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## Ascension from Hell

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By

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I watched the golden light from the flames glisten on the rippling crests of the river's current far below as it wound its way through the battered city and out to the Nordsee. I saw the Cathedral too, with its twin spires; its stony spears jutting heavenward high atop the roof of the ancient basilica. Fires burned everywhere in the city, my beautiful city, Köln. People screamed and dashed about in their feeble attempts to flee the bombing and the devastation around them. I saw it all, now.

"Rudi?" Hans had whispered across our darkened bedroom. My brother, Hans, was ten and very smart. At least that is what Muttie kept telling Papa. I had turned seven that very day. I thought I was smart too because Papa said I took after Hans.

"Rudi!" He hissed his impatience at my silence.

"Hum?" I answered thoughtfully. Now that I was seven, I thought more and could understand things. I had more responsibilities too. Papa had said so that very morning at breakfast.

"Rudi!" Hans' voice sounded frightened. "Listen."

I focused my attention on the ceiling of our attic bedroom. I could see in the dark. At least, I thought I could, especially if I stared straight up at the ceiling and concentrated. I imagined them before I heard or saw them; the planes, many planes. They had come before and had left the factories outside the city in ruin. People died. One of Papa's friends, Herr Decker, died. Papa was sad and frightened. He tried twice to move us to Duhr, to be with our *Grosseltern*, our grandparents, but men in black uniforms said his papers were "*ungültig*", "invalid", so we

stayed. Muttie was scared, very scared. I could tell; since becoming seven, I saw and heard things and knew.

First, I heard the soft winter rain as it washed the roof tiles. Then I heard them and held my breath; I heard better when I held my breath. My brother's breathing became short and forced. I knew he was struggling to stay calm and quiet. I believed if I continued to hold my breath they would overfly us. It would work, I told myself.

The sirens began to whine. Why had they not gone off earlier? I wondered. Everyone knows they are supposed to sound before the enemy comes. Adults sometimes forgot the rules. I knew them and remembered, and I was only seven.

Then I heard the sounds of deep, rumbling booms that made my bed tremble. Papa and Muttie frantically entered our room and rushed to our beds. A flash of light exposed them. Never before had I seen my father and mother so, their faces white and masked with fear. That is when a bomb exploded nearby and our building rocked. Papa threw his body over Hans, and Muttie shrieked as she hugged me so hard that I could hardly breathe. We heard screams from the street below. My eyes and mouth stung, I knew fires had started nearby. That was very bad.

Another explosion threw Papa and Hans to the floor. Muttie was tossed on top of me in my bed. The force of blast must have shattered an exterior wall and along with it our bedroom door as wooden shards were flung at us. That is when everything slowed down. I saw Papa's hands and face began to ooze blood as both he and Hans slowly wrestled to their feet. Muttie and I had been spared, except for a painful ringing in my ears. Smoke flowed into the room from the shattered window and a yellow light flickered behind it; I knew we had to get out. Papa shouted something at us, but I could not understand him through the roaring noise. He sounded so far

away. His strong hands grabbed Hans' pajama shirt and dragged him through what had once been our door. I could not help but wonder why he was moving so slowly. I struggled, for seemed for hours, to free myself from under Muttie and got to my feet. Unthinkingly, I slid on my slippers, and helped pull my mother from the bed. Muffled screams and shouts from somewhere outside broke through my partial deafness as we made our escaped and tried to dash down the stairs. To my awe and horror, the stairs abruptly ended half way down. Before Muttie's grasp could save me, I was falling....

Something firm yet mushy broke my fall. I lay on my back in a pile of something oddly familiar. I looked up into my mother's stricken face on the parted staircase two floors above. Strangely, I felt safe and comfortable. Then the sharp sting of smoke and the odor of something wet and metallic started me coughing. What was I lying on? My confused mind begged to know. My eyes focused on my surroundings and I tried to scream. My screams would not come past my throat as I turned to look into the mangled and bloodied faces of neighbors and friends. I thrashed to escape their dead clutches only to sink deeper into the mangled mass of brick, wood and bodies.

My mind did not have time to piece together what all had happened for my pajama collar tightened round my throat and I was hauled from the death pit. Standing dumbstruck beside my brother, I looked down into a large crater created by an exploded bomb. It had struck beside our house, destroying the front rooms. Bodies lay partially buried in the shattered brick and splintered wood. I heard more muted shouting and crying and shrieking around us, and I felt more than heard the distant bomb blasts throughout the city.

Hans and I stood alongside one another in shock. I remember Papa; he shoved a lantern into Hans' hands, took him by the shoulders and he spoke very seriously as he faced him. Papa ordered him to find Herr Jäger, *der Artz*, the doctor, and return with him. I was to go too. Herr Jäger lived off the *Hohe Strasse*, the Old Roman High Road, near the *Altstadt*, in the center of the Old City, not far. Hans took hold my arm and tugged.

