

2016 CREATIVE ARTS STUDENT CONTEST

MOTHERS AND FATHERS: STORIES OF LOVE AND LOSS

High School – Honorable Mention

“Wide-Rimmed Glasses” by Pooja Prabakaran of Marietta

Lassiter High School

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Cold, cold Adina shivered within the dark confinement of the rattling train, her body pressed tenderly against her two elder twin children, Esther and Naomi. Shut and penned in cattle cars without apertures, Adina's legs cramped and her slim frame of twenty-eight ached from standing for over twenty hours. Light, there was none but for slivers of tenacious moonbeams wriggling through the cracks to cast gloomy shadows; it was in these dusky shadows that Adina ever vigilantly minded her children as a lioness guards her cubs from unknown danger. Warm in Adina's embrace and wrapped in dirty shawls, Blessed Baby Adam proceeded on sucking his thumb contentedly.

Mama, when will we get there? asked Esther. But Adina, in response, only patted Esther's silky tresses.

Home was far, far away.

Papa had broken his promise, and so Naomi had cried three days earlier. Naomi, with her wide-rimmed glasses, soft nose, glossy black hair, wiry frame, and quiet strength resembled a miniature 9-year-old version of her mother, while Esther was glitter and glamour. Never afraid of anyone, like her father, she had bouncy golden curls, startling blue eyes, an outspoken voice, and many friends.

Papa had worked as a clerk in a German office, and he too had many German friends that were in *high places*. Their family was of Jewish name and descent, but with history of generations having assimilated into German society, the household did not actively practice Jewish tradition. So when the first signs of tangible danger to Jews arose, Papa had not been worried. *What was there to be worried about?* Yet in a few months, the neighbors stopped inviting them to dinners, Adina stitched Stars of David on their clothes, and previous friends regarded them with suspicion and disgust. The hostility mounted and one day Papa didn't come home with a paycheck. Papa told them not to worry, *the boss was just a cantankerous old fellow*, and the new addition to the family, Baby Adam, *would be proudly fussed over*. Despite the joy from ever optimistic Papa, and the glow of a household with a new blessing, Esther and Naomi noticed the sadness that would brush over Papa's face when he thought they weren't looking, smaller servings of food on the tables, and Adina's and Papa's echoes of hushed fights and tears after bedtime.

Then at the middle of the night, Papa woke up the household without turning on the lights. *Mama has packed your items, just put on several layers of clothes*, he whispered with scarcely concealed urgency. Esther asked if they were running away, which she thought was awfully daring and romantic, while Naomi stuffed her teddy bear under her blouse, tight against her rapidly beating heart. *Goodbye room, goodbye trophy, goodbye books, painting, puppet- Come!* Adina tugged Naomi and out went the family into the night.

A kind family friend, Ada, a round, jovial woman who always baked wonderful warm loafs of bread, offered to hide the family in the basement, but her hospitality could only extend for one more night, before her husband might change his mind and betray them.

Ada offered to adopt Baby Adam; she had desperately wanted a child for years, and Adam was a perfect candidate with blue eyes, fair skin, and a cherubic smile. Adina recoiled in shock, to think this woman, however generous her intentions, would tear her treasure of one week away? Yet her eyes began to prickle with tears only when Papa glanced at her with a tired but expectant look, pleading to accept. Despite knowing that a chance for a baby to survive the treacherous journey was slim, Adina could not bear, even if selfishly, to depart with Baby Adam. With a sigh of intent to discuss the matter later, Papa prepared to collect fake passports that he had arranged, and he kissed Baby Adam, Esther, Naomi, and Adina before setting out. *I promise I will be back in an hour*, he had guaranteed. But it was last time they saw him.

GEORGIA COMMISSION ON THE HOLOCAUST

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Adina's tired eyes had begun to droop when the train rolled onto a station. As the latch opened, the crowd in the cattle car throbbed and poured out, stumbling onto the wet pavement at the shrill pierce of a whistle. Adina held her children close, but when an officer spotted Baby Adam sleeping serenely in her arms, he motioned over a guard. The young guard, a man no more than twenty-three, plucked the shawls and baby out of her arms and briskly hurried away. Instantaneously, both Adina and Baby Adam let out a penetrating, guttural cry of pain as they both felt the immediate and visceral absence of comfort and love, and Adina threw herself after the guard's polished shoes. She slipped and fell, hitting her head on the heartless ground, and when she adjusted her glasses and threw her head towards the sky, she was greeted at gunpoint.

Back into the line, woman, a guard yelled.

In a frenzy of careless rage Adina attempted to run after her little child, but considerate women restrained her and whispered *The baby will be fine. Besides, there is nothing you can do.* Broken and sobbing, she stood with Esther and Naomi to enter a new chapter of her life of unimaginable despair and hope.

