

“Der Pfad der Erleuchtung”
by Ben Higgins & Jordan Edmunds

The Son of the Miner

He was only a toddler at the time, but Frederick Bergmann could remember the day his father didn't come home to their Hütte from the mines. Mrs. Bergmann had always hated her husband's work as a miner. She thought it was too dangerous for a man with a family, especially since they had just recently welcomed their second son, Lukas, into the world.

As fate would have it, a week after Lukas was born disaster struck the mines. One of the largest collapses in history trapped and killed hundreds of the men working below the Earth's surface. One of these men was Mr. Bergmann. When the notice came to his family at the far edge of civilization, Mrs. Bergmann, wearing her apron-like dress, opened the door with warily. She wept quietly as to not wake the sleeping Lukas in her arms. Young Frederick ran up to his mom in his lederhosen and knee high socks and wrapped his arms around her leg. He gazed up at the faceless man in a black overcoat. He turned to his mother's tearful face and had a sinking feeling in his stomach. *Where was his father?* He needed to be comforted and told everything was alright. His mother grabbed his hand and led him to bed silently. She left the room weeping quietly and rocked back and forth in the chair tenderly stroking Lukas's precious hair. Frederick was confused and had a disturbing feeling that something had changed.

Nearly seventeen years later, Frederick still had no father or fatherly influence. He lived with his mother and brother on their farm and tended to the crops. Lukas took care of the animals while their mother kept the boys in line. While keeping them disciplined, she gave them most everything they wanted and always had an open heart for them and for all living things.

But Frederick always knew something was missing; he yearned for more every time he harvested the crops, every time he sat to pray with his mother, and every time he played in the fields with his brother. There was this unquenchable thirst that nothing *here* could satisfy. Frederick knew he had to leave; he had to find that *something* he never had growing up.

The next day, Frederick awoke and went into town to trade supplies. He saw a regiment of the military marching proudly yet humbly through the town. They stood so rigid and marched empty of sadness, empty of want. Frederick knew in that moment what he had to do.

That night, he told his mother of his plans to join the military. She cried, screamed, and forbade him to go. But Frederick knew his will would overpower that of his broken mother, so he stood outside the house and began to march. He marched until lifting his legs caused a searing pain to reverberate through his thighs. His mother came outside, grabbed him by the shoulder, and embraced him.

“You can go,” she said with tears streaming down her puffy cheeks.

Frederick went to sleep that night happy -- happy that his mother had given him permission to go and happy at his destination.

Frederick awoke with a smile listening to the morning wind rustle through the long grass. It was before dawn and the sun had yet to make an appearance on the horizon. Gently, so as to not waken his family, Frederick packed his belongings. He briefly cradled the straw toy man he had ever since he could remember and then placed it away on the sole piece of furniture in the room he shared with his brother and mother. He wrapped up his supplies in a pack and then fastened it to his shoulder as he strode out of the house. Not a hundred paces from the front door, Frederick saw a form take shape behind him. It was his panting brother running away from their house.

“You didn’t think I would let you leave alone, did you?” he said, and the two walked off into the pre-dawn twilight.

With the Infantry

The whistle blew again. By this time, it had faded into the background of Frederick’s mind since he had heard it millions of times these past two days. Ausbildungslager was rugged, brutal, and housed more depressed men than anywhere else in the world, yet it beat wasting his days living at home on the farm with his mom.

Lukas was right next to him as they did one of their ten kilometer runs during the day. Frederick was proud of Lukas. Despite being two years younger than him and a whole year younger than everyone else at boot camp, he was able to keep up and was the second best in the camp to Frederick. However, Frederick still hated that his kid brother came along. He wanted to get away from his family, and he agreed with his mother that war was a dangerous place. With all the tension building up in Europe, Frederick could see that war was imminent, especially with Chancellor Hitler now controlling the country with “emergency powers.” Lukas was too young for this stuff. He was barely 17 and had to lie about his age to come with Frederick.

After about two years, the brothers could fire a rifle accurately, defend themselves in hand to hand combat, survive off the land, and take orders from the commanding officer. They did as they were told and almost became the perfect soldiers. However, unlike the other grunts at the camp, they couldn’t bring themselves to kill a person, even if they were the enemy. The years of living with their pacifistic mother had softened them. As good as they were at hitting the bullseye of a standard circle target, they couldn’t hit a “kill spot” if the target was a picture of a person.

