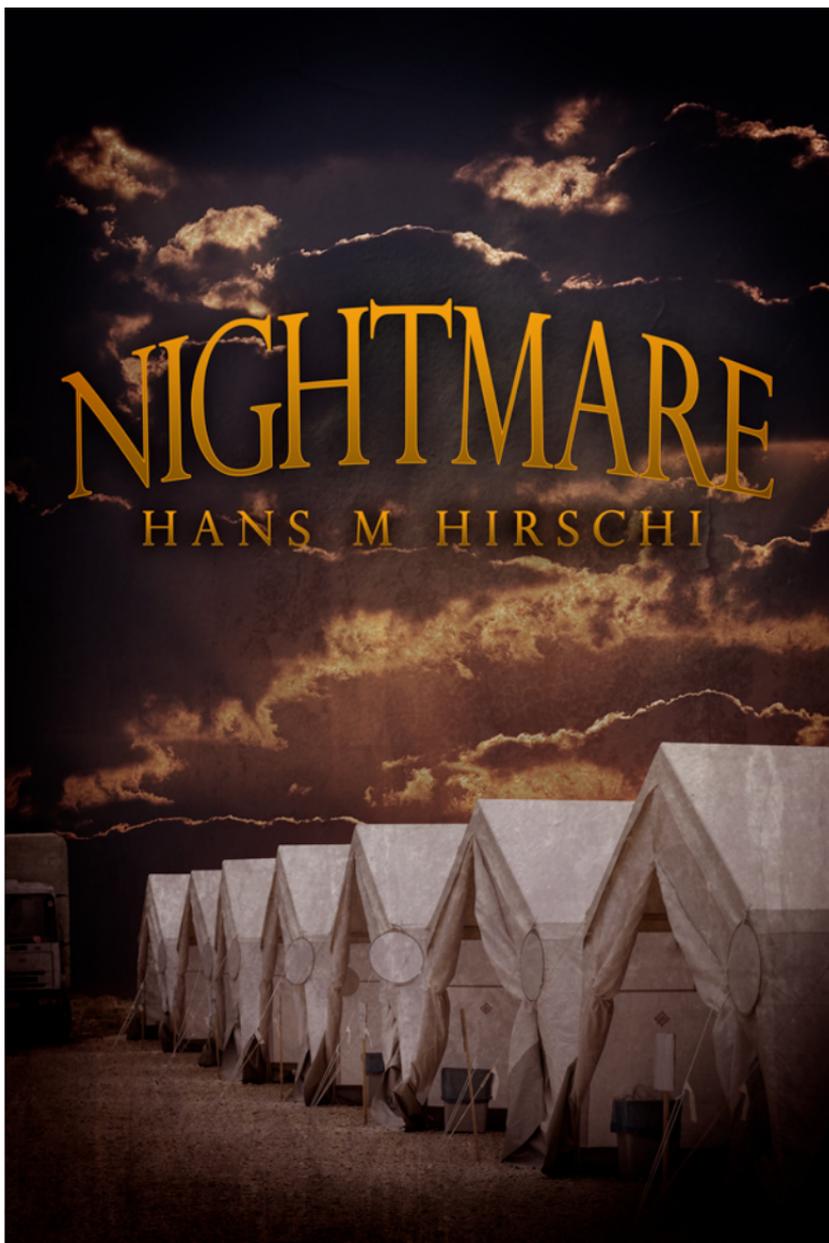


NIGHTMARE

HANS M HIRSCHI



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By

Hans M Hirschi

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are a product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

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What we leave behind

“We’ve got to go. NOW!” I bark those words as my husband struggles with what to take along and what to leave behind. It is a scene I will never forget for as long as I live.

“Come on. The boat leaves in five minutes. If we miss it, we might be stuck here!” I am pressing him on, and he gets irritated with me, as he often does under pressure: “Don’t push me. You know how much I hate that!” Finally, he closes the front door, locks it and we hurry to the jetty to catch the ferry to the mainland.

It is early in the morning, very early. It’s raining and cold, as it so often is in Sweden in winter. This particular November though, it feels as if the country is weeping. Weeping for what is about to happen, weeping for innocence lost, and weeping for the blood that is about to be spilled on its soil. The ferry pulls into the small harbor of our island just in time. It isn’t even five o’clock in the morning yet.

Only a handful of other passengers stand there waiting, hiding behind the lapels of their coats or jackets, trying to avoid the rain, the wind, the world. We get on board as quickly as we can. For the first time in years, we don’t greet the mate as we pass by him to get to the safety of the passenger cabin. It isn’t his fault, yet given the circumstances,

it feels odd to say “good morning” to someone we’ll likely never see again.

We don’t say a single word during the entire twenty two minutes it takes to reach the mainland. Even the baby is quiet, playing on his iPad. He, too, feels that his parents are under an enormous amount of stress, and he keeps to himself, as if he knows that even the slightest wrong word could set off a chain of events he knows he wouldn’t care for. At two and a half years, Jayden is a happy and bright little boy, the joy of his parents, Noah and I. He’s doing great in preschool. His social and language skills are coming along just nicely. It’s no exaggeration to say that I would kill to save his life. I would gladly give my life to save his, and so would Noah. Which is exactly why we are on this boat at this time of day.

Allow me to explain. As a gay couple in Sweden, our life was, for the most part, no different than that of any other family. Noah works for the government, making a decent living, while I work as an author.

Our son, Jayden, conceived through surrogacy, goes to preschool and is happy. All is well. Except, well, all is not well. When the Russians finally gave up their pretense and bombed the shit out of Kiev, Europe was in shock. But neither the EU nor the USA would go to war over a country whose biggest asset was heaps of nothing and then some. As harsh as it was, nobody really gave a shit about the Ukraine and the Russians knew it. They knew that we would continue to buy their gas and oil whether

the pipelines crossed the border directly from Russia or passed through a third country. Eliminating the middle man, so to speak, was how the Russians saw it. That was in July, an eternity ago. Sadly, encouraged by the European reaction, or lack thereof, the Russians decided it wasn't enough and pushed a little more. I don't know if the Americans saw it coming or not, there certainly must've been signs of warning, but it all happened so quickly that it was too late for anyone to react. Tallinn, Riga & Vilnius all fell on the same day—October 25. Ninety eight years to the day after the October Revolution.

Europe was at war again. Or at least NATO was. Sweden was in shock. The Baltic countries are, were, gone. I'm still confused, because I'm old enough to remember a time when there were no Baltic countries, and now they're gone again. There were not enough NATO troops stationed in the Baltics to mount a serious defense and the Russians just literally ran over those tiny countries, staging a mass genocide of ethnic Estonians, Latvians and Lithuanians, putting Russian puppet governments in place.

That was ten days ago, and it scared the shit out of us in Sweden. I mean, we're not members of NATO, we're not taking sides. Neither is Finland. So when the Russian army crossed the border into Finland two days ago, Sweden literally ground to a halt. Because, if the Russians take Finland, they'll eventually come here, too. They had said as much.

We just didn't listen. Or take them seriously. Old wounds, going back hundreds of years when Sweden was a major power in Europe and we invaded Russia, took what we wanted in the Baltics and elsewhere, at least for a while.

I remember how my Facebook exploded, how Twitter quit when the first bombs fell over Helsinki. Who would wage a war on several fronts? It was nuts, complete military nonsense to wage war from the Black Sea all the way up to the Arctics, but that's exactly what the Russians did. It seemed like a nightmare! And they caught everyone by surprise. With memories of how they treated the gay population, Noah and I sat there in silence and watched how the reporter on TV was crying. The Helsinki Cathedral's main dome collapsed in the fire from one of the bomb hits as we tried to make sense of the execution of Finland's government and president at the hands of a firing squad earlier in the day.

The reason? Finland had begun to discuss joining NATO openly. Apparently, that was unacceptable to the Russians, who still secretly viewed the country as a former archduchy of the Russian Empire, part of their so called sphere of interest.

