

Night Hawks by Kelsey Binder

The silence that filled the New Jersey diner was the brand of silence that caused ringing in your ears. Erich Verräter sighed as he sat paralyzed on the wooden stool, unable to break his gaze from the dirty rag sitting on the other side of the bar. Deep contemplation consumed him, and the air hung stiffly around him. He was a prisoner to his own conscience; he probably could have adjusted to his haunting nightmares, but the guilt that constantly throbbed in the back of his mind was torture. *All it takes is some courage, Erich. Speak up. Be a man.*

Erich's head snapped around as the bell atop the door pierced the stillness of the room. Two young people noisily and clumsily stumbled inside, and Erich was filled with jealousy. *I remember being that ignorant.* The girl leaned up against the bar across from him and examined her nails. She had never felt the horror that he himself had experienced, and she probably would never have to. Erich eyes shifted over to the Jewish bartender, but he looked down almost immediately after making eye contact. *Does he know that his people are being buried alive? Shot for no reason? Trapped in gas chambers and left to suffocate?*

A judgmental glare from the man across the room made Erich realize that he had not even touched his coffee. It was probably cold by now, but he took a couple sips anyway; his several weeks of poor sleep was distorting his ability to rationalize his pending decision. After lying awake for several hours that night, Erich thought he had finally mustered up enough courage to visit the newspaper office and expose his country's evil deeds, but he had second-guessed himself at the last minute and come to this diner instead.

For the millionth time in weeks, Erich's thoughts floated to his time working at the extermination camp. He saw the horrified expression of an emaciated woman as he dragged her young nephew away. He smelt the leather of a pair boots as he flung them by the shoelaces into the growing pile. He saw the spit flying out of the mouths of his fellow officers as they ordered prisoners into line. Why had it taken him so much time to leave?

He remembered the day almost perfectly. Though his usual assignment was to inspect the prisoner barracks for forbidden items, he had been temporary relocated to gun squad number 6 due to an outbreak of influenza among the gunmen. He had been scheduled to begin on Thursday and had been dreading it all week. Could he really bring himself to pull the trigger on *innocent* human beings? Would he choke under the pressure? He wanted to honor his duties to his country, but he refused to become a monster. He hadn't even wanted to join the military in the first place, but he had been forced into the decision by his veteran father and grandfather.

He arrived to the yard a couple minutes before the rest of the officers on that Thursday and found the prisoners standing outside of the barracks, filled with terror. He brought his whistle up to his lips and blew into it nervously. "In line, now!" he yelled at the shivering skeletons before him.

They hurried with hunched backs into a rough line but kept their eyes locked to the ground. How was he expected to end the lives of each and every one of these people? They weren't much different than him, after all. Some had been doctors, some had been neighbors, some had been heavy sleepers. They all had a favorite food, and they had all been loved by someone. Erich noticed a little girl looking up at him as she held on tightly to her big brother's hand. She couldn't have been much older than his own daughter, Hazel. Her eyes weren't filled with fear like the rest of the prisoners, but instead Erich saw confusion. This little girl had no clue what was happening. She had no clue how cruel men could be.

Something broke inside of Erich in that moment. *I can't do this. I can't be responsible for the crimes of my party.* Erich stood frozen for what seemed like an eternity, gun in hand, and before he knew it, he was running. Running towards the gate and away from his obligations. *How many prisoners have wished to run out of here, just like this? How many people have dreamed of escaping this hell on earth?*

A few hours later, Erich was boarding a boat to London; from there, he would travel to America. This cruelty had been going on for far too long, and if anyone could expose the Nazis for who they really were, it was the Americans. They were fueled with hatred for the Axis Powers, and maybe Erich could find a journalism company to publish the story.

Erich snapped back to reality, and he was back in the New Jersey bar. The young people were still sitting on the other side of the restaurant, sharing drunken jokes and laughing foolishly. He thought about how lucky they were compared to the millions that were losing their lives on the other side of the world. *How many people could I save if I said something?* Erich decided that he couldn't put this decision off any longer. He would go now and share Germany's secret before any more innocent lives were lost. Determined, he stood up and smacked a dollar bill on the bar. The bell atop the door rang in Erich's wake as he rushed out of the diner.