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This Story is Not a Monument

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Author Bio

Rhiannon Winner is a Political Science major with a double minor in Peace & Justice and Middle Eastern & Islamic Studies. At Gettysburg, she volunteers, makes killer salads at Ike's, and attends meetings for the myriad clubs she is a part of. In her free time, you can find her working on her novel or chasing after people to pet their dogs.

This Story Is Not a Monument

In the hull of a trembling trawler, Oscar and Anna sat with their fingers threaded together. They whispered in unison the words to a prayer neither had believed before right then.

The water seeping through the planks above them wetted their upturned faces, making it easy to pretend that neither of them was really crying. Anna slid her hand out of Oscar's so that she could cradle her stomach.

"I wanted them to grow up like us," Oscar sniffled, resting a hand on her belly.

"They will. I'll teach them all of my mother's recipes, and we'll tell them about our childhoods, and everything. They'll be just like us," Anna said.

"They won't be happy like we were. They'll never know the camp."

"I don't *want* them to know Westerbork."

"But it's where they belong. We were happier than we've ever been, we were close to your parents, and we spent so long on the nursery. It's what they deserve."

Anna shook her head. "They wouldn't want to share a home with so many people. Everyone was always coming and leaving, it smelled, everyone was dirty...God, who were we to think that was a good place to raise a child? Maybe this is for the best."

"For the best?" Oscar sputtered. "How could you say that? This isn't *fair*, we don't deserve this. They'll grow up thinking they're a refugee, not a—"

"Shh! Don't say it."

"I—I know." Oscar clamped down on his lip, shaking with a renewed vigor. It looked as if he might start sobbing, and Anna wasn't sure she could handle that.

"Hey," she said gently. "We might go back someday. If not to the camp, then home."

They both knew Anna didn't believe that, but he nodded nonetheless, pretending to be comforted. Oscar shoved his hand into his pocket and kneaded the wad of falsified papers there. The only thing that distracted him from the shuddering trawler was the thought of landing on American soil as William Woods. *William Woods, William Woods, William Woods*. He repeated the name over and over in his head, hoping that Oscar would become alien to him. But Oscar would always be Oscar at heart, and Oscar was not an American.

The trawler lurched dangerously toward the water, causing the bags at Oscar's feet to slide across the deck.

"We're going to die," he whimpered.

"No, we aren't. Go ask what's happening."

"Why can't you?"

Anna gestured to her stomach with a look of frustration.

He blanched. "Oh. Right."

Oscar staggered across the slanted deck, leaning against the wall for balance. He'd thought the relentless rocking of the ship was bad, but it was nothing compared to what awaited him on the main deck.

It took him awhile to figure out what was happening. The rain blinded him, and beyond the ship was a light so bright that he could make out nothing else. He seized the arm of a smuggler racing by him and cried, "What's happening?"

The man jerked his arm free and smoothed his sleeve where Oscar had rumbled it. He muttered something about ungratefulness, pulled his hood tighter over his head, and stomped off in the direction of the light.

Oscar tried asking a few other crew members, but none of them would answer him. Shivering but unwilling to return to Anna without an answer, he shuffled to the bow and squinted into the light.

The light was coming from a ship triple the size of the smuggler's. Oscar held up his hands to blot out what light he could, but wished he hadn't as soon as he'd identified the ship. *H14* was emblazoned on the side of the destroyer.

Oscar sprinted back to the hatch, slipping on the brine-soaked deck and cutting up his hands in his panic. He secured the latch behind him, but his bloodied fingers shook so violently it took four tries.

"You're soaked," Anna said as he staggered back to her side.

"I know," he replied, but his teeth chattered so hard that there was no way she understood him.

Anna took ahold of his hands when he collapsed beside her. She lifted them up so that he could see the blood dripping down them, but she didn't say anything. She looked up at him imploringly, which was somehow worse than if she'd chastised him for getting hurt.

"They're following us," he said.

"Can we get away?"

"I—I—well, they—"

"What kind of ships?" Anna snapped.

"Destroyers. Oh god, oh god, oh god, no. They can't." He curled over her belly, unable to manage any other words between sobs.

There was an awful screeching above them, but whether it was the ships scraping each other or the storm or the crew, neither of them could be sure. Anna let Oscar cry, oblivious to the blood he was smearing across her dress, but only for a time. She was planning their next move, and as he slowly lifted his head to ask why she wasn't crying too, Anna knew what she was going to do. It was in that moment that she decided their family would not die in the hull of a putrid trawler or whatever prison their pursuers wanted to cart them off to.

"Come on, now," she said, holding Oscar's shoulder for balance.

"Where are we going?" he blubbered.

"Would you rather we all die here or wherever they take us?"

"I don't want us to die."

"Well, you don't get a choice in that. But I want us to try to live, or at least to go together, on our own terms."

"I don't understand. Go where?"

"We'll take the lifeboat."

"No, God, no, we'll drown."

"I hear it's pleasant. More pleasant than other ways of dying, at least."

