

UNWORTHY OF LIFE

Germany 1941

I stare at the peeling white-washed walls. I stare at the window with rusty iron bars. I stare at the dirty blue and grey striped mattress, which is my bed. Grey stuffing protrudes from a hole in the corner and is trying to escape the stitched confines.

The overall I wear is baggy and hasn't been washed for weeks. My hair has been shaved off and my scalp is bristly to the touch. I am confined to an old wheelchair due to being physically handicapped.

The sound of marching boots outside - the sound of shouts and screams inside. The overpowering stench of urine and disinfectant. Einsicht Mental Institution is an old prison with cold flagstone floors and has been my home for four years since I was given up by my mother.

She came to see me at the start, but after a while she came no more. Dieter, the nurse who cares for me, tells me that she has moved away because she wanted to give our house to good people.

When I am alone I take out the small metal cross with the funny little man on it that she had given me and I pray for her the way she has shown me. I also pray for the other people like me trapped in their rooms.

At night, I press my hands to my ears to keep out the noise, and I dream of my mother, and of a time when we were happy in our Munich home; a time when people used to smile and call me happy, little Friedrich. But my dreams turn to nightmares when I remember the darkness that descended over our world, and people looking at each other with frightened eyes. From the streets at night there was the sound of breaking glass and the smell of burning.

The dark became darker when it took my father away and left my mother crying into the night. I had wanted to go to her; to console her, but I needed help to get out of my bed. I cried: "Mama, mama!" But she never came.

The rest of 1937 was spent cowering in our home with the shutters over the windows and the door locked. Boots marched along the street and we heard cries as people were taken away from their homes and their businesses. I asked Mama where they were taking our friends. She told me it was better not to know. She also told me to love God, because he loved me and would not forsake me, and to always remember *that*, no matter how bad things got.

One day I peeped out of the space between the shutters of the parlour window and saw men in shabby clothes with dirty faces being marched along our street. The men had dead eyes. At the sides of the horde were soldiers in tan uniforms with guns. One of the men stumbled and fell on to the cobbled road. A soldier then ran over to him and hit him in the head with the butt of his rifle. I screamed with horror, and the soldier looked at me with such hatred in his eyes that I cowered away from the window and hoped that they would go away. Mama came running into the room and closed the shutters totally, and said: "When you hear marching boots you must not look out Friedrich."

The dark took my mother one evening while I slept. When I awoke with the first rays of a frosty dawn slipping through the shutters, I shouted: "Mama!" But there was no reply.

The whole of that day and the next night I called for her from between soiled sheets, but she never came. Then the next day she walked into my room; her skin was pale, and she had a faraway look in her eyes. "Mama!" I shouted with joy.

"Friedrich, look at you, I must clean you up."

The next day she took me to the institution and told me that the doctors would be able to look after me better than she could. "But Mama I want to stay with you!" I cried.

I watched her as she waved. I watched her as they closed the old metal-studded wooden door. I sobbed as a man in a white tunic took me to my room; a room with bars on the window.

One dark morning I am awoken by two men in white coats and dressed and told that I am going on a bus journey. "Where's Dieter?" I ask.

"He's gone on ahead," said one of the men.

The bus, an old, dark-green vehicle with wooden seats, sits in the courtyard. People like me are being helped into the coach by other men in white coats. Some of the people are crying others just look bemused.

The bus takes us away from Munich out into the snowy countryside. I push my hand into my trouser pocket and feel the comforting shape of the cross with the man on it. A man in a white coat, who sits opposite me, looks at me briefly and smiles.

Big white snowflakes begin to fall from the sky as we eventually turn into the courtyard of a tall, sand-coloured building. We are then helped off the bus and taken into a low, grey building with a flat roof at the side of the main house.

In a cold, bare room the men in white coats take off our clothes and then lead us into another cold, bare room with only one small, round window. There are many people both young and old in the room, the shouting and crying is deafening as one of the men closes the large, thick door.

I look at the cross I grabbed from my trousers before they were taken away and, as an engine starts and blue/grey fumes issue from a vent in the ceiling, I the funny little man why he has allowed me to be born at such a time with such a deformity, but most of all I want to know why he has forsaken me.

As dizziness starts to grip me I see a figure peel off from a central group of people and approach me. I feel a warm hand wrap around my cold fingers as I gaze up into a pair of loving eyes.

"Mama!" I cry as I realise that God hasn't forsaken me after all.

