

Maruša Krese: Me, Afraid?

excerpt from the novel

translated from the Slovene by Gregor Timothy Čeh

1941

Me, afraid? No. I have been stuck here in the snow for three days now. Sitting on my empty rucksack. In fact I cannot sit, just squat. How I would like to lie down for a moment, a second, half a second. You mustn't, the commissar of our scattered unit advised me a few days ago. And now he is dead. We didn't even bury him. We fled, ran away. I don't know. From the Germans, the Italians, our own, the White Guard. We fled, ran right past his body.

"You must not close your eyes," he added. The eyes, his eyes. I ran past him as he lay there in the snow. I didn't really even look at him properly. If only I could have quickly closed his eyes. I ran. Just ran.

Sometimes, in winter, I was cold. Sometimes. It was beautiful then. Then, when I felt the icy wind blow into my face and tears roll down my cheeks. Tears? I must not cry. As long as I don't cry. Please. If I do so, I will stay lying there, never get up again. Cold, am I shivering? What's that? Just don't close your eyes, just don't close them. I can't feel my toes. I can't feel anything anymore. My period has long stopped. Am I even still a woman? I don't hear anyone. Are any of our people even alive? Should I crawl to the next bush? I saw her. I saw Katja yesterday. She was hiding over there behind the snow-covered logs. Was she alone? Where on earth is Ančka? And my brother? My youngest. He had just started his first year at primary school. He was so proud, so happy, and our neighbour had given him a puppy. He carried it to school with him. But only for a few days. Until the Italians arrived, and with them our neighbour. He pointed his finger at Father and Mother.

"Them, they're Reds, they're Reds," he shouted. Since when are we red, I asked myself, trembling with fear. That was the last time I was still afraid.

"Don't be afraid. It's only me."

Someone is hugging me.

"Ančka. You're alive."

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I haven't seen her for over a month. She would sit by the fire with her eyes closed. She was pretty. Is she still? Is she even still alive? Yesterday I found her younger brother at the hunting lodge. Barefoot, starved, scared. He was crying.

"Sis said I should never cry. Never. Sis said I was grown up now," the boy whimpered.

I lifted him up, placed him onto the horse and brought him to headquarters. We fed him, wrapped him in a blanket, gave him a cap with a red star to wear. He clung to me all

night. I cannot take a single step without him following. He doesn't know, doesn't know anything. He's desperate. Numb with pain. His brothers, his sister, his parents. Where are they? Father is in the camp at Gonars. That's all he knows. But then we all know that. Should I take him to his own folk? They are also on the run, hiding for months on end. Occasionally someone tells me they saw them. I don't know how to console the boy, what to say to him. Hell! May the Devil take the lot of us! And if I tell him that his sister is still alive? Alive? Nobody knows what happened to her unit. They were betrayed. And then? It is too dangerous for us to try and find them. Is she still alive? She is certainly the prettiest. Was? But she usually does not even look at me. Is she conceited? I know, I know. She went to secondary school, I didn't. She read a great deal, I didn't. In any case, if she is still alive, if I manage to find her, I will never let her go again. Never. Her brother? Would I have taken care of the boy this way had he not been her brother? He looks like her. Too much like her.

Here in the forest we are safe. Are we already in Croatia? Headquarters decided that we should hide until this fiery storm is over. Is this right? We can't just stay like this and wait for a miracle to happen. We must move on. We need to go and help. Where? Who's who? It's winter. Spring is late again. We need a green forest. Then it is easier. At least we can eat leaves. And grass. The first wild berries. It is still a long time until then. Is she still alive?

Stop daydreaming! Volunteers, where are you? Let's go.

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I must not fall asleep. Now it's Ančka's turn.

"If I start snoring, squeeze my nose," she whispered before she closed her eyes.