Oscar clasped his hands over his mouth and shook his head. He would not give up easily, but that much Anna had guessed. She was about to open her

mouth to argue when there was another horrible scrape above them.

"Do you hear that?" she hissed. "They're coming. We have to go now, Ozzy. You know we do. We'll pray and we'll swim if we have to, but we're going to do something. You can die here if you want, but this baby and I *will not*."

He hiccupped little sobs instead of responding, but didn't fight Anna when she nudged him toward the hatch. Oscar climbed up first so that he could help Anna ease onto the waterlogged deck.

They were both gasping, the fear and the storm and the exertion of heaving a pregnant woman up a ladder leaving them breathless. They were so distracted trying to breathe and keep their balance that it took them awhile to realize something was amiss. It struck them at the same time that there wasn't a man in sight, and there certainly hadn't been any down in the hold with them. Oscar paced the length of the deck to be sure, but no, they were really gone.

"They took the lifeboat!" he cried.

"So they did," Anna said, squinting into the light so that she could see her husband.

The light cast by the destroyer silhouetted Oscar, which somehow made him seem tiny. Pudgy, scruffy Oscar had never seemed so before. He looked so small, so helpless, as he turned in circles and yanked out his tangled hair in knots.

"Oscar!"

If he heard her above the roar of the storm, he gave no indication. He was still spinning around in despair, arms bowed over his head, performing some sick sort of ballet for their enemies. Anna would've asked Oscar if he wanted to jump, but the shame of watching him dance in the light of the destroyer was too great. In one swift motion, without daring to pause and second guess herself, Anna shoved Oscar overboard and dove into the water after him.

Oscar was almost drowning Anna, frantically grabbing at her shirt so that the waves didn't pull them apart.

"I'm here, I'm here," she said, leaving her no time to catch her breath before a wave swallowed them.

Under the water, for one fleeting moment, there was silence. Anna and Oscar and baby were together in the quiet and ice, but then they were caught in a trough and forced back into the air. Anna closed the few feet between her and Oscar so that they were caught in an embrace when the next wave crested upon them.

"You were right," she said in their native tongue as soon as they'd returned to the surface. "You said we were going to die, and we are."

There was another wave, another trough, before he sobbed, "I hope we drown before we freeze."

"I hope the little one stops kicking soon."

Oscar shook his head. "Pity us, not them. They won't feel anything."

"Won't they?"

"I only care about us."

"You know, we should name them now. Have a first birthday party."

"Okay."

It took a few more waves before Anna eventually said, "So what if it's a boy?"

"I like Peter—" Another wave. "Peter, or maybe Paul."

"Peter Paul has better ring to it than Paul Peter," she said.

"Yes."

"And what if it's a girl?"

"You pick this one," he said. Anna suspected he was only offering because he was so overcome with emotion that he could hardly speak.

They slipped beneath the waves half a dozen more times before Anna made up her mind. "We could name her after our mothers. Good, strong role models for a girl. Maria Elisabeth or Elisabeth Maria, do you think?"

"Elisabeth Maria. Then she could be baby Lizzy."

"Okay."

Anna laughed so hard that she ended up with a mouthful of seawater when the next wave hit. Oscar stared at her in disbelief at first, but soon, he was laughing too.

They were, in the vaguest sense, aware of the British destroyer searching the trawler and then scanning the waters for a lifeboat. But it was hard to be afraid when they were drunk on something and too cold to care.

"Peter Paul Refugee and Elisabeth Maria Refugee," Oscar said after awhile.

"What's that?"

"I'm just imaging what their life would be like if we'd made it to America. Would they have last names? Would they get to keep ours? I think they'd just be assigned new names, or maybe they'll just call them Refugee. That's the English word, isn't it?"

"Oh, Oscar, I don't want to die sad. Peter or Lizzy doesn't want to either."

"What's sad about dreaming?"

"Didn't dreaming get us here?" Anna was shivering so violently that she was surprised her words came out intelligibly.

"I suppose."

"You know," Anna said, her colorless lips pressed into a hard line, "We're good swimmers. I bet Peter or Lizzy would be too. If we all swim together, maybe we'll swim off the edge of the world. Or to America. But we'll swim until we find something."

"Or we could freeze here together."

"No. This is death, but swimming? Who knows what happens if we swim?"

So they swam. Taking breaks, sometimes overcome with fits of hysterical laughter, they seemed to go on for eternity. But every time Oscar shot a glance back over his shoulder, *H14* was still visible. In fact, Oscar was pretty sure his family died within sight of the destroyer. The unfairness of that was undoubtedly one of his last living thoughts: how his whole family had perished in the middle of an ocean for nothing. He wondered if there would someday be a glorious memorial or monument or something for the patriotic, upright Langs of Camp Westerbork. But Oscar doubted anyone would remember them outside of their families. There were men being shot, blown to bits for their cause—real heroes. Then there was Oscar, who'd just done paperwork and menial labor for his country because he believed in it. He probably believed in their mission more than any terrified, confused young boys on the front lines, but the strength of his conviction was meaningless. No man had ever gotten a monument for shutting up Jews in boxcars.