

The Patchwork Girl **by Esmé Iverson**

Hanover, Germany, 1939

“Tanya,” my mother calls, tapping her foot on the floorboards. “Tanya!” Tanya is not my name, but I know she’s calling for me. “Tanya!” She yells again, her voice reaching a new octave. I leave my book on my bed, rounding the corner in the hallway quietly.

“Yes, mama?”

“I can’t find the spoons.” I pull out a drawer. It rattles out slowly from its place in the counter.

“They’re always here, mama.” She selects a large wooden ladle, forgetting its proper use, turns back to her pot simmering on the stove. I turn around, and so does my mother. She looks alarmed, as if I wasn’t just talking to her.

“Katya! You startled me!” That’s a name I’m more accustomed to being called. “You should be minding your brothers, not moping around the kitchen. Go on, get! I’m irritated just looking at you!” I walk silently back, around the corner. My deflated demeanor shifts instantly as I see Lucas and Nikolai’s bright faces, smiling gaily up at me. I know, regardless of how mother feels, these two will always love me, as Tanya did.

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I can remember the day that Hugo Schneider met Katya Kruger for the first time, like it was yesterday. It was grey and cold, having just snowed. The little girl’s older brothers, Hans and Ernst, were about to throw her into the freezing cold Leine river. She was kicking and screaming, writhing like a snake. But Hugo, little Hugo, began to chuck stones and pebbles at them. He’d seen Katya struggling, seen her face, and felt something wonderful inside, something he wanted to feel again. Being quite small for his age, he had very good aim and surprising accuracy; he hit Katya only once. The boys dropped her and ran away. But it’s what

happened next that intrigued me even more, and triggered my thirst for knowledge about our patchwork girl.

“Are you going to thank me for saving you?” ventured Hugo.

“Are you going to say you’re sorry for hitting me?” replied Katya.

“No.”

“Then you’re only wasting my time.” Katya did not like boys; she believed they did not wash their hands. But who could blame her, she was only four. Hugo decided right then and there that he liked this girl. But who could blame him, he was only five. By now Katya was already walking away.

“Goodbye, *ziemlich*” said Hugo, using the German word for pretty. After he said it, he immediately regretted it. And rightfully so, because Katya slapped him on his cold, white cheek.

“*Hochnäsiges Schwein.*” Stuck up pig.

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Tanya was the only thing that bridged the gap between mother and I. She kept our cracked relationship from breaking. But now Tanya is gone, and mother’s love for me has shattered into a thousand pieces. Every day I try to pick up those fragments, to build something new. But they cut my fingers.

The Kruger family depended solely on the two oldest boys for income. Mrs. was not fit to be working, and Mr. was gone. The twins worked after school shifts at a factory nearby, supplying batteries for submarines. It was a sad day when they were conscripted. Ernst first, and Hans only a week later. Katya knew only too well, with Tanya nowhere to be found, she was the oldest, and needed to find a job, needed to find one fast. Many other girls her age were going to work in the factory, along with their mothers and sisters, so as the sun rose one cold morning in early March, Katya headed off to the factory. Her mother, either forgetting or not caring, had not made her breakfast. The young girl’s stomach moaned and complained, seeming to worsen with each step. On 5th street, Hugo met up with her, also having not eaten breakfast.

“Hello *ziemlich*,” said Hugo. This word annoyed Katya to no end. She never told him, but it reminded her of her father.

“Hello Hugo.” Despite the little feud they’d had that snowy morning so long ago, the two children had formed an unlikely, yet strong relationship.

“You seem sad, Katya. Is everything all right?”

“Well my brothers just left, remember?” Her tone was not exactly friendly. But Katya was in a situation that you couldn’t blame her for snapping.

“Yes, well, there’s something else, too. What’s bothering you *ziem-*”

“Don’t call me that!” This retort was followed by an awkward silence; they walked the next few steps without speaking. “Well, I have been having this dream. I’m floating above the ocean, and two pictures are playing just below the surface. One has my mother and all my brothers sitting around the table, eating. Then my mother starts crying. In the other, my father is embracing Tanya. But why would they be together? Maybe Tanya *is* dead.” Hugo did not reply; he didn’t really know what to say. How can you sympathize with something you’ve never experienced? The rest of the slow trudge to work was tight-lipped and silent.

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Is this what it’s like to be a mother? If it is, I’m never having kids. All day I work hard, come afternoon I watch my brothers. The only solace I find is with Hugo. He understands what I’m going through. Each morning I wake up exhausted and depressed, my mother only worsening the matter with an abundance of complaints and orders. I wish I never had to deal with her again.