It was hard to watch. I had been to Helsinki a few times, and the few cities I visited were as peaceful as the Finnish capital. Cold, freezing cold, both times I was there, but peaceful. And clean. At some point, Noah and I looked at each other, and we realized that if Sweden were next, our lives would

be in serious jeopardy. We had seen the reports from Russia about how the LGBT community was persecuted, how children of lesbian mothers had been taken away and put into foster care, and how mothers were jailed for violation of Russia's LGBT Propaganda Law, or as they preferred to call it: "For the Purpose of Protecting Children from Information Advocating for a Denial of Traditional Family Values."

Protecting children my ass!

We knew that our family and Jayden would be in jeopardy if we stayed. But where could we go? We stayed up all night, discussing our options. We were toying with returning to Switzerland, the country I was born in. I had no living relatives left, but both Jayden and I were citizens. We talked to friends in the USA who said we'd be welcome there. The next day, Noah went back to work, Jayden went to daycare, and I tried to get a grip on what was going on. Flights were all fully booked, at least the ones that were still operating.

As NATO was at war with Russia, most civilian flights had been cancelled because the military needed to be able to operate without having to worry about civilian jets. The only way out of the country was by car.

I spent the entire day trying to get money set aside for our trip south, pack, do laundry and pretend as if everything was alright. When Noah came back to the house in the evening, we had dinner, put Jayden

to bed and continued our preparations. Helsinki had fallen into Russian hands by then. The inner city was completely destroyed and NATO forces were amassing in the Baltic Sea. The Swedish government was making threats if the Russians decided to cross the sound. We turned off the TV. It was as if we were watching some really bad C-reel on the SyFy channel. We didn't know if the bridge between Malmö and Copenhagen would still be open, not to mention the southern bridge across the Belt, but we had to try. As a NATO member, Denmark would undoubtedly suffer the wrath of the Russians for any and all retaliations of NATO for the Baltics, the ever-escalating spiral of violence, spinning out of control. I didn't care. I had vowed to Noah when Jayden was born, that I would protect him with my life, and if I had to swim across the Öresund and the Belt, I'd do it. Anything to protect my son.

Whatever happened to the world to let it come to this? In near darkness, I look out the window of our ferry as it approaches the mainland. The all too familiar sound of its engines soothe my mind as it's reeling from the events of the past few days. I'm afraid of the future. I'm afraid of what will happen to my son, my husband, me.

We reach the car in no time, but we get drenched from the rain. Noah straps Jayden into his car seat while I pack the bags away and strap the carry-on cage with our two cats into the seat next to Jayden. It was a difficult decision to make, but we decided

to flush the fish from Noah's aquarium down the toilet. But we couldn't leave the cats behind. We couldn't risk telling anyone we were leaving, not even our closest friends next door who normally look after our house when we travel. We just couldn't take the risk. We left a letter on the kitchen counter, explaining our actions. They have a key to the house, but if we really were heading into war, I doubt our neighbors would want to be looking after our pets.

"Ready?" I try to sound upbeat as I glance into the rear mirror where I see Jayden looking at me. He nods, probably thinking we're taking him to school. Noah's face betrays the stress and anxiety of what's to come. I pull out of the parking lot and steer our Volvo southward bound to the freeway toward Malmö.

The radio is on for about five minutes. We're catching up on the latest on the war front. Seems that Belarus has decided, what a surprise, to side with Russia and they've sent troops to reinforce the occupation of their - former - Baltic neighbors, and to make sure that no NATO troops get in from Poland.

The situation is a mess, with NATO trying hard not to escalate the war further by attacking the Russian mainland, but concentrating their efforts on freeing the Baltic states, which of course isn't going anywhere. The Americans want to send war ships into the Baltic Sea, but the Russians claim that would be a declaration of war on Russia, a threat

that would be met with full force, including nuclear weapons. No kidding, eh?

I turn off the radio and turn on some music instead, but Noah turns that off almost instantly. “I can’t hear this right now...” Can’t say I blame him.

There’s little traffic on the streets, and even less traffic on the freeway. We pass a few Norwegian registered cars and trucks going north and a few Swedish vehicles. Other than that, the roads are all but deserted. It’s Friday morning and everyone is staying at home, waiting for what’s to come.

We make good progress and reach Malmö by eight in the morning. It’s still fairly dark out. As we approach the bridge and the toll gates, we notice, to our dismay, that the bridge has been closed. Police cars are blocking the way. I pull up to one of the cars and get out.

“Officer, why’s the bridge closed?”

He sighs and looks at me. “Son, haven’t you been watching the news?”

“Erm, yes, I have, which is why we want to cross the bridge and get out of here...”

The officer looks at me incredulously. “Why would you want to leave a neutral country and enter a country that is at war?”

I decide it’s not worth discussing the finer points of my rainbow family with him. Knowing that the ferry service across the sound fifty miles north,

undoubtedly, must be stopped too, I return to our car to discuss our next steps.

“We could try to find a boat to take us across,” I offer. Noah looks at me, stupefied. “Do you really think anyone would risk their life to take us across?”

I shake my head and hold on to the steering wheel for support. “No, of course not. I meant we steal one. Honestly, do you really think it matters? We’re not coming back any time soon, and if things do get out of hand, nobody is going to miss a boat.”

Secretly, I agree with Noah. To steal is not what we’re made of, it’s not what we are, yet here we are, three hours into fleeing our home, abandoning our house, twelve hours after the genocide of our fish, descending further into criminality. “It’s for Jayden,” I plea. “Not for us.” I know it’s not fair, but I also know it works. If we’re to get out of this country in one piece, we need to get going, no matter what.

We pull up our iPhones and the map applications to see where the nearest marina is. Oddly, the GPS seems out of whack and doesn’t work. Well, maybe it’s not so odd, given the circumstances. After all, it is a military application at heart. But knowing Malmö a little bit, we find a harbor and I drive us there. In the meantime, the sun has decided to make an appearance on this awful November day, with a few rays breaking through the clouds.

Next to me, Noah begins to chuckle and shakes his head. “This is nuts. What are we doing? What is wrong with us?”

“What do you mean?” I’m not sure I’m following him. I mean yes, it’s crazy for us to want to steal a boat, but it’s the only way to get out of the country. “I mean it’s crazy, the world is going crazy. Just a couple of months ago, we were on vacation at Disney world, we were enjoying life, and everything was great. Now look at us, sitting here, looking out of our car like criminals trying to find the best boat to steal. It’s crazy, and I can’t quite believe this is happening. This is a nightmare!”

Suddenly, he bursts into tears, sobbing uncontrollably, which obviously triggers Jayden to do the same. I’m counting to ten. Slowly!

One, two, three, four... As I’m about to say five to myself, the sound of two fighter jets roaring over my head interrupts my thoughts, followed by a loud explosion, far away.

“What was that?” Noah wonders.

“I don’t know, but I hope those weren’t Russian jets over Swedish territory, or we’re in bigger trouble than I thought. Turn on the radio!”

“...minister is once again urging the war parties to agree to a cease fire. And this just in: the Öresund Bridge and the bridge across the Big Belt have apparently been destroyed by Russian forces in hopes to hinder reinforcement traffic crossing into the Baltic Sea.”

“FUCK!” I say. I was hoping to not have to steal a second boat to cross over into Jutland, but it seems we’re not having that sort of luck.

Noah looks at me and says, “Now what?”

“I don’t know. Let’s take this one step at a time.”

“You know,” he says, “we may have been better off crossing the Kattegat from the island instead of coming down here...”

“Yeah.” I feel a headache coming on. “But we would’ve had no car.” The second I say that, I realize the repercussions of what I just said, because we won’t have a car much longer, if we continue. “Let’s take a walk and see if we can find a suitable boat.”

The sun’s appearance has stopped the rain, for now at least, and the air is fresh. In the southwest, we can see smoke plumes rising from the explosion of the bridge, and every now and then, fighter jets fly over our heads.

It’s so odd there’s not a soul out. I’m afraid that if anyone were to see us, they’d find us suspicious. “We need to get out of here, and come back after nightfall.”