A rumor spread through camp one day that General Olaf Krueger would be coming to inspect the troops. General Krueger was the most decorated and popular of all of the German Generals having successfully led battalions to battle in World War 1 and winning the majority of them. He was one of the few WW1 survivors and knew Hitler on a personal level.

“Did you hear about the General coming to camp?” Lukas asked Frederick one day on the obstacle course.

“Of course I did,” replied Frederick. “I’m pretty sure that everyone in camp has heard.”

"I heard he comes from a family like ours. His father died soon after he was born. He ran away from home when he was 13 to join the infantry. They all said he was too young to join, but a Colonel saw his desire and potential and let him stay and live in the camp. He found a way to deal with the killing, which is his key to success." Lukas paused and thought about what he was going to say next. "I can tell you are like me and can't shoot to kill. I propose we see this General when he comes, and maybe we can learn from him."

"Well, I don't see how that could hurt us, so we might as well," admitted Frederick.

"And perhaps if we could, could we go with him?" Lukas pleaded. "I'm going to be honest here. I am getting tired of this camp and the goons here. We belong at a higher level with the General's men."

"Well, little brother, we shall see. Time will be able to tell if we should go and if it will be a good decision."

The next week General Krueger came to visit. He held a rally to get the men ready for war. Bodies squeezed in next to each other as everyone crowded to hear the General. After an hour of cheering and raising fists in the sweat filled air, the General finished his speech. A few men went to approach him, but they were confronted by the camp's officer and were told that if they could pass a simple yet challenging test, they could join the General.

"The General only accepts the most competent of soldiers," the officer proclaimed. "If any of you apes want to join him, you will have to go a round with me."

Many of the men backed down after this announcement, but some still stood and agreed to fight the officer. Five of the seven men had failed, and it was left to Frederick and Lukas. The officer, feeling cocky having beat five of his soldiers, made an offer to Frederick. If he could beat him, he *and* his brother could join the General. Frederick accepted and the two battled.

Nearly the entire camp came to watch the brawl as the two were the most equally matched men there. They grappled and wrestled in the mud until their entire bodies were brown. At one moment, the officer looked like he was winning the fight, but the next second Frederick was back on top. The General even turned to see the event and eventually saw Frederick come out victorious. Both men were panting, but Frederick was standing up while the officer lay on the ground in a pool of sweat mixed with blood.

"We depart tomorrow," General Krueger told Frederick dryly. "Have all your things packed tonight and meet me at the gate tomorrow morning by the first bugle call."

"Yes Sir," accepted Frederick.

Frederick looked back at Lukas who was looking at him with excited eyes. Frederick managed an exhausted smile and they walked back to their barracks together.

Olaf

“Lets go,” the General commanded Frederick and Lukas. “We have a three hour trip, and I have business to attend to. I can’t afford any delays.”

General Krueger was a hardened soldier to say the least. His tanned face was starting to grow lines from his long years of service. Cuts and battle scars decorated the sides of his face and neck giving him a more daunting appearance. At the same time, his face commanded respect from all who looked at him. People were too intimidated by him to disobey orders or question his methods, yet underneath this hardened exterior, a soft peaceful person thrived.

The General had been able to find peace within himself during the first world war while on the battlefield. His commanding officer had been gunned down during a mission, and Krueger stepped up to take his place in the trenches. He led his squadron through the enemy territory back to safety without losing any more men. This was his first victory of many and gave him the needed confidence to succeed. General Krueger never hesitated and outside of battle was very quiet and calm with his men. Even in battle, he was relatively relaxed as he fought and shouted clear, specific orders to his squad. It was this exact inner peace that the two brothers desperately wanted to learn.

Upon reaching the new base, the gates were opened by two soldiers sweating in the sun. The jeep drove through the gate, down the gravel road, and straight to the barracks to drop off Frederick and Lukas. General Krueger did not even look at them as they exited, and as soon they were out and had grabbed their duffels from the back, the jeep continued moving to the General’s quarters.

