



The Cats in Krasinski Square

The cats come from the cracks in the Wall, the dark corners, the openings in the rubble.

They know I can offer only a gentle hand, a tender voice.

They have no choice but to come.

They belonged once to someone.

They slept on sofa cushions and ate from crystal dishes.

They purred, furrowing the chests, nuzzling the chins of their beloveds.

Now they have no one to kiss their velvet heads. I whisper, "I have no food to spare."

The cats don't care.

I can keep my fistful of bread, my watery soup, my potato, so much more than my friend Michal gets behind the Wall of the Ghetto.

The cats don't need me feeding them.

They get by nicely on mice.

I look like any child playing with cats in the daylight in Warsaw, my Jewish armband burned with the rags I wore when I escaped the Ghetto.

I wear my Polish look, I walk my Polish walk.

Polish words float from my lips and I am almost safe, almost invisible, moving through Krasinski Square past the dizzy girls riding the merry-go-round.

My brave sister, Mira, all that is left of our family, my brave sister tells me the plan, the newest plan to smuggle food inside the Ghetto.

Her friends will come on the train, carrying satchels filled not with clothes or books, but bread, groats, and sugar.

I know the openings in the Wall.

The cats have taught me.

I show Mira on a map her friend Arik has drawn.

"Every crack will be filled with food," Mira says, bringing our thin soup to simmer on the ring.

I ask to smuggle the bread through the spot near Krasinski Square where Michal lives on the other side of the Wall.

Mira knows the danger, but she nods.

I fall back onto the mattress and the big room dances with light.

But on the day, when the train is already rolling toward Warsaw, Arik, breathless, bursts into our room and says the *Gestapo* knows of the train and the satchels, and they'll be waiting at the station with their dogs to sniff out the smugglers.

The look that passes between Arik and Mira frightens me more than a knock on the door in the night.

I cannot remain inside.

Instead, I wear my Polish look, I walk my Polish walk.

Polish words float from my lips as I move through Krasinski Square, singing a nonsense song.

The cats come from the cracks in the Wall, the dark corners, the openings in the rubble.

And I know what we must do.



We gather the cats, one by one, Mira and Arik, Henryk and Marek, Hanna and Anna, Tosia and Stasia, we gather the cats into baskets and head to the station, where we spread out, waiting for the train, behind the Gestapo and their straining, snarling dogs.

Suddenly steam and the scream of the whistle.

The train pulls in, passengers stream off.

The dogs are set loose, their sharp barks echo through the station.

They fly toward the men and women, the girls and boys with the strong scent of bread, groats, and sugar about them.

But before the dogs can reach their prey, we open our baskets and let the cats loose.

The station explodes into chaos as frenzied dogs turn their wild hunger on the cats, who flee in every direction, slipping through cracks, into dark corners, between openings.

The smuggled food vanishes from the station, vanishes from our side of Warsaw, through the Wall, over the Wall, under the Wall, into the Ghetto.

Including my basket, with a loaf of bread for Michal, taken by grateful hands.



And the music from the merry-go-round floats in the air, rising, tinsel-bright, above Krasinski Square.

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