Eight hours later, we return to the marina. The rain has resumed, and around us, the world has spiraled further out of control. The attack on the Öresund Bridge was interpreted as a declaration of war by the Swedish government who protested sharply with its Russian counterpart. And although Sweden

opted not to retaliate, it was only a matter of time before the country would be drawn into the conflict.

The armed forces were alarmed and reserve forces called upon. This time, I leave Noah and Jayden in the car and go looking for a suitable boat on my own. I remember having seen something that looked big enough for our luggage and the three of us, plus the cats. Sneaking onto the boat, I check if there is enough gas and if I can somehow short circuit the engine.

Unfortunately, it seems the owner has taken the battery off the boat, so I need to go and find another one. But every single boat in that marina is either missing the tank or the engine. Resigned, I return to the car.

“There is only one boat that would work, and it has no battery. No battery, no way to start the engine.”

Noah sighs. “Now what?”

“Well, we could go and look in a different marina. There’s another one just north of the city, remember? It’s only a twenty minute drive.”

Noah jumps in his seat. “Drive, that’s it!”

I’m confused.

“Don’t you get it? We’ll just take the battery from the car. We won’t be needing it any longer.”

God, I love my husband. He’s so smart. Why hadn’t I thought of that? We unload the luggage and take Jayden, the cats and everything else to the boat. I

install the car battery, break open the panel and short circuit the engine. Instantly, the boat's diesel engine jumps to life. Noah releases the boat's ropes and I gently pull out.

It's been a few years since we sold our own boat, and piloting a new and different craft is always challenging, but since it's my only time, and since I really don't care about the boat, I don't worry about scrapes or bumps. I just need to get us safely across the sound. As we leave the marina, I realize this could be more challenging than I had imagined. The waves in the sound are taller than they appeared from land.

The boat is hit by a first wave and Noah loses his foot hold. He falls and hits his head. "Ouch. Watch what you're doing!"

"Sorry!" It's all I can say. I have to focus. I try to tackle the waves from a different angle, but no matter what I do, it's going to remain a bumpy ride. "Can you make sure Jayden's okay?" I shout into the cabin.

Slowly, we leave Sweden behind us. The rain is pouring down, and I can barely see where I'm going. Luckily, I know I just have to steer east, stay clear of Salholm and try to make our way to the Danish side, while avoiding any ships that might still be out there.

Ha, I think, I guess that's not going to happen now, not after the Russians have blown up the bridge. In the distance, I see Copenhagen. The lights of the

city glow and grow, little by little, as we approach the Danish coast.

It's scary. Here we are in the middle of the sea, crossing a straight where submarines might be hiding this very minute.

I'm scared, I'm freezing, and I can't see shit. Every twenty seconds, the lights on the Danish coast disappear as the boat descends behind another wave, only to appear again as we climb the next one. We've been out here for over half an hour and progress is slow. The westerly wind is slowing our speed, and it seems as if we're still far away. I can see Saltholm off to port. It's dark. The island is inhabited, but I can't see any lights.

Compared to the big city lights of Copenhagen, it feels almost like a black hole. Just a day ago, I would've seen the lights of cars, trucks and trains crossing the sound, and the lights of the bridge itself, highlighting its slender silhouette in the dark.

So many times I've crossed it, even by foot once, before it was officially commissioned. That seems a long time ago as we're once again forced to use the old-fashioned approach by boat. Finally, we approach the harbor north of downtown Copenhagen, where the ferries would normally depart. They're docked and silent, their scheduled interrupted by humanity's madness. Stopped by the dogs of war.

I don't even know where to land the boat, but finally decide I don't really care, as long as we get

out of it safely. I find a pier that seems deserted and ask Noah to go out to moor the boat.

It's been over an hour since we left Malmö, but we've made it. We're finally in Denmark. Whether we'll be safer here, a country officially at war with Russia, I don't know, but for now, I'm content to be one step closer to the continent and Switzerland, where I hope we'll be able to get a flight out to the USA.

Odd, I realize, we're about five miles from Copenhagen's international airport, but there are no more flights to be boarded from here, even though I know that just days ago, there were still daily flights to several North American destinations.

We should've left sooner, I scold myself.

As quickly as I can, I help Noah get Jayden, the cats and our luggage off the boat. We're in Copenhagen, but we have no car. How do we get from here to Odense and on to Jutland?

Noah suggests we steal a car. I hesitate. "Shouldn't we try to catch a bus? Or a train?" I'm not a very good criminal, and it pains me to leave this boat behind, but we need to. We have no choice. We start to walk toward the city, and it strikes me just how little traffic there is, particularly given that it's a Friday night. It's only nine pm. Normally, this would be a bustling city with lots of people going out, but not tonight.

Pulling two suitcases, the cat cage and the stroller with Jayden, we must look odd and out of place.

I'm afraid to be picked up by the police.

Undoubtedly, they'd wonder how we got here.

By a stroke of luck, a taxi drives by and the light is on. I wave him over. He pulls over to the curb and I quickly walk up to him.

"Hi, could you take us to the station?"

The driver turns his head to me and gives me a puzzled look. "I could, but that wouldn't help you much. There are no more trains running. Where you heading?"

"Germany!" I say truthfully, avoiding any context as to how I want to get there.

"Get in!" he says in response.

I waive to Noah who quickly comes to the cab and starts to unbuckle Jayden. I put the luggage in the trunk. As I pick up the cat cage, the cabby shouts from the cab, "No pets!"

I look dumbfounded as Noah struggles to strap Jayden in the back seat. He must've heard what the cabby said, but he pretends as if nothing has been said. What do I do? Set them free? Leave the cage here in hopes that someone will take pity on them? Do we give up on this chance to leave Copenhagen?

My mind is spinning when the cabby shouts again, "Come on. We don't have all night if you want to get out of here!"

My face is heating up and I realize that my mind's made up. "I'll be a second!" I shout back as I put

the cage on the ground and open the door. The younger of our two cats tries to get out, but I manage to grab him. My face is all wet from the rain and the tears are flowing freely, realizing that even if I don't have a choice, I am doing something I never thought I'd been able to.

With a yank, I break his neck, and his body goes limp in my hands. I put the corpse on the cage and open the door again. The second cat is hiding in the back of the cage, probably sensing what's about to happen. He fights me, scratching me bloody, but I finally manage to get him out of the cage. It topples over and the corpse of the other cat falls to the ground.

"I'm so sorry!" I scream and with a yank, I give up my humanity. I straighten up the cage and put both corpses back into it, close the door and hurry over to the passenger door of the cab. The taxi takes off, leaving part of my family behind. A part of my family I just killed.

Animals, yes, but for the past four decades, cats, dogs and fish have always been a part of my life. I never thought I'd get to the point of killing them, but when push came to shove, when the future of my child was in the balance, the decision was surprisingly easy. Ten minutes later, I'm sick to my stomach, and I wish I could wake up from this nightmare. Only this isn't a dream...

In the back of the car, Noah is quiet, but I can see that he's crying. The younger of the cats was his,

and I know how much he loved it. He couldn't bring himself to ask me to do what I did, I know that. It's not about being a coward, quite the contrary. By not mentioning it, not vocalizing it, he actually made it easier. Had we discussed it, who knows if I would've been able to go through with it? Instead, he pretended as if nothing happened, as if we never had any cats, not even when Jayden asks for "Ma'a?" again and again. Noah simply ignores it, and after a while, Jayden quiets. Does he understand?

As we leave Copenhagen, the cabby suddenly starts talking. "You can't leave over the belt. The bridge was destroyed. Your best shot is south, either from Gedser or Rødbyhavn. With a bit of luck, you might catch a transport. The Americans and the Germans are deploying troops in Lolland. Maybe one of the ships will take you south. I'll take you, but it'll cost you."

"How much?" I wonder. Money is inconsequential at this stage, or so it feels. Besides, without getting to Switzerland, how can I even think about money for a flight? First things first.

"Two thousand dollars!" I gasp. Seems war is an expensive business. I pull out my credit card but the cabby laughs.

"You're joking, right? Cash, my friend. Who knows if I can still access my bank account tomorrow?"

