

THE BOAT PEOPLE by Kathy Petrakis

My mum woke me in the middle of the night. I had just started dreaming. She pulled me by the elbow and whispered in my ear. "Monica, be quick. We're going on a secret adventure." Since the war, almost everything felt like it was done in secret, even buying food. Today felt like one of those days. Those days when mummy was scared.

She told me to wear my warmest clothes – the clothes she had bought me for my ninth birthday. I rubbed my eyes and looked at her. It was too hot for those clothes but as I was about to protest, she gave me that look and I stopped.

"Quickly", she pleaded and I knew something was wrong.

She inspected me like an army sergeant, making sure my pants were tucked into my 'rain' boots and I had put on everything right. I tugged at the collar around my neck and she tapped my hand away.

The sweat rolled down my face like a dripping tap. I desperately wanted out but my mum held her finger to her lips and when she looked at me, she seemed so sad, I knew I had to be a grown-up today. To help her like I helped in the sewing classes she ran. She clasped my hand and led me to the front door. She opened the door and peered outside before closing it abruptly.

"We must wait for the soldiers to go." I nodded. Soldiers were the bad people. It didn't matter which soldiers, we avoided them all. She opened the door again, just enough for her eyes to see the road and then yanked me outside and into the alley by our house.

"Walk quickly now Monica. We must hurry."

"Where are we going?"

"Later, later."

Almost running to keep pace, I couldn't argue but I was so warm in my jacket, I began to feel as if I was floating in my sweat as it gathered around my buttocks and neck.

"Hurry Monica, hurry."

The edge in her voice was scaring me. My mum was always so calm, even when she was scared.

We passed a legless beggar in the street who reached his arms out to us but we kept running on. I looked back at the beggar who started shouting "Traitor, traitor." My mum quickly slipped into another alley but didn't slow down her pace. What was the man talking about? Twenty metres away, I could see the harbor in front of us. I was never allowed to play there.

"Mum, are we going on a boat?"

"Shhhh"

Why was it all such a secret?

Across the road from the harbor, I could see soldiers everywhere.

“Monica, we need to play that game. Remember? Where you run to the ‘safety spot’ without being seen?”

I nodded, my stomach twisting with anxiety. I knew this wasn’t a game.

“See that red fishing boat over there with the tall man setting up his nets?” I nodded again. “I need you to get to his boat, without any of the soldiers seeing you. Can you do that?”

“Yes, Mummy but I have too much clothing on it’s too hard to hide.”

She looked at me for a moment. I thought she was going to cry.

“OK, give me your jacket. I will carry it.”

I peeled it off thankfully and gave it to my mum. I looked down at my shoes but didn’t want to push it.

I peered around the side of the building and watched the soldiers walking by, guns over their shoulders, talking to some of the fishermen, harassing the few people walking the streets, or just smoking lazily. I also noticed the street vendors setting up their stalls, ready for the early morning business. If I could get behind one of them and then the tree on the right, I could be able to make it by the boat without being seen.

I looked back at my mum to indicate I was ready to go. She hugged me tightly, her warm tears dripping on my shoulder. “Whatever happens, you do what the fisherman tells you to do. Did you hear me?”

“But what_”

“I will hide after you. But whatever happens, you keep going.”

“Mum no, I will wait for you.”

“No!” she hissed. “You must get on that boat. There may not be another chance.”

“I’m scared.”

“Be brave for mummy okay? I love you.”

She hugged me again and pushed me to go. This wasn’t fun. I was crying now too, making it harder for me to see ahead. But I was going to show mum how clever I could be. I wiped my tears with force and gritted my teeth. My mummy was going to be proud of me. I saw the soldier distracted and made the first sprint to the vendor. The vendor pretended he didn’t see me and I smiled gratefully at him. The next stop was the tree. I listened as the soldiers’ voices dimmed. The vendor tapped me lightly on the shoulder and I ran towards the tree but slipped before I got there, falling flat on my face.

I didn't breathe and prayed that I couldn't be seen. I counted to ten before I turned my head to see if I was safe to keep going when I felt my body being lifted like a package in a crane. I panicked. Being upside down, I couldn't see who had lifted me. Was it a soldier? Was I going to die? Before I knew the answer, I found myself behind the tree.

I turned to face a boy a few years older than myself.

"Stupid girl. Don't you know how to hide properly?"

"I slipped. I'm usually very good at this game."

"You almost got yourself killed." He peered around the tree. "Are you going on the boat?"

I kept silent. It was a secret.

"You're very late. More soldiers are coming and your mum is still behind the building."

"How do you know my mummy?"

"I saw you stupid."

He was getting on my nerves.

"Hey! Don't call--"

"Shhhh."

He covered my mouth and pulled me against the tree as soldiers' boots were heard nearby. One soldier came right past the tree with his torch, flashing the fishermen.

"Anyone see any traitors trying to sneak onto your boats?"

They all shook their head.

"Some of our children may have followed us down here," one fisherman offered lightly. "You know how kids are, they never listen."

The soldier stared at him.

"They are probably playing around the harbor, bothering the street vendors."

The soldier hesitated a moment longer before scanning the area briefly. Me and the boy slid down quietly to be as flat against the ground as possible. The soldier didn't see us and moved along, his gun resting calmly against his shoulder.

We both exhaled at the same time, unaware we were holding our breath.

"Move it. Go!"

"But my mum_"

“I will take care of her.”

Could I trust him? I wanted to know where my mum was.

“Go!”

I waited a second longer for the soldiers to be further away and raced to the fisherman with the red boat. *Now what?*

I crouched at his legs while he sorted his nets.

“What is it child?” he said without looking at me.

“My mummy told me to come to this boat.”

“Name?”

“Monica. Nguyen.”

“Where’s your mum?”

“Next to the building.”

“She might not make it.”

I gulped. *What was I going to do?*

“I need you to climb into the boat and make yourself as small as possible. No sound.”

I nodded.

“My mummy?”

“What did she tell you to do?”

“Get on the boat.”

“Well then, hurry up child or we’ll all be in trouble.”

I tried to see if my mum had followed me, but the boats were blocking my view. I didn’t want to go on this boat alone. I didn’t know where it was going. But I promised her I would be brave.

I climbed into the fishing boat to feel cold hands grab me and place me into the corner. “Shhhh.”

I could feel the boat swaying and bodies pressed against me. I really wanted my mummy.

Suddenly, a plastic tarp material was thrown over our heads and we were forced to stay with our heads low. I felt I was suffocating. I kept hitting into the people next to me as the boat swayed and we sat in total darkness. I wanted to cry. I wanted to go home.

Everyone kept quiet as the fisherman whistled, pretending to go about his day's work. I heard a splash in the water and hoped that was just his nets.

I don't know how much time had passed. All I knew was that I was cold and cramped from being in this position for so long. I opened my eyes to see the sun and water all around us. For the first time I could see the faces of those around me. There were elderly and children, mothers with their daughters, fathers holding their families together in their arms. Me, I was alone.

From nowhere, I saw my jacket being passed down the rows of people. *Mummy?* Standing at the point of the boat was the boy who helped me.

"Your mum sent it."

My heart sank.

"She didn't make it, but she might be on another boat."

I wanted to burst into tears and beg them to take me back. But I stared at the boy defiantly and lifted my chin up. My mummy's just on another boat. It was going to be okay. I won't cry. I will be brave and make mummy proud when I see her again.