

TEDDY

Christa Pirl

The city during wartime excited her. She confessed to it only once, decades later, whispering to her daughter in a frail, thin voice. When she first moved to London, just before the war, a hushed, nervous energy hung in the air and mixed with the dense fog. Afterwards, the city awoke. There was a sense of purpose, of life lived on a tight timeline. Her mother sent letters urging her to return home to Norway, while she still could. But she wasn't going home now.

Each morning she longed for the click clack, her sturdy heels hard on the pavement. She didn't mind if she wore through the soles. She liked to press her hand into the smooth, cold stone on a warm day, run her fingertips lightly across the chiseled stone. Scrolls, masks, and angels looking down, watching her as she watched back, peering into windows as the sun set and lamps were

lit. The grand architecture marred only by the increasing number of bold black signs. Air Raid Shelter. Road Closed. Danger. Unexploded Bomb.

She danced late into the night, slowly strolled the blackened streets. She leaned into her husband, smelled the smoke on his jacket lapel, his muscles flexing as he held her. She closed her eyes and smiled under the cover of the darkness. Couples kissed in dark corners. Teenage girls, who should have been in bed, giggled and skipped through the streets. Big band music poured from underground clubs. So long as no light followed, the bobbies left it alone. The stiff upper lip relaxed. For some hours.

On nights when the sirens sounded close, her daughter, not yet three, cried softly in her sleep. The day after, she would treat her girl to a special outing. They would pack a lunch and sit in one of the large squares or manicured parks and watch the pigeons and parades of uniformed men, their brightly colored ribbons and shiny medals catching the sunlight against the dull brown wool. The girl let out a little squeal whenever they found a carousel. They quickly learned the best ones, the fast ones, where they could throw their heads back, eyes closed, feeling only the rush of air, fingers wrapped tight around gilded reigns.

Their favorite spot was the cavernous café on the corner, just down the block from their tidy apartment. They both put on their best dresses. The floors gleamed, highly polished black and white marble checks. Brass globes hung over every table, casting a circle of light onto the dark green stone tops. The leather banquettes were buttery to the touch. Her girl liked the colorful deserts, especially the striped ones, layer cake in rainbows. It didn't feel like a war was supposed to feel. Not until one afternoon, when a widow and her three small boys sat at the table to their left. The boys took turns comforting their mother who wept quietly into a handkerchief embroidered in cobalt blue thread.

Sometimes she wandered alone in the late afternoon when her husband worked late and her girl was playing with the neighbor boys. She found a small consignment shop just outside Chelsea. The cottage it occupied was old, tucked just behind a small row of houses that appeared as if out of a draftsman's dream. The gentle curve of each façade perfectly aligned with the next, each column identical, perfectly symmetrical. The only variation: every door was painted a different color. There were two black ones, but they weren't the same black. One cool, the other warmer, almost chocolate brown. It seemed impossible

there were rooms, lamps, beds, lives behind those curtained windows. She stood for minutes, her alternate, aristocratic life playing out inside her head.

The shop held pieces of households, discarded. Gowns, beaded hats and satin gloves. Shiny silver tea services, candlesticks and oversized inlaid platters. Nobody entertained in the same fashion; widows didn't wear cocktail dresses, didn't need their cocktail shakers. She always felt a bit guilty, a profiteer. But the hunt was so enticing. She liked beautiful things. Even when she couldn't afford them. But during this war, she could.

Her hair was jet black, almost blue; shiny and thick like a movie star, she thought. She set it every day, tight curls around her forehead and larger ones at the nape of her neck. She was certain the neighbor ladies thought her vain, spending so much time on her looks. At a time like this. It seemed the smog agreed with her complexion; she rarely needed rouge. She had a nice figure, even after her daughter. She showed it off. Her favorite dress was rich emerald with ermine at the neckline. She had shoes to match. She still hunted for a handbag in the same hue. Until she found it, the black would have to do.

She knew she had it exceptionally good. Her husband wasn't fighting, his pay quite generous despite the mundane nature of his work. He drove digni-

taries, ambassadors, and generals through London with his driver's license purchased in South Africa. He was quick to volunteer, after his ship docked in London, after all Norwegians were told to go to the nearest friendly port. Anything to avoid going back to sea. Especially now. He heard the stories of the merchant marine, the burning oil, the U-boats. He told them he had been driving for years. He went to Hyde Park to practice. A lot.

Once he drove Laurence Olivier and Vivien Leigh, special guests of an ambassador. It was thrilling to hear him recount the tale at home that night. She wanted every detail to pass along to the neighbors. Her brush with stardom. After the event, the stars wanted to drive through the darkened streets, holding hands, leaning into one another. When he dropped them at their townhome, the movie starlet caught a glimpse of her chauffeur's hair. Vivien Leigh reached her hand to his forehead. "What a beautiful shade of red, like rose gold!" she said.

As the bombings became more regular, she thought it was the right thing, sending her girl to a quiet country village. There were two other children going to the same country estate. Someone to play with. At the train station the woman in the military uniform, several sizes too large, handed out brown name tags to be fastened around the girls' necks.

The first time they went to visit their girl, just weeks later, she didn't recognize her own father. She cried and shied away. He cried, too, wiping his eyes with his handkerchief, running his hands through his red hair, the same shade as their little girl's. She watched father and daughter and felt silly and childish herself, her ridiculous obsession with Hollywood starlets.

"If we are going to die, we should all die together," he said. All three boarded the next train to London, nearly empty and dead quiet.

