

Hair

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## Hair

We walked in lines towards the hell awaiting us. My father and younger brothers had been split up from my mother and me earlier. My mother lightly held my hand to calm me down, but her hand was shaking more than mine. People were pulled out of line and never seen again. I don't even remember their faces. Crying filled the air as mothers were separated from daughters. My mother squeezed my hand to wake me from my fear. We walked on.

We entered a room. Everyone was given a number and then it was engraved into our arms. The pain of receiving those numbers seems like nothing compared to everything else I went through now, but back then the tears filled my eyes as the numbers were carved into me. We were all led into a room and told to undress. Women tried to hide their naked bodies from the men in the room. My mother on the other hand, stood proud. She was not going to show these monsters that she was uncomfortable; she would not give them that satisfaction. I tried to be brave like her, but I was not as strong, so I hid behind her while I removed my new green dress. We were then told to cut our hair. Tears stained my cheeks at the news. I was a woman; women do not have short hair. I refused to do it to myself, so after my mother finished cutting her hair, she moved onto mine. My tears fell and mixed into my dark curls. My mother shed no tears. We were led to our rooms. My identity was left in that room along with my hair.

I did not feel human, my identity as a woman was gone. It was lost without my dress and hair. I became a ghost of myself. I did not think. I just reacted to orders, moving in a haze, rarely eating. I lost my desire to live. My mother forced me to eat, often giving me her servings of food too. I was lucky to have been kept close to her. Without her, I would not have survived. She would do her job, help me with mine, and then help out the rest of the girls around us.

Through all of my mother's extra work, she began to lose weight. She became a twig, nothing but skin and bones. A ghost of the person I had once known. Before we went to sleep one night, she pulled me aside, rested a hand on my cheek, and began to speak.

“My dear, you need to wake up. Please darling, fight to survive. Want to live. I don't know how much longer I'll be able to help you. Don't let them turn you into an animal. You are a human being. You are a woman. Hair and clothing does not define you. A woman is strong, she holds the family together. She raises the family. Darling, don't base who you are on something that fades with time. Having long hair does not make you a woman. Your actions will. I don't know how much longer I can stay here on Earth honey. When I'm gone, the duties of the woman fall to you. The duty of keeping the family alive belongs to you. You are in charge of the Nerot; you light the candles. You bring light when there is none. Bring light to these people, show them hope for the future. They are your family now. Keep them alive.”

With that, my mother went to bed. She did not wake up the next morning. The women in our barracks didn't know what to do. I had been so lost in myself that I hadn't even realized my mother had been working too hard. I should have seen that she was the one that needed help. We all sat there, unsure of how to proceed. I had not realized how much my mother's actions had influenced these women. She had led our family, kept us alive. Her words the night before came back to me. She had left her role to me. I had been entrusted with the role of protecting the family, of creating light when there was none. It was my job as a woman. I could no longer base my definition of being a woman off of things that could be taken away. My hair had been cut off and my clothing taken away, but that changed nothing. I was still a woman. I did not need those things to make me a woman. I would become like my mother. I would lead this group of women. I would keep us safe.

With that resolution, I gathered up the women of the barracks and led them off to work. I began to follow in my mother's footsteps, helping out the people that needed it, and protecting the young girls that were in the camp. I finally had a reason to live again. I was a woman, and I had a duty to protect the family around me. No prison camp or Nazi was going to take that away from me by cutting my hair or taking away my clothes.

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My granddaughters all stared back at me expectant, their eyes glowing with questions.

I continued, "You see my girls, when I entered that camp, I thought my identity had been taken from me. My hair had defined me as a woman up to that point, but there is so much more to being a woman. Women are the leaders of the family; we have to keep everyone safe. We bring hope when there is none. That instinct can never be taken away from you, no matter what. Don't base your definition of yourself on something that can easily be taken away or lost because once it's gone, you will have no footing to stand on and you will lose yourself."

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