I turn around and look at Noah. He's looking out the window, ignoring me. Same tactic as with the

cats, but I wish he'd say something, support me, have a fucking opinion, for once. But no. I put my wallet away and pull out an envelope with the cash I had managed to get from the bank the other day. Five thousand dollars and euros each. Twenty percent of the money already gone, in less than a day.

“Here you go,” I say, and watch as the cabby grabs the wad of money and hides it inside his jacket. He seems a nice enough guy, actually a savior of sorts. That is, if he actually takes us all the way to Lolland and doesn't just dump us by the wayside somewhere out in the country.

The roads are empty everywhere and we encounter very few vehicles. There are military trucks and convoys, but very few cars. I guess the Danes are also staying at home, trying to find as much comfort in this incredible situation as the people in Sweden were earlier.

“Any news from Finland?” I wonder. The silence in the car is killing me. The atmosphere is so dense you could carve the air with a knife. The cabby doesn't respond but turns on the radio. As in Sweden, newscasts seem to have replaced any normal broadcasting.

The prime minister emerged from a cabinet meeting earlier and is now briefing her Majesty the Queen. The unprovoked attack by the Russian air force on Danish territory will be avenged. Meanwhile, news from the front are grim. American forces have

suffered heavy losses near Narva on the Estonian border to Russia, and British and Norwegian forces in Riga were all but obliterated by a Russian missile attack. In Finland, Russian ground troops have joined forces with marine troops in Turku. The island council of Åland has announced independence and neutrality in the conflict in a desperate attempt at steering clear of the battle. It is generally assumed that Russian forces will use Åland as a bridge head if they decide to press on into Sweden. The Swedish government has closed the Russian embassy in Stockholm and expelled the embassy staff in a sharp protest against the bombing and destruction of the Öresund Bridge.

Meanwhile, in Washington, senator John McCain is criticizing President Obama for the latter's unwillingness to threaten Russia with the force of a nuclear strike. Mr. McCain is quoted saying, "If the Russians want war, we'll give them war. I think we shouldn't take any options off the table, including a nuclear first strike!"

No immediate comment from the White House was available.

In other news, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi today declared Bagdad the new capital of the Iraqi and Syrian caliphate, just days after the former Iraqi capital fell into IS hands and al-Baghdadi triumphantly entered the city. IS now controls all but the Kurdish areas of Syria and Iraq. This move was expected after the destruction of Damascus earlier this year. On the war front, Iranian weapons

were relatively silent today as the Iranian government was deliberating the next steps with allied forces in Washington. The Israeli prime minister and the Iranian President...

I have to turn off the radio. I just can't take it anymore. The world is literally at the brink of extinction. How had it come to this? What had we done? What had we missed? How could we let it become so bad? Had we really learned nothing during the first and second world wars? I think back at recent developments. The bombings in Paris, the killings in Copenhagen, the slaughters in Sydney and London, the many fires set to synagogues around Europe and the following exodus of Jewish people to Israel. I think about the hatred against Muslims all over the western world, and I think about the persecution of LGBT people in Africa and Russia. Why is it so god damned difficult for us to just live and let live?

The cabby seems to be reading my mind. "Humans are animals!" He says those three words with such equanimity that I wonder if he realizes that he's human too? "Seems we can't hold on to a good thing. Greed gets the better of us. The nineteen nineties and early two thousands were such a time, but that wasn't good enough. We wanted more. More money, more vacations, more of everything. And when it all crashed, we started to blame each other. We deserve this, and who knows, maybe we'll have learned our lesson when cockroaches are all that's left on this planet..."

At that, he laughs. I still feel sick to my stomach. I haven't eaten in hours. I turn around to look at Noah, but he's fallen asleep, and so has Jayden. Lucky them. I couldn't sleep even if I wanted to. Sleep eludes me in stressful times, such as this.

Instead, I stare on ahead as our taxi dashes south through a nightly Sjælland, toward Lolland and the hope of transport across the sound to Germany.

Upon arrival in Rødby, we grab our stuff and watch the taxi's tail lights disappear north again. The two red lights are like beacons of hope disappearing in the fog, like a dream. We were extremely lucky to catch this guy as we're standing here, closer to Germany than I had ever hoped for after facing the closed bridge earlier in the morning.

The little harbor is bustling with life. Military life. Barely any civilians can be seen. I see American and German military trucks being offloaded from one of the ferries that normally traffic the short distance from Puttgarden. I approach one of the German soldiers. Speaking German might just help in this instance.

"Hi. Listen, we're trying to get over to the other side. Is there any chance that you could help us, and take us on board when you return?"

The soldier looks at me incredulously. "Civilians on a military transport? Are you out of your mind?" I'm stunned. I've never really understood the whole military vs. civilian concept. Apparently, the military really does consider themselves a separate

society within society. I always thought their job was to serve the civilian society and to protect us? I guess I was wrong. I'm not giving up though.

"Please. We've managed to get all this way from Sweden. We managed to cross the Öresund. I'm a Swiss citizen and we'd like to get back to Switzerland before all hell breaks loose." I'm not sure if my next argument is particularly smart, but there is something in the soldier's look that compels me to make it. "Look at us. What do you think the Russians would do to my family if they ever found us? Our son would end up in an orphanage and we would end up in a gulag, or dead, or both!"

The soldier's shoulders sag just a little, and he looks over to Noah and Jayden. Looking into my son's eyes, seeing that innocent child's face does more to convince him than any of the words I could've used.

"Here's how we'll do this," he begins. "Do you see the truck over there?"

I nod.

"That one is going back across to Puttgarden. Go get in the back, and I'll drive it aboard in about fifteen minutes, as soon as the last stuff is offloaded. But for God's sake, please be quiet. This is highly irregular. I'm only doing this because you're family. And as such, we need to stick together."

I could hug him, and I'm grateful that my gaydar worked, for once. I refrain myself.

Instead, I walk back to Noah and Jayden and direct them discreetly over to the truck. We take Jayden out of the stroller, and put it and our luggage quietly onto the truck bed before we climb up ourselves. Under the tarp covering the truck's bed, we'll be undetectable, as long as no one saw us climb aboard, and as long as we are quiet. The crossing will be short, maybe an hour at the most. It should be easy enough for us to be quiet, but to keep Jayden quiet for an hour, that will be a different story.

But we manage, even though my heart threatens to jump out of my throat as the truck's engine starts. I wonder if he's really going to take us onto the ferry and not in the opposite direction. But all is well and within minutes, I can feel water underneath us as the ferry gently rocks on the waves.

We leave port almost immediately after the truck is loaded. We hear no voices during the crossing, and relax a little. We try to explain to Jayden the importance of being silent, and I wonder if he understands. Looking at his face in the darkness, our phones the only source of light, I can see how exhausted he is. It's the middle of the night and he's barely slept. Being on this truck, sitting in Noah's lap, is either too uncomfortable or too exciting and most certainly too cold for him to fall asleep.

Upon arrival on the other side, our truck is driven off the ferry. I wonder what the next step will be as we drive for a few minutes. Seconds later, I hear the driver get out of the cab and walk back to us. "Get

out quickly. I can't stay here very long. Welcome to Germany, although I'm not sure you'll be much safer here than you were on the other side. The war is escalating and there have been reports of missile hits in several of the larger cities in Poland and here. Berlin's been hit! We are officially at war with Russia and her allies now. I wish you luck on your journey south."

The news hits us like a slap in the face. Not that it is much of a surprise, but it's still shocking to see just how quickly things are escalating. With Germany officially declaring war on Russia, it makes it so much more difficult for us to cross the country. After all, we're looking at over six hundred miles. A ten hour drive by car, if we could get our hands on one. If not, we'd be walking for weeks!

We climb out of the truck and I thank the soldier for helping us. It's been incredible just how quickly we've made this much progress. We are in Germany!

From here on, there are no more hinders, no more waters to cross. We could potentially walk all the way if push comes to shove. I cannot even imagine how that would be. I've never walked more than thirty miles in my life.

The soldier nods and looks at us before he climbs back into his truck. "You better get rid of your luggage. You look like fucking tourists. You need to blend in or you'll be interned sooner rather than later!"