She fell asleep instantly. It is now my turn to sleep. I cannot wake her up. Her head rests in my lap. I will try to hold out a little longer. I stroke her hair. When will we reach a place with some water and be able to wash our hair. I itch all over. We must be full of lice again. Mother, where are you? Where are your gentle hands that plaited my hair every morning? Where are you? Where are those evenings you used to make us chicory root coffee and roast chestnuts for us? You sat next to the stove darning socks. Socks for seven children. You smiled and listened to our nonsense. Only now did it occur to me that you were probably constantly tired, that you were alone, that you didn't have the support of your husband, our father, who was always sombre and demanding, reminding you at every possible moment how his family had disowned him when he chose you. He demanded eternal gratitude and you never said anything. And my cousins, the sons of Father's brother who inherited the large farm instead of his older brother and who married a woman who constantly prayed in church, pointed fingers at me at school and sniggered slyly. I never wanted to tell you. Where are they now? Certainly not among us. Mother, where are you? Lojze, the young lad from next door, joined us about a month ago and said that both you and Father were taken away handcuffed, that Father is apparently in Gonars, that nobody knows what happened to you and that all the boys, my brothers, had fled. Our home became an Italian military post and before it was taken over by the Italians the neighbours took all and anything that was useful from the house. I am no longer tired, I am not cold, I

am not afraid, I am only worried about what happened to you. I must not cry. Let Ančka sleep a little longer.

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The snow started to melt. Some of the youngest ones crept away at night and returned in the morning with some old potatoes they had dug up from a nearby field. The cook made some kind of soup, a strange, unsalted potato broth, and the young fighters became instant heroes.

The reconnaissance group returned. Things are bad. It's going to be tough. We need to move. The Germans are coming to assist the Italians. In the night we lost three fighters who fell asleep in the snow and we have run out of the brandy that was used for the wounded to ease their pain. Somehow we will need to reach the monastery where the monks who support us live. They always supply us with brandy, flour, lard, dried meat and a load of optimism. We need to make it as far as the monastery and hide the wounded there for at least a few days. The few horses that we still have are too starved to be of any use. What can we do with them?

We are clearing the place, wiping away our traces and planning our fight. Her youngest brother asks for a gun or at least a small grenade. A small grenade. Poor child. Will I be able to continue to keep him safe? I no longer think about his sister. At least I try not to. It hurts too much.

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"Children, look after yourselves. Don't forget who you are, what you are," the teacher of Slovene Language had said to us before he escaped through the window.

We trembled with fear and horror. The headmaster, the Religious Studies teacher and four Italian officers came into our classroom. And a translator. He seemed even paler than us. The headmaster looked deep into the eyes of each one of us, hitting our desks and later our fingers with his cane, shouting.

"Who was it? Who brought these pamphlets into school? Who organized this traitorous rebellion?"

Traitorous rebellion? Who is a traitor? We, who don't accept the Italian authorities? Us? Traitors? The headmaster says we have chosen a dangerous path. It's true. But not his dangerous path. Our dangerous path. We left for the woods that very same night, Mara, Katja, Marija and me. We didn't return home from school. Mara's brother waited for us outside our school and warned us.

"Don't go home. It's real hell."

The teacher broke his legs trying to escape and was caught. We hid until the evening and then, via a network of connections, established contact with my older brother who had disappeared a few months earlier.

“It’s better for you that you don’t know anything,” he had said when he left, closing the door behind him.

He laughed when he saw us. The four of us, frightened girls with our schoolbags, wearing skirts and sandals. It was summer.

“What can we possibly do with you,” my brother and his comrades made fun of us. The following day the farmer’s wife gave us various pairs of trousers that had belonged to her sons. A week later they solemnly placed a gun in my one hand and a glass of mead in the other. And a few days after that, when I shot my first person, I became the unit’s commissar. In fact, I became a commissar even before I was handed the gun. They sent Ančka, who came from another part of the country, to help me. I caught sight of her and embraced her. Instantly she became the sister I never had.

Ančka is asleep. I stroke her with my hands, hands that kill. Hands that remind me of Mother’s hands. Gentle hands that brushed my hair every morning. Hands. Death. Silence. A silence that kills.

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Slowly. Slowly. We stop every fifty metres, listen, wait and, when the patrol returns, move on. How far will we get if we continue at this pace? The nurses make sure the wounded don’t make any noise. I don’t want to know how they do it. If I was wounded, I would shoot myself straight away. That I would be such a burden to others, so dependent on others, that I would, I would... No, I would shoot myself there and then. I would not ask anyone for help. Is she alive? Is she wounded? I can’t bear the thought.

“We will sleep here,” the commandant decided. We had come too close to the village and had to withdraw deep into the forest. It is too dark for us to continue.

They woke me up for guard duty. Pulled me out of my deep dreams. Dreams? Was I really dreaming? Once again I was the boy accompanying Father to the train station in the nearby village. I begged him not to leave. I begged him to take me with him. Begged. No longer do I know all the things I begged him. He wanted to wipe away my tears with the clean hanky that Mother gave him for the journey.

