

## Nachthexan

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Tanya is moving on the bunk below.

The searchlights pan along the sides of the hut, the glare leaks through the crevices.

The air raid sirens wail. All lamps in the camp are extinguished.

Now, in the dark, only the bitter east wind pierces the poorly fitting planks, sighing with its icy breath on my bare face. I shiver under my one blanket, although still fully clothed. The stove's fading embers give no warmth.

'Are you still awake Tanya?' I whisper.

'No,' comes her muffled reply. 'Katrina... Go to sleep.'

'I'm cold, can I come down? Two blankets are better than one. We could keep each other warm.'

'Big sister you snore and your breath smells of cabbage.'

There is silence for a while. Then Tanya relents, 'All right... and no talking.'

I nudge in beside Tanya and spread my blanket over both of us. Tanya too is wearing all her clothes and her head is wrapped in a scarf. The lice are moving and itching in my armpits and between my legs. I try not to fidget and scratch. Even through my padded jacket and Tanya's red army great coat, I feel her boniness. I had nursed her through dysentery. I made a point of saving the choicest piece of potato or cabbage from the watery soup.

There is the drone of approaching bombers, I judge it is from the direction of Dortmund, north of us. Sometimes they bomb

Cologne and they pass over us to turn away to the north and their home. But not tonight; the RAF are bombing Dortmund.

‘Home...’ I whisper. England for them, Ukraine for me.

I hear the distant thud of bombs and the sound of anti-aircraft fire. Even though they may kill me, it fills me with joy to think the Germans are getting something of their own medicine, here on their own soil.

‘Give them hell... give them fucking hell.’ Tanya chuckles, ‘May they all burn in hell.’

Tanya hisses words.

‘I hope they bomb and burn every Nazi to hell – even if I burn with them. They have it coming. I’ll laugh as they weep. None of them is innocent. Bomb them and their children and their children’s children – all the fuck to hell – comrades – fuck them to their deaths!’

Some of the other woman are whimpering.

The raid seems louder than other nights.

‘They’re growing in strength.’ I whisper.

‘They need to.’

The sounds fade.

‘Now Katrina – shut the fuck up and go to sleep!’

I met Tanya for the first time in August. She had been captured near Nepokrytaia in May ’42, in the fight around Kharkov. She had crash-landed in a lake, she told me. They carried no parachutes to save weight. Her navigator drowned.

‘She was lucky.’ Tanya laughed.

The guards called her Nachthexan – Night-Witch. That first time, I saw the proud defiance in her eyes. She described how, flying their old Polikarpovs, they were night stalkers. They’d cut their engine and glide over the German lines looking for the glow of cigarettes to aim their bombs on... men. There was only the sound of the wind as they glided in their old crop dusters.

‘As if we flew on broomsticks,’ she said.

‘They feared us, so they’d fuck us, to diminish their fear.’

Tanya’s blonde hair attracted the guards’ attention. She said that this saved her. Any Russian woman in uniform was always raped and shot.

‘They like their meat fresh when they can get it. But I’ve seen them fuck fresh corpses, staked over a gate.’ She coughed, bringing up phlegm into her mouth, and rolled it into lump. Then she gobbled into the dust where a fly loitered.

‘Fuck it! Missed!’ She pushed back her fringe. ‘My Goldilocks hair saved me!’

‘We are things to them... men...’ she says bitterly. ‘They have no soul. But I am always a free witch... here...’ She tapped the side of her head, laughing. ‘In here...’

‘Are you religious?’ I’d asked

Tanya threw back her head and laughed.

‘Am I fuck? You don’t have to be religious to have a soul. I’m a good communist but don’t let them know that or I’m screwed.’

Her voice was deep and husky from smoking, like that of an old woman, but she told me she was not yet twenty-three.

Tanya saw no problem in trading her services to the NCOs for cigarettes and food... to live. These men then gave her some protection from the brutalities of the others – the rank and file. This aura of protection extended by association to me. I’m often in her company as we exercise around the compound. At thirty-nine I’m less attractive than Tanya. I’m spared much of the attention the younger prisoners receive. After my capture at Dneprostro I find ways to make myself ugly – to be less woman. Before that day I felt I was a citizen – a person still – even under the terror, I was called ‘Comrade Engineer’. I had a part in the building and then the destruction of our great dam, guiding the sappers to lay their charges in ’41. But in Germany we are slaves. We are nothing.

I lay awake for a while. Sharing our body heats. The cold retreats a little. I drift off into sleepiness. I try to think of better times. I see the expanse of the Dnieper again shining in the spring light. The fresh green of the birch leaves are translucent against the sun. I am smart in a white coat reading the gauges and dials in the control room.

The aircraft engines throb near and low. Some have come back.

‘Low – straining for height.’ Tanya whispers. ‘Heavy bombers.’

This time something is different. The anti-aircraft fire is rapid

and close. Once – twice – the hut is shaken by explosion. For a moment – silence – then a third. There is a new wind straining through the planking. It smells of water and earth. I clutch onto Tanya, but she is laughing.

‘Fuck them! Fuck them to hell!’

Some of the other woman are moaning and crying.

‘Shut the fuck up!’ Tanya yells.

Then she is swept from me. The world of prison dissolves around me.

The waters close over me.

I struggle...

I see my Dnieper, and it is swallowing me in homecoming.

I am home now. ‘Tanya!’ I call out. ‘I am come back.’

But I gasp as I break surface. The Moon is full.

‘Tanya!’ I scream.

There is no answer.

I am rolled by the tide, clutching onto planking.

From the water, holding onto my debris, my body is cast ashore among corpses.

‘Where is Nachthexan?’ I say.

There is the sound of wind over the waters.

Nachthexan is free... she always was.