I look at Noah who looks puzzled. We only brought one suitcase as it is, and most of it are things of Jayden's, valuable personal belongings, trinkets, things we hold dear, a laptop, images, etc.

Sadly, the soldier has a point. We're refugees now, as hard as it is to understand. And as such, we can't afford the luxury of our laptops or old family photos. Besides, if I had to choose, right here and now, between Noah, Jayden and the trinkets, the choice would be obvious. We leave the site and start to talk south, along the road, and at the first opportunity, we dump most of our luggage, with the exception of a few diapers for Jayden and a change of clothes for each of us, plus money, passports and credit cards.

I can't help but cry as we push the expensive silver aluminum Rimowa suitcase into a ditch by the road, leaving behind what's left of our old life. The reality of what we're doing hits me like a ton of bricks, and it reminds me of the countless refugees I've seen on TV in the past decades. People fleeing for their lives with nothing but what they could carry, crossing continents to reach a safe haven, usually Europe, often Sweden.

Now we're running. We're running from a danger that isn't even real yet, but on the other hand, if we had stayed, and if the Russians did invade Sweden, which is still a realistic possibility, we'd have been stuck, and all the Rimowa suitcases in the world wouldn't have saved us, nor my MacBook, nor any

family albums. Quite the contrary, given the nature of our family.

Still, it hurts. It hurts more than I can ever put in words. As we walk on, I look back on our past, lying in a ditch off highway 207, glistening in the light of a street lamp. The last one outside Puttgarden before the highway continues on into the dark.

Noah is stoic, but I can tell he's as upset as I am. We don't say a word as we continue to walk. Jayden finally falls asleep in his stroller.

It makes me wonder how much he understands of what's going on. It pains me that we have to put him through this, yet somewhere deep inside, I hope that he one day will understand that it was for his sake. That we did this for his future.

Refugee Camp

We left Sweden three weeks ago, and we've reached Frankfurt. I don't think we'll ever reach Switzerland. The war is going badly for the west as the Russians keep pummeling our cities with missiles. So far they're using conventional weapons only, but it's having a huge effect on morale.

The Americans have joined the war effort in earnest, but it seems we're not making much progress. Most major European capitals had been bombed so badly that it would take decades to rebuild them. Worse, a continent where three generations of citizens had never witnessed war, was in shock, paralyzed and unable to react with the necessary force to stop the attacks. Instead, politicians, while officially declaring war and alerting the military, were still talking about peace, diplomacy and that no military solution could prevail.

Meanwhile, Russia had more or less reconquered much of its former Soviet empire, plus all of Scandinavia. We had been lucky to escape when we had.

A few days after having left Puttgarden, we were picked up by the German Red Cross, and they transported us here to this refugee camp in Frankfurt. It's in a forest clearing near the airport. I can't count how many times I've flown through Frankfurt to Switzerland to see family, or to the

USA on business, visiting friends or other places in the world. It's odd to recall sitting in the First Class lounge, drinking espresso, eating fine food, waiting to be driven to the plane by limo. Yet, we're sitting here in a small tent among thousands of other tents.

Most other refugees have come from Denmark and from Eastern Europe. Open borders within the European Union allowed the Polish, Czech, Slovaks and Hungarians to flee before the Russian army took over their countries. The Polish army fought valiantly, I hear from our Polish neighbors, but to no avail.

Russia's propaganda had paved the way for a new government, and Poland was, surprisingly, the first country to officially leave NATO, claiming it was its membership that had caused the Russian invasion in the first place, pointing to how Finland had fared only weeks earlier. The fact that Sweden had also been taken, despite not being a NATO member, had not been mentioned.

The Germans stand their ground for now, and so far, no Russian soldiers had crossed the border, not even into what was once the GDR. But Berlin was bombed to rubble, causing the government to evacuate to the former capital of Bonn in the west. Frankfurt, Munich and other major cities also suffered severe damage.

Next to us is a tent where an elderly couple from Hamburg found their refuge. They were both born in the nineteen thirties and have vivid memories of

the allied bombings toward the end of World War II. They are completely broken, devastated as they had to witness such destruction twice in a life time. They lost their entire family in the bombings. Their daughter, her husband and their two grandchildren were all gone. And while the old man is putting up a facade of strength and comes over to talk to us every day and play with Jayden, his wife barely ever leaves the tent. I fear she's lost her will to live.

I've been thinking about this a lot lately. What would I do if Noah or Jayden were hurt or killed? How would I go on? Would I lie down and wait for my heart to stop beating, like the old lady next to us, or would I fight on, fight back, seek revenge? I've tried to talk to Noah about it to see how he feels, but he doesn't want to engage in idle speculation. Can't say I really blame him.

I wish I could just simply turn off these thoughts, but I can't. And for some odd reason, I can't seem to push myself past the ultimate horror. I can't think about not having Noah or Jayden at my side. I just can't. Such thoughts are impossible.

If you cannot even imagine being alone, how can you think about how you'll react?

Life here in the camp is otherwise very drab and very routine. It's cold and humid, and our sleeping bags stink to high heaven. I've never been much of a camper, but I'm telling you, this is worse! Not only because we're not out in the wilderness, in a beautiful natural setting with a lake or mountains or

a beach, by yourself, but we're stuck in the middle of a forest clearing with an estimated fifty thousand other refugees. In row after row after row of whitish tents that look more yellowish brownish after a couple weeks of usage.

It's cold in early January. We celebrated Christmas in this hell hole and New Years is nothing I ever wish to repeat again, particularly compared to our New Years last year in Key West, sunny, warm, friendly. The contrast couldn't be starker.

We get up in the early morning, usually because we're freezing. Then we go to the communal lavatories to wash up a bit, change Jayden's diapers and then queue for some breakfast. After that, we play with Jayden, and try to keep ourselves busy until we queue again for lunch then we try to learn what's new on the war front until we queue again for dinner, or we talk to new arrivals to learn... You get the picture. It's dull, duller, that you might imagine for a refugee camp.

And it's growing. The Red Cross can barely keep up with setting up new tents. The first few rows of tents had a provision of a few feet of space between each tent, providing a tiny bit of privacy between our cloth walls. Not any longer. With every addition, that space grew thinner and the latest arrivals now reside in tents, wall to wall with their neighbors. Some families even share tents with others.

So what do you do with all the time? We've tried to discuss with the Red Cross setting up a school, maybe a preschool, and other ways to keep ourselves busy and to provide our children with continued education. So far, no luck. They are too busy arranging living quarters for new arrivals, to make sure people stay healthy by staving off infections and diseases. I don't blame them for their priorities.

When we first came here three weeks ago, there were twenty thousand people here. Now there's more than double that and if rumors are true, there are millions of refugees pouring into Germany. Some are transported onward to France, the Iberian peninsula and Italy, but most seem to hope they'll be able to get out of Europe and to the USA. We're thinking the same, of course, and being so close to an airport, you can almost taste the freedom, and the relative safety.

Instead, we continue to get up in the mornings as we've done these past weeks. At least we're together as a family, and while it's boring and dull, we're alive.

We've tried to contact our neighbors back home, but no avail. All phone lines are down, and news from Sweden is scarce and purely military.

It's been three months since we arrived here in Frankfurt, and things are getting worse. The war itself seems to have come to a halt. The Russians

seem happy to have re-conquered most of Eastern Europe, except East Germany, and they have quickly established new governments. Governments which operate the same way the Russian government has done in its own provinces. Notable exceptions are the Baltic countries which once again are provinces in Russia and the Ukraine.

Little is known of how things are on the ground in each of those countries that were conquered, because no foreign journalists are allowed in, and little to no news leave them unless sanctioned by Moscow.

It's strange to see newscasts with the new Swedish Prime Minister. Just a few months ago, he was considered a crazy right wing extremist, not taken seriously by anyone. The same can be said for every new puppet government in place. I can only imagine what it must be like to live in those countries now, particularly if you're not corresponding to the "new normal."

As so often before, minorities are persecuted, rounded up and either killed, incarcerated or shipped off to Siberia.