“You can’t, Mother gave it to you for the journey.”

He looked at me, stroked my hair and patted my shoulder, “You mustn’t cry. Now you need to look after the family until I earn enough money for you all to join me.”

My friend’s father also left. We returned home. Slowly. We walked slowly. We were both silent. Sitting outside the house, waiting for us, were Mother and my younger brothers and sisters. Mother is due to give birth any day now. I went into the forest, down to the stream, and I cried. Two days later I returned. I had grown up. A letter arrived from America with three dollars in it. And then another letter without any dollars. And one more. And then nothing else.

No, I wasn't dreaming. Will this night ever end? And this war? We will not survive another winter like this. I don't even know if we will survive anyway. My friend from the village, the one I walked home with when we took our fathers to the station, took a different decision. He joined the White Guard.

"You know what, I won't be cold and I won't go hungry. And my family will be safe."

That was what he said. Was he right? No, surely he is wrong. At least I hope he is wrong. He will regret it. If only the moon would shine for at least a few seconds. And the stars! If only, this night when I am not allowed to sleep, I could look at the stars. Like those beautiful nights I spent looking after the cows out in the pastures. I lay down on the ground and counted the stars. They took me to visit my father. With the stars I travelled across the ocean to the country they said was magical and beautiful. I asked the stars to tell my father how I really do look after the family, and I asked the stars to bring to me my father's greeting. Those beautiful warm nights. At the time I didn't know they were beautiful.

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"Why didn't you wake me up?" she asked.

"You were sound asleep."

"Thank you for this rest. And keeping me safe. Why don't you close your eyes now, at least for a short while?"

"I mustn't. Dawn is breaking."

I am sitting on a rock. Dead bodies all around me. I moved from one dead person to the next. Closing their eyes. It didn't matter who. Italians. Germans. Partisans. I was closing their eyes like a machine. Have I become a machine? What am I? Who am I?

While Ančka was trying to persuade me to take a nap, a partisan ran past us. Then another, and another. They were running away.

"Get out of here," they shouted.

We were under attack.

"Idiots," Ančka shouted, grabbed her gun and ran in the opposite direction.

"Attack, attack!" she shouted like mad.

I ran after her, also shouting. I cannot stand my voice when I scream. I jumped over bushes and ran as if there was no tomorrow. I'd rather die than flee. Following behind us were other fighters, partisans who had moments earlier been fleeing.

I am sitting on a rock, looking at the dead. Apart from four, all of our unit have survived. Have I really become a machine?

"Where do you skirts get such strength from?"

Is that supposed to be praise, or what? The courier came to tell me that it was time we moved on.

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How long since I have even seen a fire? I sit here in the warm, waiting for the soup in the cauldron to cook. In the last few days, all we had to eat was bark from the trees and ten of our wounded died. Perhaps I am already going crazy? I don't know where they get this strength. It isn't strength. It is rage and madness. The moment. Here and now. The moment when you have nothing to lose. You look your enemy in the eye and you know, it's him or me! Him or me? Sometimes I wish it was me. I wish that all this would finally be over.

I heard that they managed to save their necks and that she and Ančka have become the commandant and the commissar of their battalion. I don't know which one is the commandant and which the commissar. It doesn't matter. Was this something that headquarters decided in order to mock the men? She is alive, I have heard. I will talk to her when I see her. I have her brother with me.

The boy paces up and down by the fire, salutes invisible commandants and keeps repeating, "I have become a partisan. I have become a partisan."

The poor lad, he doesn't know what awaits him. But now he is proud. He can barely wait to tell his sister and brothers. Will he live long enough to do so? I don't know why, but I am more afraid for him than I am for myself.

Yesterday we attacked the castle where I had worked before the war. The Count's family had long left and it has been occupied by the Italians. The library in the castle burned down. I still have a few of the Count's books. He would always lend me books and debate with me. Every evening as I left he would send greetings to my family and console me that I would soon earn enough to travel across the sea and find my father. A funny kind of consolation but it always brought a few moments of solace.

The village priest had long conversations with Mother until she gave in. I was sent to school in Ljubljana, to the Saint Aloysius Seminary. I spent most of my nights crying and when I confided to a schoolmate that I had no intention of becoming a priest, I was sent back to the village in a hurry the very next day. To the village where poverty and mistrust rule. To the village you can only reach on foot, the village where every house hides a sad story. The village on the shady side of the hill. The village called Bogneča Vas. A village forsaken by God.

