurried footsteps. They stared at each other in shock. They stood in silence. Alfons thought the Nazi SS officers would open the cattle car doors at any moment and fill the train car with gunshots killing them all instantly. Tiny beads of sweat fell down Alfons’ cheeks. Time marched forward, twenty minutes, then maybe thirty, forty minutes. An hour went by and nothing happened. They continued to wait, not knowing if they should try to force open the door to the cattle car themselves. After several more minutes passed, Flemish voices could be heard outside the train. Upon hearing the Flemish voices, several of the men in the cattle car cautiously forced open the doors. Then, they heard the words, “You’re free! The Germans are dead!”

They all jumped from the cattle car, tears of joy streaming down their faces. Plumes of flame from explosives could be seen across the railroad tracks that were ripped from the ground. Dazed survivors wandered past the dead bodies of SS officers, killed by the Belgian resistance.
