

The Summer Storm

A small, sturdy seven-year-old boy sat by a narrow window. His mother had opened the shutters to let the air circulate. Everything that day seemed to be humid and stifling. In the distance, there were mountains, forests and the threat of rain. It was the perfect conditions for a summer storm.

As the sky began to darken, Martin thought he heard rumbling in the distance. Nervously, he tried to dismiss this noise as only the local mines and smelters ... the smoking, belching workplaces of the local men who dug metal and iron out of the soil. Those noises he was used to, he could ignore them – dismiss them even as normal, day to day sounds ... but Martin knew that what he was hearing in the distance was nothing to do with the sweltering work his father did, rather it was the mysterious noise that came every July and August, along with the humidity.

Martin shivered. His nerves were beginning to get the better of him. He knew the storm was on its way. Mansfeld could very well be in the thick of it before

long. Once the storm passed over the neighbouring valley, he would soon see the lightning before the thunder rolled.

Out of the window, Martin had a good view of the little mining town he called home. It had bright red roofs and wooden-framed buildings. In the distance, a sturdy fence surrounded the area. It was there as a protection because Martin lived in a country that had to be prepared to fight. Towns and villages must protect themselves against raiders and opposing states. The land Martin lived in was called Germany, but it wasn't what you would call a united Germany, with one leader and one government. Instead, it was made up of lots of areas, each one ruled by its own prince, with its own army. Germany could be a volatile place and each town and village did what it could to fortify itself against enemies, real or imagined. However, Martin wasn't sure whether a fence like theirs would give any protection against thunder and lightning.

Martin's mother said that he should pray when he felt afraid. But Martin wasn't sure exactly who he should pray to. The priests prayed to the Virgin Mary and the saints – and there were lots of them. But his mother and father prayed to God. Simple prayers in German – different to the prayers he heard from the monks and priests in the chapel. They only ever seemed to speak in Latin. Frantically, as the thunder drew nearer, young Martin Luther tried to pray to the Virgin, all the saints and God, at the same time.

Confused and frightened, he hoped that someone would listen and help.

The storm continued to approach. Martin tried to take his mind off things by sniffing the familiar scents wafting on the air – the metallic aroma of the copper and silver mines, the fresh, almost medicinal, perfume of the pine forests in the distance, the closer floral notes of poppies and apple blossom from a well-kept family garden.

However, none of that could take his mind off the coming storm. ‘Any moment now,’ he whispered to himself. South-western Saxony in the summer was well used to sudden thunderstorms, but Martin was not. There was something about a thunderstorm that would always put him on edge.

‘Be brave,’ he told himself out loud. But Martin was not brave, and could not be, in the face of thunder and lightning.

Suddenly, across the ink-dense sky a serpent-like streak of fire lit up everything in its path. Martin leapt up with a gasp. Just then, a gentle voice at his left-hand side brought him back to earth. ‘You know what to expect on summer days like these, my darling.’ Turning away from the window and the terror outside, Martin looked into the grave, honest face of his young mother. Her high cheekbones were a sign of good breeding, or so she said herself. The sweat that slicked across her skin, however, was the evidence of hard work. Her warm, full mouth was what Martin loved most,

because even though she used that mouth to discipline her oldest son, it was also the same mouth that told him she loved him and that had, for as long as he could remember, kissed him goodnight before he fell asleep.

‘Why is it, Martin,’ she asked, ‘that you are always so scared of these storms?’

Martin interrupted, ‘... my heart jumps out of its skin at the sights and the sounds ...’

His mother laughed, in a good-natured way. She recognised a little of herself in the anxious, poetic eyes of her young son. They could both take a leap of imagination and in moments be somewhere beyond the forests, in a land or world that they had never been in before. Martin’s imagination, however, wasn’t always beneficial, particularly today, as it led him to worry unnecessarily about something that happened frequently in their Thuringian homeland.

Martin’s mother gave her little boy a gentle squeeze. She pulled him onto her lap, fully aware that she would not be able to do this sort of thing for much longer. Young lads had to grow up quickly in Germany, whether they were bound for the mines, like most of the young boys in Mansfeld, or for an academic life, like Martin.

Frau Luther wanted that sort of life for her eldest son. ‘His bright mind and thirst for knowledge set him apart from the other lads,’ she thought. Her husband, Hans, had spent a life slogging away in the dusty, dirty mines, drilling and digging silver and copper from the unforgiving soil. They both wanted something better for Martin.

Another streak of lightning broke directly overhead. The thunder that followed caused Martin to cling closer to his mother. Kissing him gently on the forehead once again, she smiled, trying to reassure him.

