

Bourne toWrite...

creative writing
workshops

Claustrophobia

by Sue Hitchcock

Maria woke with a start when the siren began to wail. She leapt out of bed, driven by adrenalin, thrust her feet into her boots and loaded on her heavy winter coat. She had heard the siren before on a practice run but this time, it was for real. Grabbing the bag, packed in readiness, she found the landing dark but crowded and the stairs blocked with her slow-moving neighbours. Just in front of her, Ekaterina was struggling, her baby in one arm and her three year old son hanging on the bannister with one hand, while holding tight to his mother. He could only descend one foot closing to the other on each step. Maria snatched him up and they progressed a little faster. At each landing Maria had to set him down and change arms, unaccustomed to his surprising weight.

The street was dark, apart from the sudden fire and deafening noise, too close, driving them with the crowd towards the underground shelter in the station.

Why did she used to complain when her alarm clock had called her away from the warm arms of her Konrad. All the men were gone now, training to use the weapons needed to fight the Russian invaders.

At the top of the steps descending below ground, an old fear returned, a lump in her throat, a sick feeling in her stomach. There was a reason why they had taken a top floor flat. She had an unreasonable fear of being underground. Was it imbued by her father, who had told her of the terror at being trapped by a rockfall, when he had worked in a mine as a young man?

“Ekaterina, I have to leave you. I have to find my mother.”

Maria's mother lived in a village a few miles from town, and was not likely to be bombed, but suddenly going there felt far preferable to burying herself with the crowd at the station, so deep underground.

The road was frozen and easy for her to get some speed up, but it was also on the trajectory of the missiles. Each whistling threat, exploding in the town and sometimes in the fields beside the road, throwing up clods of frozen earth. Maria's confidence in her decision began to fade, but going back would be as dangerous as going on. Maybe the bombing would end soon.

The closest explosion yet threw her off her feet and she knew she had to take cover. The ditch by the road was solid with ice, so she scrambled down and slithered onwards. A path crossed the ditch and a small, dark tunnel beneath it faced her. Now she had to decide. She could climb up to the road and risk the bombs or she could face her fear. Two eyes shone out at her from the dark tunnel, but she had never feared animals, even foxes who were more terrified than her by the noise and flashes. So recognising her animal fears, she assessed her claustrophobia to be stupid, when the tunnel offered her the same protection it gave the fox.

"Hello, fox. May I share your hideout?"