

I am the Sphinx

By Maggie Butt

*Based on a true story, told by a prisoner of
Straflager E166.*

Snakeskin 2008



A doorway is a hopeless hiding place
and the sweet smell of love
like aniseed to tracker dogs
who growl and snap our feet.
Blacked-out tenements crowd
this labyrinth of unfamiliar streets,
too dark to see the scuffling rats.
Night in this town of sounds:
our two sets of running feet,
the panting of our breath
barking dogs and hunters yells
echo off buildings, closing for the kill.
Shivering listeners cower behind each window
and their prayers fail to cloak us.

We squeeze each other's hands
Bill says, "I love you,"
but capture's searchlight blinds my face
and my reply is prisoned.
I clamp my chattering teeth and
trembling finds new home in my knees.
German voices ring behind the light
- disembodied shout, "Against the wall!"
I lean to stop myself from falling,
a loose-stringed puppet.
I will not sob. It will not end this way.

I cough my voice down low to give
false rank and serial number
deforming my Czech vowels.

Marching to the prison camp
I keep my eyes fixed far ahead.
As men piss against trees
steam rising in the chilly air
I sew my bladder tight.
The camp wall's wire looks flimsy
inadequate, until I see the guns.
I bite my tongue, hope "Hail Mary"
will contain the fear, prevent it
bubbling, hot-spring, from my lips.
Words swirl within my head
trapped blizzard in a snow-globe.

The British officer, as young as us,
conducts a tour which includes the latrines
"Not quite the Ritz," says Ralph
but I am overjoyed, long hours undammed,
the sweet relief!
Ralph says, "At night we leave
our trousers and our boots in here."
Bill asks, "What do we wear?"
"Pyjamas, if you've got them

or your birthday suit."
I clamp my teeth together.
My mouth is clogged with sand.
I am the sphinx.
Bill now speaks my words,
"Sir, Sergeant Smith here...
is my wife."

Ralph sets a bunkhouse sentry,
says the words, "We have a woman
in the camp." A cheer vibrates the roof,
whistles, "Me first," stamping,
"Will she do us all?" Ralph bangs
his tin mug, "That's enough of that,
she's our new inmate's wife,
and under our protection."
Bill says: "She helped me to escape
- bridge building - in her village."
Pale English prisoner in my man-less world
snatched daily glances, whispered plans
the lazy guard deaf-drunk on spirit
distilled from mother's plums.
"We found a priest to marry us
and have been walking for ten nights."
Ten days of bliss and fear
in haystacks, stables, barns,

adventure beyond boredest dreams.
Rich cream turned sour over night.

Ralph coughs, "We'll need some small pyjamas."
A wiry Scot climbs down from the bunk
where he's lain prone. Men mutter
as he presents striped cotton. "They're none
too clean," he says, "I was nae expecting
visitors." He turns, "And bye-the-bye
I'll kill the man who messes with the lassie;
he wouldnae be my first." They nod
knowing about the Glasgow razor gang.
I don't, but hug the smell-soaked, stiff
pyjamas, rough cloak of invisibility
and my trousseau.

Dusk roll-call whistle sounds outside the hut,
Ralph nods, "Diversion" to the Scot
who lines up close behind me, Bill in front.
The guard yawns at his routine search
wild terror pulses through my veins.
Once times six is six. I will not faint.
Two times six is twelve. Look him in the eye.
Three times six is eighteen. Searching Bill,
his hunger-skinny arms and chest.
Four times six is twenty-four. German hands

pat my legs, hips,... Scotty calls,
"Fat arsed German pansy. Going to lose the war.
Like you did before." The sentry freezes.
Joyful, derisive chorus in the line.
"Going to lose the war, like you did before!"
Five times six, he's gone. I could smell his breath
beer and cigarettes and garlic sausage.
I march now. Out into the air. Deep breaths.
Left. Right.

In the wash room, men are singing
"Roll me over, in the clover, roll me over
lay me down and do it again."
Their eyes are curious, hungry,
tension prickles air -- suppressed desire.
Bill stays close, Ralph and Scotty watchful.
Men try for modesty, and I avert my eyes.
The girl I was ten days ago still shocked
by men's close naked bodies, smell of sweat,
but terror-of-discovery's a giant
whose shadow shrinks all other fear.

Bill cuts my hair. Short back and sides.
I know it's necessary, but oh so cruel.
I hate it, hate it, hate it. In another life
I would throw myself on my bed and weep.

I glance in the broken mirror where they shave.
It should make me feel safe to look so ugly,
but I raise my eyes to Bill's and see what?
Can love be lost with a few locks of hair?
I run my fingers through the bristly spikes
and will it to sprout back.

In dank latrine I pull on stained pyjamas,
tighten the binding round my breasts.
We file barefoot from the washroom.
I see the thin legs of the man in front,
pants hang off scrawny naked buttocks.
I stare beyond the German guard,
pass, with a panic-rush, form fists,
and concentrate on nails piercing palms.
A tiny stone embeds between my toes.
I try to think of that.
Our daily meal's thin soup and bread,
which some devour ravenously
but others eke out crumb by crumb
watched by wolves.
Before lights-out they show an apple tub
which serves as night urinal for us all.
Bill whispers, "I can help you, if need be,"
judging the difficulties of its size and height.