God. I have my own problems with God anyway. Until now, he has always betrayed me. So I set him aside. Forever.

He sat down next to me. I admired him. In fact, no... I respected him. He had returned from Spain. He knows what war is and he knows what civil war is. And he knows what it is like when brothers face each other on opposite sides. He knows all that, but he doesn't want to talk about Spain.

"Forget it," he says every time I ask him.

“Forget it.”

“I saw her,” he tells me. “But you will have to work hard at it. She has too many admirers.”

I felt like strangling him. He just grinned. He has a wife waiting for him in Ljubljana. And a child. How are they? Can he even sleep at night?

I will doze off. Here by the fire. When was the last time I felt warm? I cover the boy with a blanket. He is already fast asleep, clenching in his hand the cap with the red star. Goodnight! Nobody knows what tomorrow will bring. Peace. Silence. Fear.

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Marija joined the partisans in a red skirt.

“Are you nuts?” the Party Secretary shouted at her. “Anyone can spot you from miles away!”

Marija cried, “You are not my Secretary, anyway. I’m not a party member. And I was running away, fleeing. I watched from the hill how my home was burning. My brother, my sister, and me. We all ran in different directions. When we returned home, our mother and father were lying dead in front of the house. The three of us just ran. The red skirt. Mother sewed it for me, for the first day at school.”

We looked at each other. We need to get her to a safe place.

“I will sleep next to her tonight,” I said.

If anyone will sleep at night at all.

I look at Marija. She lived in the house next to ours. I envied her, I really did. And she knows that. I told her as much. A few months before the war started she and her family had returned from America. She had seen the sea. She travelled across the ocean by ship. The sea. When will I see the sea?

Marija is sobbing. I don’t know what to say to her. That I admired her father? I remember how we went to see him when the Italians and the Germans occupied the town. The German flag hung on the town hall for a while, then the Italian flag again. They kept changing it. The town was full of swastikas and the secondary school was converted to an Italian hospital. Only a few empty classrooms were left for us. The teacher of Italian and Geography came from some place in Tuscany. He kept telling us, “Children, forget about politics. Forget about it.”

He tried in vain to teach us some song about a chicken. It only had three verses. He despaired.

Then, on the first of December, when celebrating the Day of Yugoslav Unification was banned, we all stood up and honoured our former country that was still our motherland with a minute of silence. Even the youngest pupils, despite being ordered at school to not to do so. We were sent home and the condition set for our return was that we become

members of the Fascist youth organisation GIL. We went to see Marija's father. He listened to us, stayed silent for a long time, observing us. Then he said,

"You need to decide for yourselves."

Our school was taken over by the police. And we dispersed all over the place. And he is now dead. What can I say to Marija? That she has me? Not much solace.

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I think winter is over. Things have been strangely calm recently. The farmers in the village gave us Easter eggs, roast ham and potica.

"We've had all the food blessed," they assured us.

We washed in the stream, had our hair cut, shaved, and got enough sleep for the first time in a long while.

"Tanks are approaching the River Kolpa!" a boy running from the village is shouting.

He is waving his hands. His sister was in my class at school. A few of us climb to the top of the hill. Tanks, lorries full of armed soldiers, jeeps, motorbikes. Last night we destroyed the bridge. Something is moving in the water.

"They are our fighters," the machine gun operator says.

I take the binoculars. People on horses are trying to cross the river. A bearded man lets go of his horse to help one of the soldiers who is drowning. They are indeed our people and the river is treacherous. Then I see her. She is talking to the horse, persuading it, stroking it, pulling it along. She's mad. She collapses onto the river bank. We run down to help them.

"Comrade, take my blanket," I say and wrap it around her.

"I couldn't save it. I couldn't," she whispers.

Her lips are blue. "It saved my life so many times."

"It was just a horse," I console her, knowing full well what a horse means in times like this. I would give my life for mine. My life for a horse. I hold her close.

Things are calm, calm. She lies there by the fire. Her brother is clinging to her. He does not let go. He tells her about his acts of bravery and she sleeps.

And Marija? Desperate, she is talking about her red skirt. The water had carried it away.

"Mother, my mother," she keeps saying. "Mother made it for me. The water has carried it away."

We won't tell her yet that her brother managed to escape but that her sister was caught by the Germans. They shot her right there, by the well in the vineyard. If this war is ever over, I will buy her a new red skirt.

