

## **Finalist**

### **Hide**

#### **Anneke Hutt, Wellington East Girls' College**

Come inside. Hurry. You need to hide, Manni.

I knew They would come at some point. The house was too close to the main village for Them not to search it when They came on their rampages. Maybe I was praying for a miracle. Maybe I was being foolish, hoping the peace would last a little longer, hoping I could keep my little haven safe. I was sick of living in fear.

That morning I had put a poppy in a mug on the table, playing in a masquerade in which everything was fine. Pretending I lived in a world where people put flowers on tables. A blood red poppy, growing tall and defiant amongst the rubble. Tall and defiant like my father, before he was cut down, his blood spilling across the dusty path, the same copper shade.

Manni was playing outside in the dust with the dogs. She would tease them and chase them and giggle her little heart out. I leant against the door frame, drying the dishes, and watched her innocent play. She didn't know how special she was. I was intent on keeping it that way. I showed her how to cook, and where the rice was hidden in the cellar. We would play hide and seek, and I would show her the trap door under the couch that our father had built. She would always hide there, and I would never find her.

Hide, Manni. I'm counting.

When They came, I offered up no fight. I knew they had been searching for me. There was no point in fighting anymore. I was so tired of hiding. They beat me anyway, smacking me against the wooden bookshelves lined with books I had smuggled inside our home till the pain swallowed up my vision and I fell down, the metallic taste of blood the last thing I remembered before the blackness consumed me.

But They didn't find Manni.

Oh please, please, I hope They didn't find her.

I woke in the dust, in a strange camp, a stabbing pulse throbbing through my skull from the cut above my eye. They hauled me up, dizzyingly quickly, and took me into a tent and interrogated me for hours. They grilled me about my parents and their involvement in the resistance, demanded what my father had left behind before he ran out that fateful day, pressing me for where it was hidden. I spoke not a word, staring definitely at Them, daring Them to strike me. They did of course, beating me till I was bloody and bruised, but I spilled nothing but my blood. They would never know where it was, hidden under the trapdoor of my house.

When they realised I was of no use, they set me to work in the fields with other captives, breaking rocks, trying to break me. I can't recall much from that time; the sun made my mind fuzzy and numb to everything but the ache in my back and my arms and my legs.

It wasn't much of a camp. Stained swathes of cloth draped over sticks standing precariously in the hard red earth. There was the constant, gagging smell of human waste, flies everywhere. I gave up swatting them after a while. I was too weak. They fed us rock bread when They remembered. We drank water from the water troughs kept for the horses. I didn't bother learning anyone's name, they all died off or just disappeared. I think they just gave up. I refused to meet my end the same way.

At the end of every day I would sag behind the supply crates near the edges of the camp and suck dirt from the cuts and blisters on my palms, tenderly touching my new bruises. I learnt to spend my time hiding from Them, hoping they would forget about me and the interrogations. I also hid from the blistering sun, and the screams. Most of the women kept the men company throughout the day and night, out of desperation for food, or a break from the work, or because they got caught out in the open. Their cries kept me glued to my spot in the crates, heart pounding and eyes crying tears that couldn't leak out of my dehydrated body. I barely slept, just waiting for the time to tick by into the next day, and the next.

I occupied my mind with thoughts of Manni. Her memory kept me strong. How she would snuggle up to me in bed, curled up like a cat with her thumb in her mouth. Her red stained lips and teeth from the melting ice block in her hand when she came home from Auntie Mena's days before the first bloody rampage. Her silent sincere face as she stood over Mother and Father's hastily dug graves, eyebrows scrunched up with concern. I would dream of her emerging from the trap door and finding a friendly family who would take her in, or taking care of herself with the sack full of rice. I would have nightmares of Them searching the house after they took me. Of Them over-turning the couch. Spying the latch on the ground. Slowly creaking open the trapdoor. Seeing Manni's smiling face staring up at them. Of Them... I would always wake up bathed in sweat.

It had been weeks, months, years, I don't know, when the helicopters came to the camp. I lowered my rock and cracked open my eyes at the sky from my spot in the field, shielding them from the glare. One of the metal beasts flew into the sun, obscuring the light, my saviour coming down to rescue me. Their blades whipped up the dust into spinning clouds, and They ran for their guns, or flew into the open plain hoping to escape. I sat down heavily and watched as soldiers poured out of the helicopters like sweet water. A few of Them fired staccato shots, but the soldiers gunned Them down, sprays of crimson drops arching through the air.

I must have passed out. A warm hand, freckled, with smooth fingernails, landed on my left shoulder, and I woke from my temporary blackness, flinching subconsciously. Words I didn't understand flowed over my head. I couldn't even raise my head. I was so terribly tired. Take me home, I said. Take me to Manni.

The village was barren. A wasteland of rubble, and burnt out hollows of disfigured homes. I hobbled slowly down the main street, up the road to my house far from the village. It was still intact, and it gave me the smallest flutter of hope. The door hung partly open, and I gently pushed it and walked inside. Books were scattered on the floor, splattered with rusty brown spots that I hoped were my blood. A decomposing brown flower flopped in the mug on the table. I heard a rustle from the bedroom, and dared to dream.

Manni? I'm here.