In the evening, the General held another rally in the camp to get the men pumped. Germany was on the brink of World War Two, and Hitler had commanded all bases to get ready to march the next morning. Similar to the previous rally, men packed in around the General and cheered during his speech. Only one person was not fully into the action, Frederick.

“I’m having doubts. I don’t believe I am ready for war,” Frederick told his brother.

“What are you talking about? Just coming to this camp and seeing the General has given me a boost of confidence. I am now ready for anything!” Lukas replied.

“Well, then perhaps this is for you and not me. It is time for you to leave my shadow and find your own path. I just know that this war will not help me find mine. I need to talk to the General. I will be right back.”

Frederick turned from Lukas and went through the crowd to talk with the General now that his speech was over. He explained his predicament, and General Krueger listened intently. At first, he was disappointed in having his time wasted. A man who was qualified to be with the General suddenly feeling unprepared to fight? That was unheard of. But the General knew that Frederick was telling the truth.

“Go back to your barracks, get your bag, and leave. Talk to no one including your brother. This is your punishment for not filling the shoes of a man,” General Krueger told Frederick phlegmatically.

Obligingly and disheartened, Frederick walked away with his head down, not making eye

contact with anything but the ground. He glanced left to see where his brother was standing, but Lukas was now with a group of men conversing and laughing. *This really is his life now*, Frederick thought to himself. He turned his eyes back to the ground and continued to the barracks to get his stuff. As he was leaving and approaching the gate, he heard a voice calling his name.

“Frederick! Wait up! Where are you going?”

Frederick turned to see Lukas running after him. It shocked him to see how he wasn't so little anymore. He had changed - they had both changed - since leaving their mother alone almost two years ago.

Lukas caught up to him and repeated himself, “Where are you going, big brother?”

“Lukas, I am sorry I have to do this. I am sorry I have to leave, but I can see now that this is not for me. I can see you blend in with the men, and you are a better fighter than me. But I see no good ending for me. I know you will be successful. The General ordered me not to talk to anyone including you on my way out, so I must leave now. Goodbye, brother, and good luck. I love you, and perhaps we will meet again someday.”

Lukas's face slowly turned strawberry red as his eye muscles tensed. Frederick turned around before tears started flowing so that he didn't have to see his brother cry. Frederick trudged off down the gravel path without looking back.

The Day After

Frederick walked aimlessly down the stark highway. He didn't know where he was going or where he wanted to go. He just walked. While he walked, he thought about what had happened the previous years. He and his brother had grown together and enjoyed their time away from home and their mother. He understood his mother and her ways better now. He realized it was because of her that he was unable to kill another person.

Seeing the General had not helped Frederick at all, but it had solved Lukas's problem. Frederick still felt the hole in his heart left by his father's death. He thought Lukas had the same hole in him, but perhaps not. Maybe the General was enough of a fatherly figure for Lukas to be at peace.

I certainly hope he will be ok through the war, Frederick thought to himself. He wouldn't be able to bear the news of his brother's death, especially after he left his fate in the care of the infantry.

The sun was beginning to set and lit the sky with an orange glow. The edge of the few clouds in the sky turned pink as the sun hit the horizon. The sky on fire struck Frederick with a fear that things would not turn out positively. As the top of the sun hit the horizon, Frederick picked out faint lights of a city. He smiled knowing he would be able to make it there tonight, get a good night's sleep, and be on his way the next morning.



Frederick exited the motel after a night of restless sleep and stepped out onto the chilly curb

to hail a taxi. Luckily for him, one came by within a minute. A gentleman with graying hair sat in the driver's seat. He looked about fifty years old from the lines on his face and the age spots on his hands.

"Guten tag herr," the taxi driver said. "My name is Gustaf. Where are we off to this morning?"

"Uhh," Frederick managed to stutter out. He hadn't quite thought about where he wanted to go yet. "Umm wherever you need to go. I just want to get away from here."

"Well, if you have no destination in mind, I will take us to the Netherlands. War is on the brink, and my belief is that Germany will not be safe. I have family in the Netherlands that I would like to visit as well. Since this trip is for me instead of you, I will reduce the fare for you."

"I have never been to the Netherlands before, but I need something new. Thank you for your insight and generosity, Gustaf."

They took off for the Netherlands. Gustaf tried to strike a conversation since it would be a long ride, but Frederick was not interested in talking. Instead, he fell asleep as the taxi cruised down the highway.