Bombs have largely stopped falling and temporary cease fires are in place across most of the continent. It's a sort of stale mate, particularly as the Americans and Canadians have been reluctant to send troops to defend countries that never really became part of Europe. And in the middle of

Europe, Switzerland and Austria are two small oasis of peace.

We've been talking, and Noah and I agree that it is still our best course of action to try and get to Switzerland. Since Jayden and I have Swiss citizenship, we should be welcome, and as Jayden's legal guardian and my partner, there's no reason why Noah shouldn't be welcome.

Although, and it's painful to say this, the way the Russians have been cleansing and streamlining their own society to follow this new orthodoxy, doing away with any and all opposition, there have been changes in Europe as well.

All over Europe, ethnic minorities are persecuted, jews are being targeted along with Romani and the headway the LGBT community's made in the past decades is threatened everywhere. For now, Switzerland still allows civil unions between gay couples, but who knows how much longer that will last, given the pressure from other countries?

This reminds me of how Switzerland, at the onset of World War II, forced Germany to stamp passports of Jews with the star of David so that Swiss border patrols could more easily avoid letting them into the country. History has this nasty tendency to repeat itself.

Worst of all is getting used to how quickly everything has changed. It's not even been a year since all of Europe thought that what was going on in the Ukraine was a local problem and that the

Russians would be happy with conquering the Donbas, Luhansk and maybe establishing a land corridor to the Crimea.

Europe was busy solving Greece's financial troubles, worrying about economic growth and unemployment. To be where we are today was not even conceivable, yet here we are. And while Noah and I had been thinking about relocating to the US for some time, those were simply dreams, hopes for a better future and a better education for Jayden, nothing more.

Yes, we had applied for the green card lottery, but I guess that is all moot now. Even if we were to win, there's no way for me to go to an interview or for the Americans to contact me. It's so frustrating, and I could use the f-word several times a day.

Here we are, in one of Europe's largest refugee camps, sitting our asses off, waiting for someone else to decide when and where we're to be transported. Completely dependent on the cease fire to actually hold. According to the Red Cross, we could be on a train south toward Switzerland within a couple of weeks, provided the Swiss authorities sign off on us crossing the border. It's a formality, I know, yet it still seems to be taking forever.

I'm surprised when the "let's go!" finally comes. We grab our sparse belongings, Jayden's stroller, a rucksack with a few toys and our passports and money, and follow the young woman from the German Red Cross.

She's to take us to our liaison who will take us to the train station and the right wagon going south. Wagon, did you hear that? Not a coach, a wagon. We've been reduced to cattle. It's hilarious how quickly your expectations and demands change. Just months ago, I would've refused to travel anything but first class on a train as I have all my life. Now, I'm happy to just board a wagon. Happy to just get out of this shit hole. Literally!

As Camp Mönchbruch grew to host almost one hundred and fifty thousand refugees, the once green fields quickly turned to a brown floating mass, and with the winter rains and the snow, everyone was filthy, stinking. Before long, we stopped feeling like human beings and more like the cattle that now board the train south.

But alas, we're alive, and we're going to Switzerland. In less than a day, I'll be back in the country I left a quarter of a century ago.

The station building in Frankfurt is in ruins, and so is much of its financial center, including the almost brand new former headquarters of the European Central Bank. Not that it matters. I doubt the EU will survive the war anyway, and the Euro as a currency will most likely be replaced as the different European nations carve out their own future in relation to the new geopolitical situation.

Russia is the new super power, thanks to Chinese and American unwillingness to keep them in check. Or maybe it was intentional. Who knows? Maybe

the Americans figured that their primaries are more important than some Eastern European nations? Depending on some of the news I've seen, you could easily get that impression.

We are led through the rubble to a train standing on the platform. Noah is carrying Jayden, and I'm carrying our stuff and the stroller. As raggedy and worn as it may be, it still provides some relief from having to carry our son all the time.

We have to climb over some debris that they hadn't cleared out of the way before. Noah and Jayden take the lead, assisted by our guide, while I struggle with our luggage and an elderly couple who have difficulties climbing. All of a sudden, I hear an explosion, just a few feet beyond the debris. It's deafening and then I'm hit.

Recovery

I wake up in a hospital. Around me are seven more beds in this room which probably once housed four patients. I can't tell, but it is crowded. My body is in a lot of pain, and I can barely move. I look to see if there is a nurse around, but no such luck. I can't feel my legs at all, but a visual check shows they're still there.

Where am I? Where are Noah and Jayden? What had happened? I mean, yes, there was an explosion, and obviously I must've been hit, but...

As I'm contemplating my options, a nurse comes into the room and sees that I'm awake. "Mr. Meyer, right? Welcome back to the land of the living. How do you feel?"

She addresses me in German, which leads me to believe that I'm still in Germany. I nod to let her know I feel okay. "I'm okay but I can't feel my legs. Where is my family?"

Her look betrays the bad news she carries and I fear for the worst. She's avoiding to answer my question. "You were badly hurt, Mr. Meyer. I'm not surprised that you can't feel your legs. In fact, it's a wonder you're alive at all. That grenade killed a lot of people." She senses that she's said too much and attempts to overplay by beginning to examine me.

“Where is my husband? Where’s my son?” I ask again, desperate, feeling as if I’m about to be hit by another grenade of a different kind.

“Listen to me, Mr. Meyer, and please don’t get upset. The doctor will be here shortly to discuss things with you. You’ve been unconscious for months. We need to proceed with caution.”

Months? Did she say months?

My world is turning. I feel I’m losing my grip on reality. I feel dizzy and the entire room is spinning around me, yet the only thing I see before my inner eye is Noah carrying Jayden, disappearing behind the mound of rubble, just before the explosion.

The explosion! Oh my god! The realization hits me like a ton of bricks. They’re dead! Jayden and Noah are dead, killed by that explosion. I sob uncontrollably. The nurse leaves my bed and rushes to get a doctor. I barely notice them come back and inject me with something that puts me under, again.

When I wake up, I’m in a different room. Alone. My arms are tied to the bed and I can move even less than I could before. An orderly is watching me from the other side of the room.

“Welcome back, sleepy head. Let me get the doctor.”

The realization of my family’s death washes over me again, like a tsunami, relentless, pushing ahead against any resistance. New tears flow down my face, and my heart aches like I never felt it could

ache before. It feels as if part of me just died. Why am I alive while my family is not? What had we done to Jayden? What did we think to uproot him and take him from his home, his room, his toys? Just to be free? Wouldn't he have been better off in a foster home or an orphanage in Sweden? At least he would've been alive? What had we done?

The doctor comes in and is the sort of no nonsense type of guy you so often see on TV. Well, saw on TV.

“Good day, Mr. Meyer. Glad you're with us again. I'll remove the restraints if you promise you'll behave.”

I nod and the good doctor looks at the orderly, who removes my restraints. My wrists hurt, but at least I can move my arms.

The doctor begins to examine my legs. “Do you feel this? How about that?” He pokes, probes and pricks me with various objects, to no avail. I can't feel shit.

I try to squeeze in a question. “Do you know what happened to my family?”

The doctor stands up straight and looks at me with a grave expression on his face. “Mr. Meyer, I'm sorry to tell you but your husband and son were killed in that blast. There was an undetonated grenade that went off as he and the Red Cross staff crossed the rubble. You were hit really badly in your head and back by the debris, causing injuries to your spinal

cord. There wasn't much left of your husband to be buried, I'm afraid."

The pain is threatening to tear my heart apart, but I have to know the truth. "...and our son?"

The doctor's face is pained. I can see how difficult it is to bring me such grave news. "Dead, I'm afraid. We must assume that your husband and son were literally at the focal point of the explosion. We couldn't find any remains of your son, and there was precious little left of your husband. We found his left index finger with a wedding ring attached, and some charred jaw bone, but with no dental records available, we used the wedding ring to tie him to you. I'm sorry, but your family was killed in that explosion four weeks ago. If it is any consolation, they likely didn't feel anything. Their deaths were quick and painless."