Ralph says, "She'll take her turn to scrub it out."
No gallant favours to expose me.
The bunk house slowly settles till
I tune into Bill's breathing, irregular below,
the whole bunk rocks and creaks as he turns
and I caress the movement;
my new wife's body longs for his
cold in my scratchy blanket
my rash girl's heart cries out for home.
I hope I won't have to wee in the night.
When I was little and I crouched
I always splashed my shoes.
Red shoes. Shiny. With small bows.

At dawn we are route-marched to work.
We quarry rock as punishment.
Ralph says, "I've lost three stones this year,"
weighing himself where they weigh rock.
We seem a crowd of sickly schoolboys
gangly, playing at prisoners, but
for the depth of age within our eyes.
The quarry is a bowl of noise
shouts, trucks, explosions,
chipping of pickaxes as great stones
are released from cliff by sweat and muscle.
Two men donate spare foot-rags

to wrap my hands against the shovel.
But still the blisters raise, and burst
and bleed and I am thirsty and my muscles
ache, for all I tell myself I'm young and strong.
The day is never ending and Bill's face
pinched with self-reproach at this, my honeymoon.

At night I dream of home, and wake wet-faced.
The note I left my mother burns my mind
propped against the blue milk jug
I see my pencilled writing, neat, defiant,
the words I failed to speak: elope and love.
I dare not see her face, but picture
roughened hands and broken nails,
careless letter clutched to faded apron
my sisters fluttering to comfort,
failing to console. I want my Mama,
ache to stroke her hair.

This will be the shape of days and nights:
working through exhaustion to a place beyond,
twice daily searches, terror like a second skin.
Watching Bill's excited movements when he talks
of pork pies, roly poly, spotted dick
longing to kiss his blonde eyelashes, skinny frame.
The need for complete silence is the worst,

swallowing words like unchewed food.
Not just the speech starvation, but a dread
I will emit some small instinctive noise
a cough or sneeze pitched way too high
to be a man's, and give us all away. And
all the while my thoughts run with the conversations
I cannot, must not hold, until I fear they will
burst from the prison of my lips.
I picture my teeth wired together
and my tongue lying leaden in my mouth
to prevent the words escaping.

And in the quarry under guards' keen eyes,
the men share my load, trusting
my silence with all their secret heart.
Ralph was at Oxford, studying classics
and he longs for his books and friends
"To walk all day - imagine that - no-one
to say which way, or when to stop."
He is the one who never mentions girls,
except his sisters, mother and her cat.
Scotty's accent jars and rips the words, but
"I'm on the run," he burrs, "I killed
my sister's bastard of a husband."
He feared jail more than death in war.
"I've done my time here, prisoner three years."

The overcrowded tenement or cell
are all that wait for him. Ralph says
before I came, Scotty lay face-to-wall
summoning death. "Imprisonment
and empty dreams can do that to a man."
And dear Bill talks of railway cottages
allotments raining feasts of plenty,
"I'll grow our vegetables," he shines, "and never
let you and our family go hungry."
Strange friends these three,
a gangster, student and a railway clerk.
No peace-time trinity.

Each night my silent thank-you prayers
for one more day alive with Bill, but
echoes of the quarry are our lullaby
ringing in my ears, the sound of sweat.
I am re-virgined, chaste as moon
trapped in a cube of silence
bedded by loneliness, sleeping half a sleep.
I wake each morning with terror
sitting on my chest,
a hairy beast with teeth and claws
and evil breath. It sucks the life from me
it whispers 'parting,' 'rape' and 'death.'
I see Bill hears its snarling too

but grins, "Chin up!" and winks.
I concentrate to shrink the monster,
crushing and folding till it fits
within a metal box and turn the key.

I watch the waxing moon and wonder
how I can ask, what I could say,
chalk-lipped, dust-tongued.
Last time it was a quarter, just before
the escape and our wedding, and now
a new sliver of moon whispers it is near.
What is the English word for blood?
Do English men know of such things?
I almost cry when shyly Bill hands me
a neat pile of cut-up strips of rag,
his face, half shamed, half pleased
the first gift he has given me,
donations from the whole bunk house.
I bless the saints that Ralph had sisters.

Long after lights out, when the camp is still
the crystal radio crackles out of hiding.
A powdered milk tin, homely on the table
has a false base, where communication
hides. The men take turns to listen
based on their dates of capture or their birthdays.

They offer me, politely, but I shake my head,
fearing I wouldn't understand enough.
The news is good, the Allies' slow advance
should bring them to us within months.