‘Don’t worry, Martin. This will soon be just another summer memory. I will not tell your father what a baby you have been. Just think of the power in that lightning as it streaks across the sky. Think of the power of its Creator. Think of what our God can do with the weather, and what he might do with just one life, like yours.’

Martin wasn’t sure what God could do with a scaredy-cat like him. But the next thunder clap and the next died down in their intensity, each one sounding further away than the last. Finally, it was a distant rumble, with no lightning to be seen.

‘There. All back to normal,’ Martin’s mother declared, pushing the boy gently off her lap and setting him firmly on the floor. Taking a small bag from the cupboard, she filled it with two portions of bread and an apple. ‘No doubt you’ll be hungry before suppertime,’ she declared. ‘Your father will be hungry too. All you Luther men have big appetites.’

Martin’s pale face started to draw back some colour as he pulled on a cap to keep the last of the rain off his head. The thought of a snack before supper made him feel a whole lot better as he waved his mother goodbye.

Turning the corner onto the main street, he found himself in one of the busiest mining towns of the whole district.

‘And father is one of the busiest miners in Mansfeld,’ Martin thought to himself. His mother had told him so, many times. Martin’s mother was proud of Hans Luther, her husband. Martin and his younger brothers would gaze in awe at the strong shoulders, piercing eyes and dark complexion of their father. He had worked his fingers to the bone to better his life and the lives of his children. It was a dangerous job mining, working deep underground, where a shift in the rock or soil could bury a man alive. Financially, it was troublesome too as Martin’s father was continuously in debt, never owning the mines he worked in, only leasing them. It meant that the family had to borrow money in order to make money and feed the family. But the young Luther lads didn’t know about the ins and outs of the mining business just yet. The harder aspects of a life in copper were kept from them. However, Martin’s mother always reminded the Luther boys of what a respected father they had.

After taking a short cut and finding a convenient rock to stand on, Martin gazed out towards the tall chimneys that belched and billowed smoke from the hillsides. Piles of refuse surrounded all the mines. Deep holes and gashes had been dug out of the soil wherever a seam of copper and silver had been found.

Munching on his apple and bread, Martin scanned the horizon for his father. All the miners looked the same from a distance, small but stocky, sturdy in stature, a rolling gait. However, every time, Martin could point out his father in a crowd.

This afternoon was no exception. Almost immediately, Martin spotted one man, with one particular set of shoulders that said, ‘Hans Luther.’

Martin ran, while his father waved and as soon as Martin leapt, his father caught him mid-air and swung him from one side to the other, like a pendulum.

‘There’s my boy!’ Hans Luther exclaimed, dropping him again to the ground. It was a brief moment of friendship between father and son. As soon as it was over, Hans became the stern father once more, and Martin, his dutiful son. But the moment was still precious, even though it was short lived.

Hans and Margarethe were indeed stern in their discipline. Margarethe would chastise her children with word and action and Hans had once whipped Martin for taking a nut when he wasn’t supposed to. But on this afternoon all thoughts of punishment were gone as the two Luther ‘men’ made their way home.

The older Luther looked on with pride at the younger Luther, and the younger Luther looked up with admiration at the older. The older one could see a bright mind and an even brighter future for his son, and the younger could see the best and strongest man in Mansfeld, if not the world.

‘Oh, Father. Mother packed food for you also,’ Martin smiled, passing his father the apple and bread.

‘Hmmm,’ his father licked his lips after taking a large bite of the home-grown fruit. ‘Crisp and sweet, just the way I like it.’

Martin nodded. ‘Mother knew you would be hungry ...’

‘Your mother’s a good woman,’ Hans spoke between mouthfuls. ‘She knows my stomach almost as well as she knows my face.’

Martin ate his own apple and continued to chatter all the way home. His father could hardly believe how quickly the seven years had passed since Margarethe, his wife, had brought this young scrap into the world. As the clock had struck midnight on St. Martin’s day, their oldest son had taken his first, rasping cry, not in Mansfeld, where they lived now, but in Eisleben.

Hans then gazed up at the shadow of the large castle above them. Every penny he earned came with the permission or blessing of that family.

That was why he wanted something better for Martin. He wanted his son to have his own life, not to have to bow and scrape to counts and aristocracy. ‘He should be a professor or a lawyer,’ he muttered to himself.

Martin overheard, and puzzled, asked his father, ‘What’s a lawyer?’

Hans sighed. ‘Scruffy little scrap,’ he said, while ruffling his young son’s hair. ‘Your mother’s right. If you’re going to be a lawyer – if you’re going to be anything – you will need an education.’

Martin gazed in wonder at his father. If he said it and his mother said it, then it must be true.