It is no consolation, and I feel utterly responsible. It's my fault they're dead. Had I not moved to Sweden, I wouldn't have met Noah, we wouldn't have had Jayden and none of this would've happened. Why did I put those ideas of moving to the US in Noah's head? Why did I force him to go along with my stupid plans? Why? Why?

The doctor realizes that I'm about to lose it again and injects my IV with something. I barely realize what he's doing before I once again lose consciousness.

Dead!

Dead!

Dead!

Killed!

I killed my family!

It's all I can think about the very moment I wake up. I can see their faces. I can see how they look at me from beyond this life, accusing, angry. Jayden is crying. He's upset, and there is nothing I can do to make him stop.

Noah is standing next to him with that pout and that expression he only ever uses when we have a fight. Had.

God, I'd give anything to fight with him right now!

I never will. Again. I'm not sure I can describe what I feel right now. I'm not even sure I feel anything. Numb, yes, that's what I feel. I feel numb, as if my heart has been ripped out from a huge gaping chest wound, and now there's only a towel in its place. I can touch it, but it doesn't feel anything but numb. I have a huge hole in my chest, stuffed with a towel. I laugh, but the analogy is accurate in terms of how I feel.

Numb. As numb as my legs. I still can't feel anything. It's dark outside, but I can see that the trees have begun to green. Spring must be here, which means I must've been out quite a while. As I ponder this, a nurse comes into my room, hesitantly. I guess I must be perceived as a difficult patient.

“Good evening, Mr. Meyer. How do you feel?”

I look at her and say, “Numb.” It’s how I feel, no beating around the bush.

“I am so sorry for your loss. I cannot even imagine what it must be like to have lost your entire family in such a tragic way.”

I pray that I’m not going to be reminded of this fact every time someone talks to me. It’s too painful to think about. Feeling numb is better. Not feeling is good.

“Tell me, nurse, how long was I unconscious?”

“Well, before you woke up the first time two days ago, you had been in an induced coma, after the explosion. There had been considerable trauma to your brain and the doctors kept you sedated to help reduce the swelling and to help your body heal.”

“But how long?”

“A little over four months...” It’s almost like she’s feeling shame. “It’s May now.”

“The war?”

“Over. NATO and Russia signed a peace treaty in March. The healing and rebuilding has begun, for everyone, including you. You should rest now. Are you hungry?” She smiles and looks at me as if everything in the world would be okay.

Dead!

Dead!

“No, not hungry, but I think I need to pee...” I feel embarrassed.

She smiles. “Just let go. You’ve had a catheter inserted, so don’t worry about it. I will need to change your diaper at some point though. Are you sure I can’t get you some water or a bit of broth? You should eat, you know. It’s been two days since we removed the feeding tube as part of your final waking up process.”

As the nurse tells me this, I notice how sore my throat feels, and how thirsty I suddenly am. “Yes, some water would be nice.”

She beams and leaves me to my numbness. Minutes later, she returns with a tray. On it, a glass of water with a straw and a plate. “I brought you some fruit. It’s moist and will feel good in your throat. You must begin to eat if you ever want to leave this place.”

She smiles and assumes that I actually do want to leave. As I ponder this latest challenge in my life, the question of life itself, I’m not sure I do. Why not refuse to eat and drink, and be done with it? I could join Noah and Jayden and suffer whatever punishment they deem worthy of my betrayal.

A growl from deep within me makes me change my mind. I don’t even have the will power to go on a hunger strike. Besides, knowing how they’ve treated me this far, I’m sure they’ll just put me under again and insert a feeding tube. I accept the water glass and take a sip. It hurts. It hurts a lot but

I don't mind. May the pain be a tiny retribution. A first step to paying off my unlimited debt to my dead husband and son for having caused their deaths.

I drink again, and it doesn't hurt so bad. Damn!

Over the coming days, I return to life. At least my body does. I eat, I drink, and I allow the nurses to change my diapers, and swap the little bags that are quickly filling with my yellow urine as I drink more and more. I even got a sip of coffee today. The first sign of normalcy in months.

For the first time in almost seven months, a sip of black coffee. Weak, of course, some things never change in Germany, but it was delicious.

Cheers, Noah! Cheers, Jayden!

The thought makes me cry fresh tears. Jayden was always mimicking us, and even after we'd finished our coffees, he would take the empty cup and bring it to his mouth, trying to catch a drop or two of the precious brown liquid, as bitter as it must've tasted. Alas, whatever his fathers did, had to be emulated. Never again.

Dead!

I killed them. Both.

The war is indeed over. I get a TV in my room, and I see the pictures of the devastation all across Europe. From Paris to London, Berlin and Moscow. It's weird to see the German Reichstag, well, what's left of it, in full HD. I remember seeing grainy

black and white photos from the end of World War II, and I remember visiting it, still in bad shape in 1989, just after the Berlin wall had fallen.

That all seems so long ago. I see images of contorted steel beams in HD, where the Eiffel Tower once stood, the gaping hole in the side of the Houses of Parliament in London, and the destruction to its financial center. I see the remains of St. Basil's Cathedral and I wonder if the Russians think it was worth the price.

Then I see images from Norway and Sweden. They are peaceful with barely any destruction, because they had simply surrendered to the approaching Russian forces, afraid to suffer the fate of the mighty Finns, who were still fighting a guerrilla war out there among the ten thousand lakes, reportedly. Nobody knew because the only pictures from those countries were official images shared by RT, the Russian news outlet providing us with the truth, according to Moscow.

I wonder how our house is doing. Our house. Probably inhabited by someone else, certainly no longer ours. I think of our neighbors, less than a two hour flight away. Friends and coworkers that I hope are alright. Hey, by the way, I'm not. I'm paralyzed and I've killed my family, but thanks for asking!

I'm still in Frankfurt, but at least I'm not in the camp anymore. Oh yeah, the camp is still standing as Germany and other countries try to figure out what to do with all the refugees. Over ten million

people were dislocated, many of which would probably rather return, but can't because the borders have once again been closed. The iron curtain is back in place with a new varnish and brightly polished.

Most refugees want to go west, but the USA and Canada are very strict in who they accept, based on merit and education. It takes forever to get across the pond. Not to worry. I have all the time in the world. I mean, ideally, I'd suffer a stroke and die, but no such luck.

The doctors keep reminding me that I'm as healthy as a horse, minus the use of my legs for the rest of my life. I'm in therapy, too, physical and mental. Did I mention that? Yeah, I get to practice with my wheel chair twice a day. And I see a shrink twice a week. They say it's good for me to talk about my grief, to let go.

Heck, I should be grateful. The German Red Cross and the authorities are being super nice to me. They are helping me in any way they can, despite how thinly spread their resources are, and how much destruction they have to take care of.

Yet it's odd. Most Germans I meet seem happy, content. They rise to this challenge, and I don't get the impression that they are enjoying some sense of Schadenfreude at their neighbors' plights, but it seems there's a genuine challenge they enjoy. Nothing like a good old war every now and then, eh? Or is it merely the fact that all of Europe is

suffering from what Germany endured at the end of the last world war?

I don't know, and my shrink tells me to focus on my own issues. She's a smart woman.

"But how can you be sure they're dead?" I try.

Michaela, my shrink, cocks her head slightly and gives me a stern look. "What do you mean?"

"As I said, how can we be sure that Noah and Jayden are truly dead? After all, the only thing they found was Noah's ring finger and a piece of jaw, but that could've been someone else's jaw. Losing a finger in an explosion doesn't mean you're dead. And Jayden. They never found any remains. He could still be out there, alive, all by himself." The thought of my son, alone, is almost worse than accepting his death.

"Mr. Meyer, please. If Noah had survived the explosion, don't you think we'd know? He and Jayden would've reported in somewhere, and they would've been looking for you. But nobody did. I'm sorry, but you have to accept the facts, as painful as it may be. They're gone. You need to let go in order to move on with your life."

I concede to her logic, but only offering her Noah as a token. "I see your point, but what if Jayden had run off, by himself. It's not unheard of. What if he'd run off seconds before the explosion. What if Noah had tried to go after him, and he'd been the one caught in the blast, alone? Wouldn't that explain

that there were no remains found of Jayden? Not even a thread of clothing? Nothing?”