After many hours, they reached the Netherlands. Gustaf turned around to talk to his passenger.

"Sir, we are here. Welcome to Holland."

Frederick stirred and awoke at his words. He had slept through most of the day and was confused if the sun was coming up or going down. He looked out the window and saw people walking in the cobblestone streets. People were at ease and no one seemed to be in a hurry. Gustaf dropped him off near the middle of the city so that he could be on his way.

"Thank you, Gustaf. Here is your money." He handed over what was due and tipped him his remaining money. He exited the cab and waved at Gustaf as he drove off.

"Well, it is time to start my new life in Holland," Frederick said aloud to himself. And with that he began to walk down the street as the sun kissed the horizon.

Anika

Frederick entered the facade of the friendly-looking, glowing building containing a pink neon outline of the shape of a woman's body. Once he entered, Frederick felt the pulsating music and lights. He saw men surrounding beautiful women dancing on everything from poles to each other.

As Frederick walked closer to the center of the room, he saw her. Her body was enveloped by a thin, red dress. Her curvature was tightly hugged by the cherry red material and showed off her ample, firm breasts. Frederick's knees began to buckle under his own weight, and it was all he could do to stay standing as she walked around the room. She was surrounded by an entourage of both men and women adulating her. His gaze met hers, and she smiled. Frederick found himself becoming lost in her voluptuous crimson lips curving upward in a way that showed a mixture of desire, pleasure, and satisfaction. She gracefully lifted two of her fingers to signify the time left on her shift, and Frederick smiled and took a seat.

He started with one drink and lost count after four. His head was spinning, his spirit was giddy, and his face was red from the alcohol. His vision swayed from left to right, and he noticed the beautiful woman walking toward him. She giggled as she approached, amused at Frederick's obvious inexperience with inebriation.

"My name is Anika. I have not seen you here before." Frederick nodded his head and smiled, hanging onto her words like they were the last few drops of liquor in his glass. "I like you. Come with me," she invited. Frederick again nodded, feeling more conscious of himself, and stood up shakily to walk with her.



When Frederick awoke, he was laying in a bed with the beautiful Anika next to him. He had a splitting headache, and he could barely remember half of the previous night.

"Who are you, traveler?" Anika asked with genuine interest. His first response was nothing but a gurgle and mumble, but his second attempt was more successful.

"I am still trying to figure that out myself. My name is Frederick," he said, extending his hand awkwardly.

"Well, Frederick, as much as I like you, I cannot afford to give you my services for free. I will not charge you for tonight because it was my pleasure, but in the future, I will need payment. I should hope that you will want to come back to me."

Frederick looked at her blankly realizing that he had just slept with a hooker.

"Oh," was all he could manage to sputter. "I have just come to this place. I don't have a job or money. I like you a lot, but I am afraid I do not have the money to spend more time with you..." he trailed off realizing he did not even remember if she had told him her name.

"Anika," she supplemented. "Well, perhaps I can help you out. You seem like a smart man, and we Dutch value intelligence. I will set you up with my boss, Jozef. You can learn business from him and become wealthy. I will talk to him today and see if you two can meet tomorrow. For today, try to enjoy the town. You are welcome to come back here if you need something."

"Thank you, Anika. Your care and comfort have not gone unnoticed."

With that, Frederick rolled over and tried to sleep off his hangover. Anika watched and gingerly stroked his hair as he rested.

With the Dutch

The following years passed by in a blur as Frederick learned the ways and business of club management from Jozef. He fell into a routine of staying out late at the clubs, drinking, and watching Anika twirl around on her pole seductively. He was always the last one out of the club waiting for Anika to go back to her place.

Anika quit prostituting herself at Frederick's requests, and he gave her all his money so she could maintain the financial lifestyle she was accustomed to. The two developed a close, deep bond,

and the money became less significant as long as they had each other.

After practicing the art of love with her into the wee hours in the morning, he would finally return to his small apartment to sleep until noon the next day. He dreaded waking up everyday hungover with a pounding headache, but business was business and he needed money in order to spend his time with Anika.