Only a month later, dark shadows roared overhead as mother held daughter and ran through Covent Garden, sirens wailing. Running hard on navy suede heels. Stray strands of her daughter's hair in her mouth, tasting of smoke and soap. Colorful shop windows blurred. The shelter was still a block away. *We'll make it*, she repeated to herself. Shrieks behind her. The smell of gasoline. She saw the flash from behind, heard the high-pitched whine, and threw herself hard into the gutter, her coat tightly wrapped around the little red head. Bricks landed too close, and she gripped her daughter tighter. A monstrous wooden beam fell. Shadows still moved overhead, but now she did not notice their sound.

Her girl struggled, gasped, and shook her head free, looking up past her mother's shoulder, and said, "Don't worry mummy, it's only the bomber

planes.” She looked down at the little face. She was horrified by her daughter’s calmness.

More planes passed, bombs hitting beyond them now. The faint rosy glow, at first much like a soft sunset, quickly grew to an angry red and was suddenly blotted out with thick black smoke. A boy ran towards her, tears running down his face, blubbering. She thought he would step on their heads, but he veered sharply to their left, towards a woman’s high-pitched screams. “Henry! Henry!”

Her knee began to ache, but for once, she didn’t think of her nylons, most certainly ruined. She noticed others in the gutter ahead of her. They waited. She wanted to run, her body filled with adrenaline, and she realized again she was holding her daughter too tight. She loosened her grip slightly and forced herself to focus on something else, that pretty pearl necklace she desperately wanted yesterday. That couldn’t help her today. “Seven, eight, nine,” she counted. They could get to the tube station before another round. It was getting very dark. Soon she would not be able to find her way. She pushed against her knee. The pain shot up towards her hip.

The black hole of the tube station gaped in front of them, the narrow steps barely lit. She maneuvered around the Home Guard, their eyes fixed on the

skies. At the bottom, the next round of sirens was faint, and the air filled instead with coughs, whispers, and crying babies. She could not see how many people waited in the dim yellow-orange emergency lights, but from the din she figured fifty or more.

Carefully, she made her way along the platform. It was crowded, but she always felt uneasy sitting on the tracks, even though she knew the trains weren't running. She found a spot tucked between a metal bench and an elegant man in a fedora and trench coat. He gripped a cane, the top of which glinted, even in the low light. He was gray at the temples, his skin beginning to pull at his chin and eyes, but he was handsome.

Despite her daughter's calmness in the open air, bombers overhead, now she fussed. The air was thick and warm. The little girl wanted to take off her coat. It would be a long night down here with her in such a mood. She wondered if her husband was back in the city or still out by the airfields. Her mind drifted. He could always distract their girl. It would be so much easier if he were here.

The man next to them noticed the commotion, removed his hat, and smiled at the girl.

“I am sorry. She missed her nap today. We were enjoying the warm weather, and I lost track of the time.”

“It was beautiful, wasn’t it? What’s your name, my dear?”

He lowered his head and turned it sideways, catching the girl’s gaze. He stuck out his tongue and twisted his face around. She giggled and reached for his hand outstretched in front of his nose, fingers wiggling. Then everything shook. The thundering roll and bang of a close by bomb was followed by a collective gasp in the darkness that echoed down the tracks. Somebody began moaning, low and long. A woman called out. *Penelope!* A simmering sense of panic and dread hung in the air. One child began crying, then another. Her girl surely the next.

“Do you have a teddy, little one?”

From the depths of his coat emerged a small brown figure. Her daughter’s watery blue eyes fixed on the fuzzy object, and she became still, entranced. She slowly reached her hand towards the bear. “What’s his name?” she asked in a low whisper.

“He is Mr. Winston. Isn’t he handsome?” His eyes began to moisten. He took a breath before continuing, “He is looking for a new home.” He turned, searching for his handkerchief.

Her girl's gaze shifted, looking for permission from her mother. She was freed from the protective grip. Her mother swallowed hard, eyes fixed on the man's outstretched, trembling hand.

"She doesn't have a teddy. I know she would love it." Her daughter gripped it tight and close, mimicking her mother.

The bear was pale in color, more caramel than chocolate. It was an old design, with stiff arms, its head cocked to one side. The top of its forehead nearly bald, the leather pads on its feet worn, little bits of stuffing visible. The girl stroked the bear's arm gently and began chattering in a low voice as the sirens started up again. She snuggled into her mother's side, unconcerned by the rattle as another bomb fell. Her mother tensed and looked to the man who now stared out over the tracks into the darkness, his hands clasped tight, fingernails nearly drawing blood.

Every night as she put her daughter to bed with Mr. Winston, she stroked her hair and kissed his felt nose. She remembered that night, the orange light, the quiver of his hand. And those that never made it to a shelter.

Her daughter slept with the teddy until she was nearly fourteen. Her mother never discarded him with the old baby clothes and broken board games; instead, she moved him into an old trunk beneath the guest bed, then

into the attic. After years of exile, she brought him downstairs to her own bedroom and placed him in the center of the large bookcase across from her bed. A constant reminder. Her gaze fixed on his bright glass eyes when she told her daughter, that dark late night, about the secret joys of her war.

Christa Pirl has lived and worked as an interior designer around the world, including in New York, Hawaii, and New Zealand. She currently splits her time between the mountains of Utah and a small island in Norway, her ancestral home. She holds a BFA in Interior Design from Parsons and an MA in Art History from Sotheby's Institute. Christa regularly contributes to industry design publications including *Domino.com*, and her writing has been featured in *The Economist*. During her free time, she writes fiction, which often features interiors, architecture, or furniture.