We left our parents, frightened in darkness. I should have recognized the streets but there were no electric lights. The streets and lanes were darkened and littered with fallen bricks, glass and crushed cars. We ran as best we could and passed people who shouted for help or wept with someone in their arms. I lost count of those who I saw lay dead. Hans' lantern and the light from burning houses lit our way. He seemed to know where to go. We half-ran and half-stumbled, then abruptly stopped. The wreckage of a fallen building blocked our way. There was familiarity here and I looked past the pile of rubble to see fires at the end of the Hohe Strasse. I watched their glistening reflection dance on the wet cobble stones. Hans desperately looked around for another street to dodge the obstacle. To our right, loomed a large, dark stone building, which still held strong. There, to our left was an alley that seemed to provide a detour. A sturdy wall provided one side of the passage way while a brave, but partially damaged wall of a bombed out residence, the other. It seemed the only way to get through. Hans yelled into my face for me to stay right here and not to move; he would return with Herr Jäger. I wanted to go with him but I could not protest for my voice caught in my dry throat. I watched him run down the narrow alley, his shadow shown large on the unsteady wall from the lantern. It would be the last time I saw him.

I did not want to be alone and I became scared for the first time that night. I began to breathe hard and fast. "Hans!" My voice finally croaked. As my breaths slowed, I cried out for him again. The rumble from exploding bombs had ceased, along with the rain. Except for the far off crying of women and people moaning, it was still. Without warning, an alarming sound broke the temporary calm and I cringed. A low groan came from the alleyway in the direction which Hans ran. The injured wall had given up and tumbled into the alley. I could not see Hans' shadow for the alley had fallen into blackness and the clanking sound of bricks followed as the alleyway settled back into stillness.

"Hans?" My voice sounded so pitiful and small. Terror tore me from obedience and I hurried into the darkness after him. I did not get far for the shaky wall had collapsed in a huge jumble of bricks that arose in front of me. I blinked in confusion as to what next to do. Where was he? I called his name several times. Surely, if he had escaped the falling bricks he would have answered me. My uncertainty turned to panic when I spotted a shattered lantern at my feet. I knew then I had to try and find him.

I searched wildly through the rubble and tossed bricks aside one-by-one, then wrestled with a broken plank in an attempt to pry away the debris in my effort to find my brother. I recall my cries of desperation for him as my frustration peaked; I was just too small for the rescue at hand. My attempts had failed. Tears washed over my grimy cheeks and I collapsed atop the wreckage, exhausted and broken hearted.

Had I not been so deep in grief, I would have noticed the unexploded bomb, tail up, in a nearby ditch. Papa had told us sometimes they did not detonate instantly when they landed. This was one. It exploded and the concussion threw me across the pile of bricks and battered me,

scraping my back and legs. Its blaze of heat seared the front of me from head to toe; I smelled smoke from my cooked flesh. My ears hurt too. Something like warm water dripped from them. I knew I was injured but felt little pain. Driven by fear and wrapped in shock, I managed to crawl over the rubble and stumble into the street. Once there, I began to walk, the direction did not matter. I was badly burned and needed help. I knew someone must find me.

I had to be found! Those words echoed in my mind. I wandered, for how long? Time did not exist in my wounded state. I suddenly became aware of a woman, wearing night clothes and a shawl, in front of me. Her face glowed dirty and tired in the glow from the surrounding flames. She came to me and carefully drew a shawl around my shoulders. We walked to where a cluster of people stood. Muttie and Papa were there. Papa firmly cupped my head in his large hands and looked into my eyes. I barely heard him as he desperately question me about Hans; his voice sounded so far away. My words again would not come forth. A horrific shadow of grief covered his face. Behind him, Muttie begin to cry.

Papa and Muttie quickly rushed me down into a nearby *Keller*. Papa turned and helped others from the street descend into the dark cellar. Muttie lead me to where a lamp lit a shadowy corner. There, a large stack of thick rope lay neatly coiled. She quickly covered it with rags from a shelf and made a pallet for me to lie on. I lay on my back and looked into Muttie's beautiful face, then distorted by her heartbreak and fear. For the second time that night I felt oddly comfortable. Everything would be alright, I thought, and I wanted to let her know this. I tried to explain this through my eyes. She bent over and kissed my forehead. Papa suddenly came to us. He put his arm around Muttie and gazed upward, Muttie followed his gaze. I knew they must have heard the

recognizable drone. My heart pounded to be released from my singed chest. The planes were coming back.

I recall curling up into a little ball with the top of my head resting against the cool Keller wall. I was small, and I would make myself smaller; the bombs would not touch me. I felt the rumbles and booms from bomb blasts as they drew closer. I squeezed shut my eyes and felt invisible.

A blast came and the cellar exploded. I thought about Hans first, then Papa, and then Muttie. My mind pictured my friends briefly and then the neighbor's cat, Hertzie. It almost made me laugh. But then, I saw myself. My small young body lay burned and in tatters, partially buried under debris and the rope I had laid upon. My head had been forced into the wall and rested in an odd position; my eyes stared. Yet, I could see as I looked down into a crater where the Keller had been. Muttie and Papa were not there, nor any of the others.

I began drawing away from the scene. I noted the beauty and the devastation; the compassion and the desperation, but I felt no panic or sorrow. Instead, I ascended above it all with an overwhelming sensation of peace and love. I was afraid no more.