The First Two Pages: "None Shall Sleep" by Sylvia Maultash Warsh
From the Mesdames of Mayhem's *In the Key of 13* (Carrick Publishing)
An Essay by Sylvia Maultash Warsh

The challenge in the latest anthology by the Mesdames of Mesdames, *In the Key of 13,* was to write a story on a musical theme. My daughter was a vocal major who sang classical songs, some arias by Puccini, that gave me an appreciation for that music. I decided to use a Puccini opera as a backdrop—*Turandot,* with its cold Chinese princess who refuses ever to marry. The men who come seeking her hand are asked three riddles; if they can't answer, they are beheaded. The harsh punishment suited my story line.

I'd been walking around for a while with the germ of an idea for a story: a woman has been through a terrible ordeal, then years later, after moving far away and in the course of her new life, she comes across the person responsible for her suffering. I elected to work the musical theme into this idea, which I feel produced a more diverting story.

Once I had this plan, I still had to decide: who would be the protagonist, where would I set the story, and when. Arguably, the fiction writer's most important decision is the choice of protagonist. Since *Turandot* was going to be my musical theme, it made sense to use an opera singer as my main character. She is talented, but too trusting, therefore vulnerable.

The opening gives some backstory and introduces a pressing problem right away:

> Akmola, Kazakhstan, 1950
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> Galina's mistake was to tell her understudy at the Moscow Opera a stupid little joke. She whispered in the girl's ear: *When we are finally paid our wages, I will splurge and spend it all on a tin of herring.* Her understudy, recognizing the opportunity, relayed the conversation to the committee head, who informed the police. It turned out to be treason to imply that the government had not paid its artists in months, or that government-run stores were empty. Galina was sentenced to five years in a labor camp for anti-Soviet activity while the understudy was promoted to Galina's role.

After this, the reader understands that we're not dealing with a rational state but a totalitarian regime where there is no place for justice, loyalty, or even logic. Yes, jokes about the government were punishable offences. I read several memoirs written by women incarcerated in Stalin's camps to learn about their experiences, some of which I hoped to pass on to the reader.

And instead of working the name of the town and the date into the text, I decided to place the information in a line above the opening paragraph. I also hoped to lure the reader with the exotic place name.

In my first draft, Galina has a young daughter she brings to the camp. (In its heyday, Akmola was set up for mothers and children.) My idea was to make the daughter the point-of-view character in the second part that was set in 1979. But that complicated the story needlessly and added nothing to the drama. After writing the first five pages, I realized I was muddying the waters with an unnecessary

character and adhered to the dictum: don't use two characters when one will do. So I removed the daughter, after which the story rolled out more smoothly.

I tend toward historical fiction because, with the benefit of hindsight, I find the past easier to understand than the present, which is often incomprehensible. The present is such a small slice compared to the panorama of the past. I have written four books with Holocaust-related themes and wanted to try my hand at a different historical period. I settled on a labour camp in Stalin's Soviet Union in 1950, hoping the reader would be as curious as I was in this unnatural terrain.

To set the scene, I described Galina's dislocation to the remote camp:

> She traveled the nearly 2000 miles from Moscow in bitter November, four days by rail, sleeping on the crowded floor of a boxcar surrounded by women, then standing for three hours in an open truck. She was nearly frozen when she arrived at the camp near the village of Akmola in northern Kazakhstan.
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> All she could see was snow. It covered the barracks, the fields and the woods beyond, white under the gray brooding sky. Only barbed wire protruded through the snow; a guardhouse loomed above them.

In my research, I found there were hundreds of labor camps all over the Soviet Union, but the only one where women were sent was Akmola. (There's a small museum there today.) Though I write fiction, I'm fussy about my facts. I don't want a knowledgeable reader to put down my story because I got something wrong. I've done that myself, closed a book when I came across a factual error by a writer who hadn't bothered to look it up.

For the first sentence in the passage above, I had to find out: the distance between Moscow and Akmola; how long the journey took by train; where the train tracks stopped so I could calculate the duration of the subsequent truck ride; what kind of rail car they would have travelled in. I read about prisoners sleeping on the floor of a train car—they wouldn't have had the luxury of seats—so it gave me a picture of the scene which I tried to convey.

Physical descriptions of characters can easily fall into cliché, so I buried Galina's in a paragraph about the camp:

> Galina was assigned to a work detail with other women, sawing logs felled in the forest. She dragged herself back to the camp every evening, exhausted and hungry. She still had her good looks—shiny black hair, green eyes, clear skin—unlike the women who had been there for months and grown haggard from the labor and the cold. The male guards stared insolently at her.

What happens to Galina was a common occurrence in the camps, not the details, of course, but the abuse of women prisoners by overseers. I wanted this particular bureaucrat to stand out in the reader's mind. I often pick an actor as the physical basis for a character, their appearance as well as their personality. To characterize this man I chose Kevin Spacey:

> One day she was taken from the forest where she was working and brought before Nikolai Petrov, the director of special inspections for the province. He was of average height and weight with clipped mouse-brown hair receding from a high forehead. Unlike the rest of

him, his eyes were extraordinary. They wanted things. They devoured people, searching to find what use he could make of them.

He has her sing an aria from *Turandot,* approves of her performance, then tells her she will come sing for him every fortnight when his duties bring him to the camp.

"I appreciate the offer, sir, but I prefer to return to my friends at the barracks."

"I don't think you understand, Comrade. I am asking because I'm a gentleman, but if I want you to sing for me, you will sing."

"Of course, sir, only not—"

"And you will do whatever else I ask."

She still had some faith in the system, so she said, "I will report you to the commandant…"

His pale eyes darkened. He jumped up from his seat and came at her with a wooden stave in his hand.

I try to keep away from explicit violence in my writing and at first wasn't going to go down that road, but this "method of persuasion" was used in the camp and it felt dishonest to avoid it. It was also important to show the brutality of the character in order to make credible the events in the second part of the story.

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Born to Holocaust survivors, Sylvia Maultash Warsh is the author of the Dr. Rebecca Temple mysteries, one of which, *Find Me Again,* won an Edgar Award. Project Bookmark Canada chose her fourth novel, *The Queen of Unforgetting,* for a plaque installation. She has published a novella and many stories, two of which have been shortlisted for Arthur Ellis Awards and one for a Derringer. Sylvia lives in Toronto, Canada with her husband. She has two grown children and one granddaughter. She is working on an historical/ paranormal mystery set in 1840s Washington DC. She also teaches writing to seniors. Visit her website at www.sylviawarsh.com.