This day was a big one. He would be opening up a new club independent of Jozef. More than anything, his mentor was proud of his protege. He had only been in the business a short time but had picked up the trade so quickly. However, as Frederick got up, he could feel the blood rush to his feet, an emptiness in his stomach, and then a terrible squeezing. He heaved all over the floor.

“Damn it,” he cursed under his breath. He left the house without cleaning it up, frustrated, sad, and alone.

Two Reasons

As Frederick opened more clubs, tension grew between him and Anika. Frederick quickly learned that club management was a distracting business. He stayed out later than normal, slept less, and only saw Anika once or twice a week if he was lucky. As hard as it was, Frederick remained loyal to Anika even though he had countless opportunities to be with other women. The great life he had enjoyed for two decades was starting to fade. He was only able to cope with his situation through his nightly routine but even that was becoming increasingly more difficult. He needed something more than this temporary high to survive.

Anika began to feel the adverse effects as well. Frederick was the man who changed the way she lived. He was the one who made her loyal and quit prostitution. He was only client she had truly loved, and their loss of time together was taking a heavy toll on her. She began to take LSD as a way to escape her reality. The nights when she did not have Frederick with her she doubled the dose so that she could still “see” him in front of her. Even though she could escape for hours at a time, reality always came crashing back down on her hard.

One night, the LSD made her flashback to her life before Frederick, and she began to miss it. She went out into the street in a lacey outfit to sell herself. She had not lost her attractive appearance, and within minutes, she was at another man’s house and in bed with him.

When she returned to her apartment, she saw a figure in the dark waiting for her. She hit the light switch and saw Frederick sitting in the room on a chair. At first, she thought it was a hallucination created by the drugs she was on, but she soon realized it was the real him when he took her hand and led her into bed.

After their session, he looked into her eyes and asked her his burning question.

“Where have you been, my dear Anika?” Frederick asked her, softly but sternly. “Tonight was a

night for us to be together, but when I came here, all the lights were off and you were gone.”

“I-I-I I was out,” she stuttered. It just hit her what she had done. She had betrayed him. She began to panic about what he would do. She couldn’t afford to lose him, but she didn’t know how she would be able to make him stay after the crime she had just committed.

“You were out? Doing what, may I ask, in that outfit?”

“I’m sorry, Fred. I truly am. The past few months have been hard on me. So hard that it pushed me to my limits. I broke down and reverted to my old ways. I love you, Frederick, and I can’t lie to you.” She told him about the LSD she needed in order to live without his presence and about her cheating.

“So, you cheated on me, yet had the nerve to have sex with me just now? Have you been using me the entire time?!”

“No, Frederick. I-”

“Am I just another client, and there are countless more you see every night after I leave?” Frederick was almost on the verge of yelling and a vein was starting pop out on his forehead. “You told me you quit prostitution, and I believed you, but now I don’t know what to believe!”

“Fred, I am so sorry. I just wasn’t thinking.” She began to silently cry as she knew the end of their relationship had arrived.

“Well, I have been feeling increasingly more distant from you lately as well but that didn’t break my faithfulness. I can’t trust you anymore. I can barely look at you right now.” He hurriedly dressed. “I hope you enjoyed using me tonight because that was the last time. I’m out of here.”

With that, he left slamming the door behind him. Anika could hear his footsteps stomping down the stairs. Still distraught and crying, she curled up in the fetal position until she fell asleep. It would be a few months before she would find out that their last night together had produced a child that would torment her with the thought of Frederick, her one true love, for the rest of her life.

By the road

After leaving his old life behind, Frederick knew he had nothing left to live for. What had the last 20 years of his life taught him? Carnal pleasure, prostitution, accumulating useless money that would never bring him lasting comfort? He tried to shake the dirt he could feel attached to his soul convulsing his entire body in desperation. He could feel the vibrancy he once had in his youth had burned out into nothing but an empty husk he was now inhabiting. *This has to end*, he thought to himself and looked down over the bridge at the roaring traffic below. He could end it, quickly and painlessly, with just a jump. He climbed up on the ledge, every muscle straining and screaming for him to jump off. Just as he was about to take the leap, his body gave out and collapsed back onto the pavement.

When he woke up, a familiar old face was smiling down at him, shaking him from his stupor.