What would come to be known as the Holocaust, was a brutal, organized, and systematic elimination of many classifications of people. It was also an intricate machine of markedly ghoulish efficiency, record-keeping, and industry. However, that thought was one of the last that flit through Adina's traumatized mind as a prisoner in charge of shaving hair ran her fingers through Adina's unraveled cascading black hair. She remembered when she would pack Esther and Naomi's lunch boxes before school, and brush their hair before they rushed out to school. *You have to comb your hair, Esther,* she would scold, since Esther's pretty golden curls were especially susceptible to tangles. Now these remnants of pride and normality were stuffed into brown cloth bags, and their wrists were tattooed with consecutive black numbers.

Why numbers, Mama? it hurts, whimpered Naomi.

Perhaps because numbers take the human out of you.

As the weeks went on, the days blended into endless suffering and drudgery, of work, pain, numbness, and hunger. Esther lost her winsome smile, Naomi lost her insatiable curiosity, Adina lost her fresh youth, but none lost hope. Their hearts beat only on the fuel of hope when hunger should have killed, even when their bones jutted out like blades and their bodies slowly vaporized into air. Esther realized, *Mama is sick and needs a doctor* and Naomi unflinchingly slapped her. *Do you know what would happen if someone heard that? We would never see her again.* And so Adina continued on working as her pain turned to a dull ache and her deliriums turned into security and grand symphonies playing throughout the camp of Bach, Beethoven, Wagner, and Schumann, her favorite composers.

Within a few months, the adults knew of the deathly secrets of the gas chambers or "shower." The taste of death was all pervasive, from the breathing mounds of mass graves a few weeks old, the foul odors, the powdery rain of soot from the chambers, to the walking skeletons barely alive from all ranks and occupations of life.

The camp was a parched landscape, but just beyond the horizon was a picturesque scene of a field of flowers. Just before sunset when the sympathetic female guard would purposely turn a blind eye, Adina would catch a moment and show her children a world beyond the wires. *Beautiful, like a song, ya?* When it rained, the flowers shimmered, and when it was sunny, the flowers shone. She pointed. *We are like butterflies and flowers, you see, with strong roots. Pure and resolved, even in a muddy swamp, you can bloom.*

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As much as life departed from normal, the prisoners banded together with a sense of solidarity and responsibility. Their strength came in part from each other, and that made all the difference. At night, adults would hold secret lessons of mathematics, science, and writing for the children. Many tried to continue traditions by practicing it in secret and teaching their children. The day before Naomi and Esther's 10th birthday, Adina panicked. She had always prepared pastries and feasts for the whole neighborhood on special occasions, and now she felt as though she was becoming a disappointment. The sympathetic female guard in charge of Adina's section overheard Adina's plight, and without a word or a second glance, she slipped into Adina's palm an apple and a slice of cake, snuck from the Officer's lounge. Adina wanted to thank her, but never having the chance to speak, they never knew each other's name.

One day, Adina's wide-rimmed glasses were knocked off by a guard in a hurry.

Watch where you are going, he said, and then furiously, *Go on, what are you waiting for?*

So Adina limped away wondering how without her glasses she could look but not see, see but never saw. What now separated creation and destruction, black and white, potential and movement? The flowers were still there, but their brilliance was not to be seen. The cloudy sky, the muddy ground, the uniforms, the faces, were all gray. There was no right or wrong or an in between; no definite or indefinite, no clear details or resolution. Oh blessed ignorance, a shield, a memory! Suddenly, she felt a pang as she remembered Baby Adam and Papa. Then she remembered that she always remembered them, that the ache was a constant. In the distant background, there was a dull sound of frantic conversation.

Mama needs her glasses! She can't see, she won't survive for long!

I'll go fetch them.

No we will go.

No, I will go. You stay here and look after her.

Adina tried to say, *No I don't think I need them anymore. I can see now. It's clearer than ever.*

Then, Mama, Esther hasn't come back. It's been over 20 minutes.

Naomi took Adina's hand, squeezed tight, and traced their steps to the site. Straining to see, her feet dragged through the sticky, wet, slimy ground, a breathing yet lifeless miserable creature. Her mind raced and howled and played to its own song, *presto, vivacissimo*, quicker and quicker! Suddenly, there was a crackle and a shot in the air and a thwack of a body like a bird plunging into the muddy ground. Even with Adina's poor eyesight, it was distinct enough to see Esther, with a pair of wide-rimmed glasses clutched tight in her small, gentle hands. Adina's eyes became blurry with unshed tears until she saw both Naomi in Esther, and Esther in Naomi, and Papa in Esther, and Adam in Naomi, and all of the world she had ever known in the guard; then her eyes simmered until she could see no more.