As she walked with her friend, along old snow and cracked cobblestones, the cold fresh on their tongues and cheeks, Katya had a feeling of unease. It may have been the figure, clad in white and red, following her, footsteps muted and faint, only reaching her ears when she paused and listened hard. Or it could have been that her sliver of roast beef lunch had not been cooked properly. The footsteps became more prominent when Hugo split off, on 5th street, as usual. During this

time of day, it was usually quiet, the grown-ups still at work. Scared, she hid in an old shop, long since closed down. Peering through the broken glass of what used to be a window; Katya could only make out the most prominent features of the young woman passing outside. She knew undoubtedly it was Tanya.

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Often times I feel like a patchwork quilt. Every patch a new lie. I thought I knew my sister.

Katya was not a graceful girl. Of course she just had to trip over a can of paint. As luck would have it; the paint was dry, not further soiling her already caked boots. Nevertheless, Tanya heard it. Her head whipped around, blonde tresses catching the wind perfectly. She was so beautiful. Or she used to be. Passers-by used to think the girls were twins, but they looked far from that now. Tanya's face was hollow, seemingly older, worry lines prominent on her forehead.

"Katya?" queried Tanya. "Katya, what are you doing here?" she hissed, through gritted teeth. "Someone could see you." Her eyes darted furiously, checking every shadowy alleyway.

"I was taking a shortcut —", but her sister didn't let her finish. She pulled Katya by the arm, dragging her a few feet to a brown and beaten door, then up a few steps to another, opening into a tiny apartment flat. It was only large enough for a small kitchen, dining set, and a bed, big enough for two. And a cradle. Katya was at a loss for words. She opened her mouth, but only managed, "Oh my".

"You've been here the whole time? Do you have any idea how hard we looked for you?"

"I watch you walk home from school, every day."

"Tanya, we thought you were dead! Do you know how sad we've been?" Katya suddenly understood why so many people had been surprised when she told them Tanya was missing. It was because they'd seen her. "Can you come home now?"

“It’s not that simple, Katya. I’m married now.” She paused here, wondering if she should tell the next part. “I’m going to have a baby. Soon.” Katya was thunderstruck. She thought she’d been at a loss for words before, now she felt like someone had not only punched her in the gut, but pulled her lungs out. Tanya was about to say something more, when they heard footsteps coming up the stairs.

“Quick, under here.” Before she had time to react, she was shoved under the bed, and Tanya was arranged with some knitting. The door burst open, knocking the side of the wall. All she could see was two gigantic dirty boots, tracking mud all over the clean floor.

“How was work?”

The man only grunted.

“You smell like alcohol! No wonder you’re late!”

“You’d do well not to talk back to me.”

“Fritz, you didn’t even say anything.”

“I don’t have time for this.” His speech was slurred.

“Will you have time for this when the baby comes?” Katya could not see what was happening, but she knew only too well the sound of a tough hand slapping a soft cheek. He left.

“Does he always treat you like that?”

“Only when he drinks. He can be so sweet and caring. But when he goes to the bar, he’s a different person.” Her hand went to her head, and Katya saw just how sick her sister was. There was no color in her face and her eyelids fluttered like butterflies.

“Are you okay? Tanya, look at me!” She was gone, unconscious. Had it been in other circumstances, Katya would have wondered how her sister managed to

faint so gracefully. However she was halfway down the stairs, headed for her mother.

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“Mama, come quick! It’s Tanya!” Mrs. Kruger hoisted Lucas over her shoulder and grabbed Nikolai by the arm. All three took off running, Katya leading her way to the apartment. Only when they reached Tanya’s bedside did they stop to breathe, sucking in air like vacuums, some of them crying. They were quickly shushed, though; Tanya was in a lot of pain.

“What’s happening, mama?”

“Taya okay, mama?”

“She’s having a baby, smart one!”

Like any good big sister, Katya knew what to do for her brothers.

“Boys. You know when mama has a headache and needs you to be very quiet?”

Well, right now Tanya has a bit of a stomach ache, so we need to keep our voices down.”

“I hungry, Kaya.”

“Of course you are.”

I can only assume it was difficult for Katya, as she cut thin slices of bread and smeared them with butter, listening to Tanya’s screams and trying to keep her brothers quiet. Worth it, though? It was. Late into the night, as the young people slept, a softer cry could be heard. Cries of new lungs and first breath. Swaddled in a blanket, the little baby slept peacefully. Katya joined her sister, never more beautiful than the first time she held her son. The moment didn’t last long before father stepped over the threshold.

“What is this, Tanya? I go out and you have a party?” Drunken anger was visible in the way he walked. His wife’s face filled with rage, adrenaline pulsing through her where seconds before, she’d had no strength.

“I didn’t have a party, I had baby! *Your* baby! I deserve better. Let’s see how you do without me to lean on! How long you last before you drink yourself out of house and home!” And she left him. She never looked back. She limped, stopping every few feet, all the way home. Her *real* home.

Our family used to be a warm blanket. But every time someone left, a piece was ripped away. We’re trying to sew ourselves back together, and it’s hard, but now were a quilt, and warmer than ever.