

“Sunshine”

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The first sign of dawn was the gentle sunlight, illuminating the Swedish coast in the near distance. “Not much longer now,” muttered the fisherman from under his tattered, heavy clothing. The night had been long, cold, and miserable, but the early morning sun warmed our

restless bodies. I sat up from the cramped floor of the fishing boat, my son fast asleep in my lap, and glanced at the faces of those around me. I noticed a face staring back at me. It was the fisherman's. I quickly diverted my eyes.

Minutes later, I looked back at the fisherman. When we had asked his name, he said only "Birger." He was large and intimidating with dark eyes framed by deep wrinkles, peering out over the Baltic. The early morning sunlight had grown brighter, and he had to squint to navigate the waters, emphasizing the lines in his face from long years spent on the sea. Clear rays now beamed down, and I saw Birger smile from under his thick beard, tired and ancient eyes gleaming in the sunshine.

We were crowded in the closet of a small cabin on the beach, waiting anxiously until night fell so we could plan our escape. I remembered I had been cleaning up after our family supper, watching my husband read our son a book at the kitchen table. Sitting in that closet, I could still imagine hearing their joyous voices and laughter echo through my mind, causing my stomach to sink. It had begun with words, murmurs that we were not safe here, despite the fact that the Jewish community was small in Denmark. How foolish my husband had been to ignore their warnings. He insisted that the Germans would not dare to deport us from our homes. Many of our other Jewish neighbors had already fled, and that last night, the street was ominously quiet. This changed when the Germans raided our homes and captured my husband. I heard only the shouting voices of the soldiers and my husband at the door before I woke up my son and fled with him through the window. Too young to understand why we were running, my son had cried as we ran away from the only home he knew, adding to the harsh sounds of breaking glass and screams, which will forever be embedded in my memory. I forced myself back to the present

moment in that tiny closet, my son clutched to my chest, his eyes red and face swollen from crying. As I stroked his short hair and tried to reassure him with gentle words, I noticed everyone around me was doing the same, consoling the family and friends they had left. I could see a few of the people around me in the little bit of evening light streaming through the crack in the closet door; many I knew, some I did not. We did not communicate much, only exchanging brief words with those closest to us. Yet we acted as one body, breathing in the dusty air, life labored with thoughts full of longing and regret.

The closet door creaked open seconds later, revealing an older woman with a basket of bread in her arms, offering it to us with shaky hands. We hesitated, a rush of guilt at this gesture of kindness, having already deeply burdened her with hiding a group of Jews in her Christian home. She took us in the night before with the voice of an angel, knowing that the act could be punishable by death, yet choosing to help us anyways. Having not eaten all day, our hunger outweighed our guilt and we accepted the offering with quietly uttered thanks. “It will be dark soon, my friends,” she crooned, handing us a pitcher of water and a few chipped cups from which to drink. Looking us over with kind eyes once again, she then closed the closet door, plunging us further back into darkness with each creak of the rusty hinges.

The next time the door opened, the old woman urged us to get up and stretch our legs and prepare for the journey we were to take that very night. She explained that her husband of many years with whom she shared the cabin was a fisherman who operated nearby, and that he would return home any minute to take us all to safety in Sweden. We were to go to the docks and look for his boat, named *Sunshine*. After we were hidden amongst the nets and barrels, he would join us, guiding the boat on our journey to a new land.

Of the entire group in hiding, all of us were speechless, our hearts warmed by the unexpected gesture. After a moment of this awed silence, I managed to stand up on my cramped legs and walk shakily over to the old woman, grasping her aged hands with mine. “Thank you, thank you for everything,” I whispered, eyes welling with tears.

The woman smiled at me and paused for a moment, then said something I have never forgotten, even now that I have grown old and the threat of the Germans has passed: “We are all brothers and sisters: we both love the same God. He only wants us to protect our family.” She glanced down at my son at my feet and smiled warmly, and then looked back up at me. “And I pray that yours will see the light of salvation,” she continued, placing one frail hand on his head and one on my shoulder.

The threat of danger had started with words, spoken in hushed voices tinged with fear. Now, words had become our safety, words from a woman so different from myself, yet family. Her final words to me were like that beautiful dawn sky on the Baltic that illuminated the coast of our new home: a promise of salvation yet to come, bright as the morning sunshine.

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