“Gustaf?” Frederick asked in bewilderment. The old man’s eyes crinkled as he smiled, and he

nodded once in affirmation. In that smile, Frederick felt a sense of renewal wash over him, a feeling of real peace, however fleeting, that he had not felt since his youth.

“Thank you,” Frederick managed to say in a slur, as his old cabby helped him into the car.

The Cabby

“I figured I would be seeing you again,” Gustaf said to the half-conscience man in the passenger seat.

Frederick stirred in his seat at Gustaf’s words. He was still tired from what had happened the previous night and was trying to organize his thoughts. He wanted to turn over and sleep, but since Gustaf was being generous, he figured the least he could do was be polite and converse with him.

He looked the cabby up and down. Gustaf was old when they first met, but now he looked ancient. Two decades had passed, and Gustaf had acquired quite a few more age spots and wrinkles. But the twinkling eyes and genuine, inviting smile were still the same. Without a doubt, it was the same taxi and same driver that had brought him to the Netherlands where he had started the third chapter of his life.

“And how did you figure that Gustaf? That you would be seeing me again?” Frederick asked humbly.

“I like to call it, driver’s intuition. Just as I can predict traffic patterns and the best route to take, I can predict if I will ever drive a passenger again. And you were definitely a special one that I immediately knew would ride with me again.”

“Well...” Fred’s voice trailed off as he figured out what he was going to say. “Well, I’m glad for your instinct and even more glad that you are the one who found me. A friendly face is one that you always want to see after leaving a life behind.”

Gustaf smiled and didn’t ask any questions about Fred’s previous twenty years. He simply drove and paid attention to the road.

“Rest meine Sonne. You are safe with me.”

Like a switch was flipped off, Frederick closed his eyes and fell into a deep sleep that lasted until they had arrived at their destination in Germany more than 300 miles away from Anika and his old life.

The Son

Gustaf opened his small home to Frederick, who appreciatively accepted. Frederick learned to become a cabby and took over for Gustaf when he was sick or tired. As Gustaf got older, Frederick drove the taxi more often and began to take care of Gustaf. The two worked well together as Gustaf was the best listener Frederick had ever had, and Frederick had a lot to say about his life. Gustaf’s age and wisdom shined through to Frederick when the advice he offered helped calm Fred’s mind. After only a few months, Gustaf had become the fatherly figure that Frederick never had. Frederick trusted Gustaf

with everything: his property, his embarrassing moments, and his secrets. In return, Gustaf always patiently listened, never interrupted, and only said inspiring words to Fred.



Almost a dozen years had passed since Frederick had left Anika. Shortly after Fred's departure, Jozef fired Anika from her job seeing that a pregnant stripper was bad for business. He offered to give her her job back after she delivered the child as she was still one his best girls, but Anika declined as she wanted to lead a new life with her son, Fritz.

Anika had saved enough money to live off of after years of working and she lived comfortably with her son, but the money was running out. Anika needed find a new job and start a new chapter in her life. She took Fritz, and they traveled to Germany.

While out walking one day from store to store looking for work, Anika passed out on the street. She had not quit LSD and the high stress of finding a job caused her to overdose. Fritz panicked and screamed for help, but the store owners closed their doors and looked away. At that moment, a taxi drove around the corner, and Fritz waved to it for help. The driver stepped out of the car and looked down at the woman in the street. She was unconscious but was still breathing and laying on her side. The driver turned her on her back and looked at the beautiful face of the woman he had known long ago. He asked the boy to help his mother into the back of the cab and drove them both to the hospital for medical help.

Frederick sat in the waiting room for what seemed like hours when the nurse finally came out and invited him into the room. Anika was sitting up in bed, supported by the pillows around her. Fritz stood behind her watching Frederick as he walked in. The first thing Frederick noticed was how white the room was. It was too white. The walls, bed, sheets, gown worn by Anika; it was all too white. Anika was pale as a ghost. Her skin was stretched over her face, and she looked like a skeleton. She had lost a dangerous amount of weight in the past twelve years and looked like she could be blown over by the slightest breeze.

"Anika," Frederick said, looking directly into her eyes.

She looked back at him and realized that she knew those eyes, that voice, that strong muscular build.

