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The Girl with the Braid

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The Girl with the Braid // Molly Rossi

One day of our journey was foggier and rainier and more piercingly cold than the rest. This was the day we went to Auschwitz. As we walked among barracks, gas chambers, and crematoriums, the sun was nowhere to be seen. It was dark, and so bitterly cold that we huddled together for warmth, sharing umbrellas between every stop on our journey.

I felt the fog all around me, but it was within me as well. This constant feeling that something so huge was right in front of me, something I was failing to see no matter how close I came to reaching out and touching the overshadowing relics of the past that surrounded me. The past was so present, but for me it seemed to lay covered in fog.

In Room 5 of Block 4 at Auschwitz, there is a glass wall full of human hair. As you walk past it, it looms over you so massive and monstrous and inescapable that you can neither look away nor look directly towards it. This hair, cut from the heads of an estimated 140,000 victims after they were killed in the gas chambers, is only a fraction of the hair cut from the heads of the Jews at Auschwitz; the rest was sold in massive quantities to textile companies in Germany. In this room, I remember the sickening feeling in my stomach that began to develop as my fog started to fade away.

It was here, in the room of hair, when a moment came that I can never forget. On a smaller wall apart from the encasement of stolen hair, there was another glass window. Inside the window was a collection of braids cut from the heads of women. Lying among them was one long, thin, wispy blonde braid. 70 years old, but lying there so gruesomely perfect it looked as if it had just been cut. It stood out from the rest. Emotionally, it was like a knife, a piercing clarity through the fog.

The moment I saw that braid, all the shards of death that surrounded me became pieces of life. The girl to whom the hair belonged became someone; she became everyone. She was the

next-door neighbor I used to babysit, whose blonde locks sometimes turned green when we spent too much time in the pool. She was the quiet girl who sits next to me in history class, whose laugh always reminds me of the California sunshine from which she came. The girl with the blonde braid was one of my best friends, who loves Disney princesses even though we are almost 20, who takes care of her younger siblings like no one else, who sees right through me when I pretend to be okay, and always asks the question no one else is asking. The girl was everyone. She was the people I love and she was the person I hardly knew. The braid lying there so unattached was intertwined with everything.

I felt like I knew her name, and just couldn't remember it. She was more than a victim, she was a person, she was a woman, she had a life and a family and a job and a beautiful mane of blonde hair that she tied back into a long, thin braid before she boarded the train of death she had ridden to this desolate place.

I felt all of this in less than a moment. I didn't stare at that braid, I barely glanced at it. I looked and looked away within the same breath, stunned, overcome, and sick to my stomach with reality.

However brief my encounter with the braid was, the feeling didn't go away. I was pierced. In order to get through the rest of Auschwitz and the rest of our trip, I had to lock away the image, try to force it to a place deep within my mind. But it was always in my consciousness. The girl with the braid haunted me. She was everywhere I looked, every blonde streak in the crowd. My mind would get lost thinking of her, this girl with the braid, who was anyone and everyone all around me. I couldn't make sense of her. I couldn't let it go.

Even in moments of faith and hope, my search for her hung over me. I prayed about her a lot; I just kept praying for this woman I didn't know. I did not know where she came from, but when I looked at her hair, she had taken on a new life.

It wasn't that the magnitude of this event, the Holocaust, was any clearer than it had been before. Rather, it was the smallness of it that consumed me. I was haunted by the singularity of that braid. History, life, death, beauty and despair had expanded before my eyes. The braid, and the way it looked so freshly cut, had cut a gash in my heart. My empathy was so deepened that I didn't know what else to do but to bury it.

In a way, it felt like her story was the truth of a Holocaust. It is so enormous, like the 11 million who lost their lives. It is as vast as a wall of stolen hair, and an endless barrack filled with 900,000 pairs of stolen shoes. But it is also small, as tiny as a little red shoe in a children's size 6 that stands out among the mountain of gray, brown, and black ones. It is as little, as personal, as a wispy blond braid. But whether it was big, or whether it was small, it was all gone.

On the final night of our journey, we went to a synagogue in Warsaw. I was a little lost and confused because I had never been to Shabbat before. Fortunately, the kind lady next to me explained that I had been reading the prayer book backwards. It amazed me that even in the midst of unfamiliar ritual, I felt wholly welcome. This congregation was full of warmth and light. It felt like we had found a beacon of renewal in what had once been a city of death.

At one point in the service, the Rabbi called a girl up to the front who was to be married the next week. As she looked out at us, she was glowing with happiness, smiling at us as if she was among her closest family. She was so beautiful. Young and fresh and full of a life that lay ahead.

As she turned towards the Rabbi to embrace him, I glimpsed the long, thin, beautiful braid that was hanging down her back. It was blonde, unmistakable against her dark sweater.

And that's when I understood.

The girl with the braid was still here. I did not need to be haunted anymore; I did not need to keep searching for her. I no longer needed to try in vain to pin her to one face, one name, or one life.

Because it wasn't just about the loss. It wasn't just about the emptiness. It wasn't just about standing in the freezing rain and trying to feel a suffering that happened in a time and place that are so beyond what we can truly imagine.

It's about life too.

It's about the fact that here in a city where 97% of a thriving Jewish population had met a merciless death, that here, on the grounds of unimaginable suffering, I can walk into a Shabbat service in Warsaw, full of life and welcoming brightness, and I can worship God with a group of people that someone once mistakenly thought they could remove from this earth. I can shake Anna's hand as she walks out of the temple with her fiancé, and congratulate her on her marriage, on a life of happiness and love and hope and faith.

I don't know the face of the woman with the braid; I will never know her. She was stolen from us. But if we can think and we can feel and we can discover empathy for someone so far away and so faceless, her story is all but lost. Her story can live everywhere. So in some sense, I do know her. The girl with the braid is the face of hope. She is a story of renewal in a land of ashes. There is hope for Poland, there is hope in the face of death, and in the life of a braid, in the memory of the smallest things, there lies hope for us all.

Loose Gears // Olivia Anderson

Phoebe built a time machine, but there's a small glitch.
Phoebe built a time machine, but there's a small glitch. Phoebe
built a time machine, but there's a small glitch.