

Desperation **by Amanda Mergler, Qld**

Standing amidst the twisted remains of steel beams and broken concrete, Katja raises the hem of her dusty dress. She presses her hand against a wide concrete pillar to support her aching body. A sharp pain shoots through her wrist.

‘Godverdomme!’ She thumps her fist against the concrete pillar edge. Wobbles.

Fifty steps. That is all it will take to reach the farm and get food for her boys.

Cold creeps up her bare, puffy feet and legs. Failure swaddles her like damp washing on a Delft winters day.

In her mind’s eye, she heaves aside the rubble and strides to the greenery. She breathes deeply, willing herself forward.

A rumbling enters her consciousness, a thundering that increases in intensity. She crouches behind a barricade of rubble. Her mother used to say it’s movement that gets you noticed, that gives away your position. Her heart beats louder than the receding growl.

She pushes against shattered bricks to help her stand. More planes are coming. A whining siren slices through every part of her, a rousing drone that rises and falls.

She steps forward, using her hands to move the jagged ruins in front of her. What is it her father told her she must do? Get low, find shelter, hide herself away.

No - feed the children. She must make it to the farm. Eddies of dust whirl around her and she takes tiny steps, hampered by the throbbing focused in her chest. The siren continues to punish all nearby.

She clambers over a barricade and half completes the sign of the cross. No barbed wire! Are Germans soldiers hiding nearby? She will spit in their faces before she submits. A pool of saliva settles against her tongue.

Katja trudges towards the greenery up ahead, her feet sliding as if she’s wading through mud. She squints into the glare of the sun. Pushing a broken piece of timber aside she catches sight of her upper arm wobbling. Hairs and goosebumps raise on her arms as the morning air brushes cool against her. She left her coat over the children huddled together in her bed.

Another rumble begins. More tanks are coming. Katja darts her eyes around, then freezes. Every muscle in her body tenses.

‘Hey. You.’ A German soldier starts striding towards her.

With his movement, Katja finds her own. She slips on shaky legs. She smells tobacco and scorched earth, sees flashes of burnt books, and feels her stomach drop. She falls to her knees, reaches for the cross around her neck. The siren falls silent.

She peers over the barricade; the soldier continues to advance. She searches for an escape route, but every direction is blocked by cold, cracked concrete and shiny, sharp steel. She slaps at her face.

‘Idiot.’

A large piece of timber digs into her foot. She grips underneath it and wrenches it in front of her, her arms shaking with the weight. Splinters of wood dig into her gnarled hands as they struggle to protect her. Her vision blurs.

The soldier raises one hand, like he’s trying to stop traffic. ‘Hey. It’s okay.’

He’s made his voice smooth and calm, talking to her like she’s a puppy. Ha! He thinks such a simple trick would work on her.

‘What’s happening?’ another soldier shouts. The sunlight reflects off the stripes on his vest.

The soldier closest to her turns to face the second soldier standing atop a large tank. Katja seizes the moment, drops the piece of timber, and pumps her legs hard.

She sees herself reaching the farm, pulling cabbage and carrots and leeks from the soil. She'll make a warm soup for her brave little boys. Refill those hollow cheeks.

Katja stumbles over a lump of tortured concrete, broken pieces embedding in her flesh. A sharpness in her outer thigh leads her to look down. Her dress is torn, and a small piece remains attached to a nail sticking out of wood. She steps towards a flat slab of cement, sits down. Considers stretching out along it and closing her eyes.

The muffled voices of the soldiers rouse her again. She drags herself up and spots a crate of supplies.

Food.

She flicks wires away from her face and follows a remarkably clear path.

There will be food, surely, in a crate of supplies.

She will return, victorious, to her children. A good mother who can keep their bellies full through this winter. It will not be tulip bulbs and sugar beets for her sons tonight, but riches from a field pack an overfed soldier has discarded.

Will there be bread and chocolate, sugar for little Wilhelm?

If she's lucky, there might be cigarettes to trade with soldiers. A trade she can make without retreating into herself, without fighting back the nausea that follows.

Her breathing is laboured and her knees ache as they grind their way through every step. When she reaches the crate of supplies, she is confused. The crate is on wheels. There is a black and green rucksack, with handles, inside. Her fingers twitch on the crate's cool silver frame and she peers inside with a wildly beating heart. Tiredness slows her and her back twinges as she leans into the crate and lifts the rucksack.

Her hope dives. It is far too light.

She tears at the rucksack, the ripping sound echoing her own regret. She flings it to the floor, then lifts her foot and stomps on the traitorous material. A shot of pain jolts her spine, makes her grit her teeth, tilt her head backwards.

Across the street, a bird warbles. Katja watches a smudge of black and white sitting on the bough of a gum tree. She presses a hand to her cheek, trying to piece something together. Her fingers refuse to open and lie flat.

'Please, let me help you.'

She spins around at the sound of the dogged soldier. He is wrinkled and rugged, dirt smeared on his chin. He has never been short of food.

She can't outrun him. Her time is up.

Katja turns, walks towards the greenery and comes to a ledge. The sky is wide open and cobalt blue above her, like the pottery her mother used to paint. Perhaps she could fly like those painted swallows? She closes her eyes and opens her arms.

A tug on her dress has her falling backwards. The soldier's arms feel warm, his movements sure. She smells oil as she slinks to the floor.

'I have children.' She curls into a ball.

'It's alright, lady. You're safe.'

Katja remains curled, her eyes squeezed shut.

'Oma.'

A call from some distance.

She unfurls herself and looks up at the sound. The soldier stands.

A fine young man picks his way through the debris. He is Dutch, she can tell. Why on earth is he wearing shorts in winter?

'She's my grandmother,' he says to the soldier.

Katja reaches out a hand to the young man. He crouches down next to her, his hand on her shoulder. She leans against him.

‘De Duitsers zjin hier,’ she whispers, sliding her eyes to the soldier, now twirling his helmet in his hands. It is plastic and bright orange, like the marigolds she once pulled from her garden.

‘English, Oma, remember? English.’

Katja shakes her head, rubs her temple. She looks around, spotting the shopping trolley lying on its side a few steps from her. Her brow furrows.

‘Was I shopping? I was shopping. For food?’

‘It’s okay, Oma. Come on, let me take you home.’

Jimmy slips a warm arm around her and uses his other to hold her hand. Katja stands, winces and sways. She allows her grandson to wrap her in her dressing gown, the smell of 4711 inviting and familiar. She holds the dressing gown open and glances at her nightgown. Cradling in close to Jimmy’s side, she pulls her dressing gown tight around her, cinching the tie at the waist.

Jimmy puts his phone to his ear.

‘Got her, Uncle William. The local shops, the demolition site. Heading home now.’

Jimmy slips his phone into his shorts pocket. Katja cranes her neck to look up at her grandson’s face. She squeezes her arms against his nice, round belly.

‘Thanks, mate.’ Jimmy shakes the hand of the man holding the hard hat. ‘She slipped out while I was in the shower.’

‘She could have been seriously hurt, mate.’

Katja ambles as Jimmy leads her away from the edge, back through the rubble, down a concrete ramp. A nagging sense of urgency tugs at her, as if she’s forgotten something important. She sees the excavators, the diggers, the group of workers, scratching at shirts beneath their reflective vests.

Jimmy squeezes her hand and uses his other to support her elbow. ‘Come on, Oma. Let’s go home for breakfast.’