Michaela is squirming in her chair. “Theoretically, yes. But consider this. Where would Jayden have gone to? A child as young as him would’ve been picked up by someone, and that someone would’ve taken him to the authorities. But no, nothing. And considering the heat and the strength of the explosion, it’s not unlikely there would be anything left. Besides, this was war. There was no forensic search of the site done. No fine combing after remains or pieces of clothing. As much as it pains me to say it, Jayden is dead as is Noah. You need to let go if you ever wish to live a full life again.”

I laugh involuntarily. A full life, huh! “Did you look at me? I’m crippled. I’ll never walk again. I’ve lost my family. How can you expect me to ever live anything that resembles a full life again? Ever.”

Michaela sighs. “I’m sorry. That came out wrong, but you know what I mean. For as long as you are stuck in that bad place, you can’t live your life, any life, and I’m sure that both Noah and Jayden would want you to make the most of it. You survived. Honor their legacy, live your life.”

I could strangle her this instant. If she weren’t hiding behind that stupid desk and if I hadn’t been a cripple. “Don’t tell me what they’d want me to do. They’d want me to have saved their lives. That’s what they’d want me to do. To save their lives and

live together, as a family. But I failed them, and now they're both dead.”

My sobs swallow the last words, but it seems Michaela heard them nonetheless. “Listen, I think we've done enough for one day. See you next week?”

The next day, I'm finally discharged from the hospital, and given my status as an invalid, I don't have to move back into the refugee camp, at least not permanently.

Instead, I'm on a fast track to move to Switzerland. My home country generously paid for my hospital treatments. I'm sure my dripping irony is palpable in every word. At this stage, I'm not even sure I want to go there, but I have no choice. As part of the peace treaty, all war parties have agreed to repatriate citizens to their countries of origin, unless they ask for asylum.

And as a citizen of the richest country in Europe, a country that had once again dodged the dogs of war, I doubt that my application would've been considered. Besides, I'm no cynic, and I understand that there are millions of people out there who really need help. I'm just glad I'm not being shipped back to Sweden.

I'm picked up by someone from the Swiss consulate general in Frankfurt, who takes me back to the refugee camp where I'm to stay until my transfer is arranged.

Seems there are other citizens who also wish to be repatriated from all over Europe, and even the mighty and rich Switzerland is struggling to arrange for accommodations for its citizens returning home. Apparently, I'm just one of tens of thousands, and with my special needs, it might take a while.

Damn, I think, why did we have to sell Mom's house? Then I remember all the stairs. Never mind. Life in Frankfurt is slowly returning to normal, which is even more surreal than how quickly it had gone sour. I wheel myself to see Michaela twice every week, and then I return to the refugee camp. The situation is far from ideal, but at least I'm safe, and I'm on the right side of the new iron curtain, version 2.0. Iron curtain. How ironic. How few of us remember Europe before 1989? And even those of us who do, did we really understand, did we really appreciate what we had in the west?

Seems to me we never really got it. I have to hand it to the Polish people. They were the only ones who understood the concept, and they had paid the highest price, yet again. The Polish resistance to the Russian occupation had been resilient, and the retaliation by the Russians ruthless.

Not only had the Russian army literally pulverized all major cities in Poland, but it slaughtered half the population, making the holocaust appear like a footnote in recent human history. And when the time came to hammer out the peace treaty, Poland was abandoned and handed off to Russia without a blink. Berlin got to keep its eastern provinces, the

European Union has shrunk to sixteen member states, who would've given anything to stay clear of further Russian aggression, so Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Romania, Bulgaria, as well as the Baltic and Nordic countries were sacrificed. As horrifying as it is, but the Baltic sea is now almost a Russian inland sea, and Germany is bordering the iron curtain on more than half its borders. From Schleswig-Holstein to Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, Brandenburg, Saxony and all the way south to Bavaria. NATO troops are once again stationed across all of Germany, an eerie reminder of what things had been like before the fall of the first iron curtain.

Europe is falling apart. Being nuclear powers, France and the United Kingdom are loudly thinking about doing their own thing, and having stationed troops in Germany, old behaviors are resurfacing.

The economies have suffered badly with trade having come to a grinding halt, and the problems in the southern European countries are also back with a vengeance. Yet here, in Frankfurt, the bakeries are open, there is a smell of fresh bread, vegetables are sold on the market and I've even seen a florist. Seems odd. Almost like a dream, unreal.

Being in a wheel chair outside the city in the mud is a real nightmare. It takes me forever to get from my tent to the lavatories. Sure, they've moved me to a communal tent with other people with disabilities, and there are wooden planks on the ground to help those of us in chairs move more easily, but still.

First of all, I'm new to all this. Second, the planks are still wooden planks in the mud. You do the math. But I muddle through and my upper arms are getting stronger every day. It's weird, because while my legs seem to grow thinner and thinner every day, my deltoids, biceps and triceps are getting bigger and bigger. Alas, I also move more easily.

The weather outside is beautiful today. It's been like this for weeks now and the ground is finally drying up, which makes it easier for me to wheel around. I've parked myself in one of the outskirts of the refugee camp, where I can catch some sunshine in private and gather my thoughts. Living with ten other refugees in one single tent is anything but fun.

I spend my days mostly searching for Jayden. I just can't give up hope that my son might still be alive. As for Noah, I'm starting to believe that he's actually gone. The whole ring finger story is really getting under my skin and there are times when I can barely get out of bed. I miss them so much. I miss Noah. I miss Jayden.

Noah and I met fifteen years ago at a friend's party. He was the center of the place, handsome, confident and so very hot. I didn't dare approach him.

He picked me up with a line so lame that I had to laugh and just go with the flow. We've been a couple ever since. Well, at least until that fateful day. Now I just miss him insanely. He was the anchor of my crazy existence. He provided stability,

guidance, and he was always a sounding board to my every thought, dream or idea.

When we finally decided to have children, he was the best possible dad, and if Jayden had indeed survived by some miracle, it was because of Noah, sacrificing his life to save his son's.

I just can't get that finger out of my mind. Its image plagues me as if it were tattooed onto my retina for ever and ever.

Even as I sit in one of the tents of the Red Cross, every day, to search through their library of missing & found people, reviewing the same binders over and over, for a clue of where Jayden could be. If he's been found and if he's alive. The image of that finger surfaces all the time, bringing me to tears. The staff at the Red Cross are really kind and they let me be. Today, since the weather is so good, I decided to enjoy some solitude.

Later that day, as I roll through the camp to return from my little session in the sun, I hear an all too familiar sound. A faint call in the far distance. "Da-ddy, da-ddy..."

It's barely perceptible at first, and I ignore it, the pain of the memory of how my son used to call me too strong to bear. I keep pushing my chair, pushing it faster and faster. I go as fast as I can, toward the tent and my bunk. That last piece of privacy I have in the world. Yet the call seems to be coming closer, and closer, louder and louder. "Da-ddy, da-ddy, da-ddy!"

Then I feel something hitting me in my shoulders. “Ouch!” I hear myself say, and a response out of nowhere. “It’s Saturday, Jonathan. Your turn to get up...”

That’s all Noah says before he turns around, rolls up in a ball under our down duvet, leaving me to get up and take care of our son.

“Da-d-dy, da-d-dy...” Jayden calls again, and as I sit up in bed, trying to make sense of this weird dream I just woke from, I can hear him come upstairs to our bedroom.

“Good morning, Jayden. Daddy is coming...”

About the Author



Photo: John O'Leary

Hans M Hirschi has been writing stories since childhood. As an adult, the demands of corporate life put an end to his fiction for more than twenty years. A global executive in HR, training & development, he has traveled the world and published a couple of non-fiction titles. The birth of his son provided him with the opportunity to rekindle his love of creative writing, where he expresses his deep passion for a better world through love and tolerance. Hans lives with his husband and son on a small island off the west coast of Sweden.

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 - Jonathan's Hope (2013)
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