

Silent Night



A Short Story By

TOM PALMER

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by Tom Palmer

It was the coldest winter in living memory. So cold, in fact, that when I noticed two people breaking into a building that night, I thought my chattering teeth might give me away as I watched. I bit hard into my greatcoat collar to keep myself silent and hid behind some low bushes.

The pair – a girl and a man – did not see me, so I decided to wait to work out exactly what they were doing before I took action. I touched the pistol that was strapped to my hip to check it was there.

Who were they? What were they doing here?

You might ask the same question of me. I was a soldier back then in '44. In the German army. On patrol in the old part of a Dutch village and looking out for suspicious behaviour.

It seemed I had found some.

Everything around me was ice. Hard, bright, cold ice covering the ground. And although the world was at war, the scene appeared almost as if it was happening on top of a Christmas cake my mother might have iced and decorated with a scene when I was a child.



“The children will feel safe if you bring them here, Edda,” I heard the man say. ‘I’ll wait.’

The girl nodded. I studied her. She was thin. So thin. As was the man, in fact.

“You are so brave,” the man went on. “Thank you for this. Now go. Let’s give the children at least one thing to enjoy this Christmas.”

The girl nodded again, then cycled off into the dark.

I let her go without challenging her. I was intrigued. I wanted to know what was going on. I turned to study the man, now inside the building, as he began to open boxes of what looked like toys and games. So that was what the children would enjoy. Or would have enjoyed... if I was not here to stop them.

And why would I stop them? Because I had recognised the man immediately. He was the local doctor and suspected resistance leader. Visser ’t Hooft was his name. And he was stealing what was now German property.

This was my chance to capture one of the local people who had done so much damage to our occupation of the Netherlands. I would be a hero. I might even get a medal.



Yes, it was my chance. But I would wait longer. Observe what happened before taking action. It was clear that he was here to steal back a hoard of toys that the German army had taken ourselves from a local Dutch toy shop. I would be patient. See who else was involved. Then I really might get a medal.

A few minutes passed before the girl arrived with a cluster of children. You could not miss that they were thin, too. Thin and shivering. But eager. Seeing such excitement caused my eyes to prickle because I was reminded of the Christmas excitement of my own daughter, Gretel, and son, Hans, back home in the fatherland.

How long was it since I had seen them? Were they safe? Would they have anything of a Christmas at all? Was our house still standing?

My heart ached suddenly. For my children. And, just a little, for these foreign children too.

Now more children came. These with mothers. Children who had endured five years of war. Tanks on their streets. Skies filled with missiles, explosions. Having barely enough food to live on. Seeing people freezing to death in front of them, even. I knew all this. There was no hiding from war. They had seen it all. Its horrible truth.



But, even under such harsh conditions, these children were laughing and smiling, embracing each other as the girl, Edda, handed out toys.

It was as if the war had paused for them. For me, also. But, still, I had to stop this. It was my duty. I stood and put my hand onto my pistol.

And then it began to snow.

Huge flakes of white drifting slow and gentle to the ground. That soft peaceful silence we all love at this time of year. Or we used to. And I thought I heard the sound of people singing *Silent Night* in the distance, through the snow. Though it may just have been a memory. A dream, even.

I heard a collective gasp from the children. It was like magic. As if they were inside a Christmas snow globe and not in a town ravaged by war. A snow globe like the one I had given my children that Christmas before the war began.

My Gretel. My Hans. How I missed my children!

Then – suddenly – two soldiers coming out of the flurries, both lifting their rifles off their shoulders, both smiling, excited, like hunters in the forests finding their prey. They were young. So young. Now the German army was sending children to help men like me occupy this frozen Dutch village.



I had no choice. I had seconds. I moved suddenly to stand between the young soldiers and the children. Both aimed their rifles at me. Would they shoot? They might. First me, then maybe the children, maybe. Certainly the girl and the man.

Rapidly I flicked my greatcoat open to show them my grey uniform. My Iron Cross.

They lowered their guns, saluted.