"Frederick." It was a whisper, barely audible over the sound of the air current circulating through the room. Anika began to break down and sob, tears streaming down her thin, pale face. They were not tears of sorrow but of joy that she had been found by the man she had once loved and who had once loved her. The emotion was too much for her delicate body, and she could feel herself slipping into the void. She opened her mouth to say her last words, and Frederick rushed to her side to grab her fragile hand.

"Anika what is it? Stay with us," Frederick said soothingly. "Stay with me."

"The boy, he is-is-is," Anika trailed off as her head fell back into the pillow. "He is..."

She didn't need to finish speaking for Frederick to figure out the child was his. He had his mother's beautiful eyes, but Fred's thick eyebrows and thin lips. His skin was a shade lighter than Frederick's but still stood out in the too white room. The two made eye contact for the first time, and Frederick braced himself for a magical bond, but nothing happened. Fritz blinked and they looked away from each other. Fritz turned his eyes to his motionless mother laying on the bed and tears began to form in his eyes. Frederick leaned over Anika and closed her eyes, then promptly exited the room in need of fresh air. More had happened to him in those last twelve minutes than had happened in the past twelve years.

The nurse brought Fritz outside to Frederick, and he took his hand and took him to the home he shared with Gustaf, leaving Anika behind for good.

March

Frederick's son grew more discontent with each passing day. The single father tried time and time again to find what his son wanted and if he could buy the right food or do the right activities. Frederick desperately thought that maybe his son would come to love him. Gustaf looked on his effort with something between sadness and patience because he knew the inevitable result regardless of Frederick's actions.

One day Fritz was nowhere to be found. The tip jar they used in the living room was gone and so was the cab. Heart racing, Frederick ran outside looking for his son. He found the cab a few blocks away, crashed into a newspaper stand. His heart still pounding, Frederick whipped around as he felt a hand on his shoulder. Gustaf, with that ever-present smile on his face, told Frederick to help him with the cab. Together they pushed it back to their home, Frederick crying desperately for his son. He knew the feeling of growing up without a father and felt the hole inside himself begin to reopen. Frederick did not want his son to go through this same pain, but ironically he caused it and there was nothing to be done. *It would have been no different if I was dead*, he thought with sadness in his heart. Gustaf walked up next to him and began to speak.

"You know he cannot live this life, Frederick. He needs to be with people who understand him." A tear formed in Frederick's eye, as he knew everything Gustaf spoke to be true. "You were no different at his age. You left your own mother with no company and never returned. He will be happier this way."

Yes, Frederick thought. He could bear the pain of losing his son; it was the natural order. Eventually he would come to peace with it despite the deep pain and decay he felt in his own soul.

Lukas

It was only a matter of time until Frederick ran into the last connection of his previous life. Gustaf had become deathly ill and Frederick picked up the slack driving sixteen hours a day. At the end of another long day, Frederick was on his way back home when he saw a man on the side of the road

waving him down. Tired but feeling generous from all Gustaf had taught him, he pulled over and let the man into the cab. In the low light, he looked at the man's face and thought it was familiar, like he had seen it in a long lost dream. He was in a military uniform and asked to be taken to the nearest bar. Frederick obliged and drove his passenger, all the time trying to figure out where he had seen this man before.

"I've had a long day. Do you mind if I join you for a drink?" Frederick asked his passenger as they reached their destination.

"Of course, my friend. I could use some company after my long day," the man replied.

Inside the bar, Frederick got a better look at his passenger. The face was so familiar. It had the same eyes, nose, and mouth he had. And then a realization hit him. Lukas. Lukas had miraculously survived the war, and by the looks of it had become a general, much like the one the two brothers had met countless years ago. But Lukas did not realize the now old, gentlemanly taxi driver that he had grown up with.

"Lukas," Frederick said.

"How do you know my name?" Lukas asked puzzled.

"Do you not recognize me, my brother?"

Lukas looked Frederick over again, and his face lit up with excitement as he realized who he was talking to.

"Frederick! I never dreamed I would see you again, especially at this age. My how the two of us have grown. You must tell me everything about your life. What have you done and where have you been? Oh, this must be that happiest day of my life!"

With that, the two reunited brothers talked and drank the night away, laughing and telling stories to their hearts content. The two brothers, together once again, celebrated the beginning of the next chapter of their lives together.