The need to speak and to be heard
grows, like a baby's need for milk.
and I could wail at full lung power.
I tell myself stories; spin them out,
word by precious word till I can smell
the gingerbread house and the fetid breath
of the wolf. I am bewitched, somnambule speech
the sleeping beauty in a spell, Snow white
in her glass coffin. Sometimes I try
the stories to myself in English,
picturing eager children, blonde as Bill.
But I don't know the words for stepmother
or witch or woodcutter or axe.
It could be worse, I tell myself, I am
alive and I can scarcely dream
how time drips past in 'solitary'
days measured out in breathing.
Or worse still, the rumours
which drift like smoke from Poland.
I concentrate on listening, to improve my English,

I memorise the words as they play cards
"You cheat!" "Hard luck!"
but it's too fast and I can't say, "Stop please
what means this Mufti, twiddling, or bollocks?"
How will it sound when I take tea with English ladies
and speak like soldiers in a barrack room?
When I was a girl my mother said
I chattered like a magpie
even in my sleep, as if I knew one day
the words would all be stopped,
wine corked up in a bottle.

I wonder how my voice will sound
when I can speak again. Will it be low and masculine
like voices circling round me every day?
Or like my mother's harassed tone,
"You think I like this drudgery,
that I don't want excitement too."
Or like sweet baritone of father's song
before he left to join the partisans.
For my own voice has flown,
a small dun bird lost in the camouflage
and this one speaking in my head
is full of all the others I have heard,
leaked into me, brim-full.

The older man among the guards,
the despised Kurt, begins to follow me
to touch my bottom as he passes by.
Ralph says, "You aren't the first."
My stoppered words turn waspish,
trapped beneath an up-turned jar;
frantic, buzzing for a chance to sting.
Kurt watches at lights-out, but we're prepared
and in the darkness Scotty takes my place.
We listen as the door sighs open and his boots
creak to the bunk. Then, crack! a well-aimed fist
connects with face, and fingers twist his balls.
He staggers from the hut and on parade next day
his eye is black, and he avoids my stare.
I have made a dangerous enemy.
But news of allied forces breathing near
makes guards more careful, picturing defeat.

Each month the Red Cross parcels come
for them (and blood for me)
and then I feel their pity. No letters
from my home, but on my bunk I find
small gifts, of cake and itchy socks
which I pretend my mother made
tokens of her forgiveness.
Within my silent chrysalis

I long to show her how I grow
cramped wings I'll beat against this crisp shell.

We shape our plans and when the last
Red Cross parcels come, by strength of will
against our salivating instincts
we stow some food. One morning
when we wake, the guards are gone
afraid, like me, of Russians.
The gates stand open and we are bemused
watchful in case it is a trap.
We gather up our blankets and supplies
and pass, breath-holding, through the fence
and off, north-east, like homing birds
towards the green and pleasant land
beyond burning Germany.

We trudge down past the quarry.
Scotty spits into the silent pit.
Ralph blesses memory of good men
who died. Our vigilance distracted,
we fail to see Kurt waiting,
gun trained on us, eyes glittering revenge.
Square fingers trace the memory of
his bruise. Kurt cocks his gun.
We freeze, no sound but one-another's

living breath. He advances slowly
wants to drink my fear.

Left-handedly he fumbles at his flies
and indicates to me to drop my trousers.
He keeps his gun trained on my chest
and tears spring to my eyes.
But movement – dark shape rushes –
a gunshot and I drop, face into mud
not sure if I am hit – scuffles, cursing,
I look up to see Kurt fall with Scotty.
Ralph wrests the gun while Bill
kneels on Kurt's back, twisting, cracking arm.

Yet when they haul Kurt up, a red
grin has been opened in his throat
by practised knife, as Scotty took the bullet
meant for me. And Ralph, in madness, shoots
into the lifeless German's face.
Bill grabs his arm, "Stop now – the noise –
and we might need those rounds."
We look away as Ralph, cheeks wet,
kisses Scotty's brow and covers up his face.

We have no tools to dig, so heap
a cairn of stones, for which his fingers bled.

Ralph's words are dammed as mine
so Bill says the Lord's Prayer. I take
Ralph's arm and guide his sightless
eyes towards tomorrow.

Four days we walk, ekeing out careful rations,
digging turnips from the fields, hiding from guns
of dead-eyed Aryans in retreat.
Our breath makes clouds in crisp dark air,
Each step one nearer longed for / alien life
of beds and breakfasts and newspapers.
We plod in silent-world where words
have lost the will to flow
stone-tongued like cooling lava.
At night we huddle, babes in wood,
Bill's arms around me on the frozen ground
tight like sorrow-joy around my heart.

The rumble of more trucks announce
troops of a different colour
accents like the movies, unreal
as warm beds and hot dinners.
We approach slowly, with our hands in air.
Bill shouts, "English, English prisoners,"
and they advance to meet us, overfed and huge.
Salutes and hearty handshakes and back-slaps.

Bill and Ralph give names and ranks
and as they turn to me, fresh words ascend
like uncaged larks, circling my head, rising to the blue.

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This story is dedicated to the memory of all the men imprisoned at
Straflager E166, and of one extraordinary woman.

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