“Forget this silly man and a load of children,” I whispered, thinking quickly, saluting back, trying to conjure a lie to send them away, far away. “I have it in hand. But I have just seen two resistance men cycling south of the railway line. Go after them. That’s an order.”

After hesitating for half a second, studying me, the two young soldiers were running towards the railway line, slipping on the ice as the children had.

Now I withdrew into the shadows, my heart hammering hard, holding my breath as I watched the children leave one by one, toys in hand, smiles on faces. I felt my cold face break into a grin.

It was only when those young soldiers came that I understood why I was not confronting the man and the older girl, but just watching them. This was the closest thing to Christmas for me, too.



***Silent Night* is a story based on Tom Palmer's new historical fiction children's book, *Resist*, about the childhood of Audrey Hepburn in the Nazi-occupied Netherlands. This special extra story is based on an account of one of the many brave things Audrey, known then as Edda, really did to help the Dutch resistance during the war.**

Credit is due to Audrey's biographer – Robert Matzen – for his work uncovering these stories and to James Innerdale for his illustration. Cover : Tom Clohosy Cole

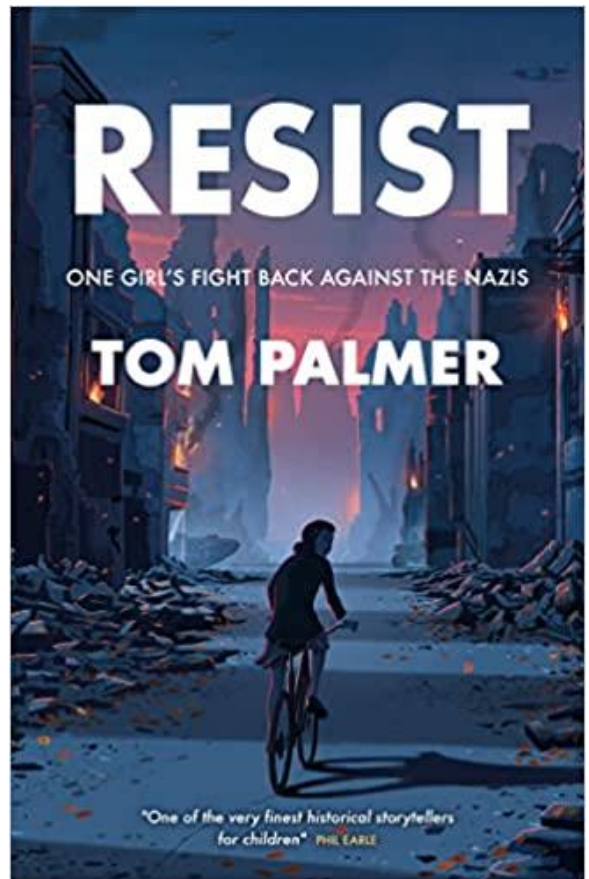
***Resist* by Tom Palmer is available from your local bookshop or online bookseller. Signed and personalised copies from www.thethoughtfulspotbooks.com/tom-palmer/books**

Visit www.tompalmer.co.uk/resist/ for more FREE classroom resources to support *Resist* including playscript, films, colouring, map activity and cover prediction worksheets.



***Resist* by Tom Palmer shines a light on the incredible work of the Dutch Resistance, in a story inspired by the childhood of Hollywood legend Audrey Hepburn.**

*“Fear...risk...courage...terror...
Deep hunger and tension during
WWII occupation. An edge of the
seat read”* **Teresa Cremin**



As the brutal Second World War stretches on with no end in sight, life for ordinary Dutch people in the Nazi-occupied Netherlands is fraught with peril and hardship.

After the murder of her uncle and the capture of her brother, Edda is determined to do anything she can to help the Dutch Resistance fight back. But what can a teenage girl do and how much risk is she willing to take?

*“It’s hard to read *Resist* without thinking of the war in Ukraine. The descriptions of hiding in cellars, the devastation and the starvation are vivid. Another gem for children’s historical fiction.”* **Dr Laura Ovenden**

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