

Fourth Place  
Fiction Writing, Division II  
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Our Lady of the Elms  
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*School Days*  
Word Count: 679

“It’s the first day of school, Judith, it’s the first day of school!”

Judith is brushing her dark brown locks into two pigtails when her little sister races into her room, grabbing Judith’s hand. The little girl pulls her sister along, pigtails bouncing, shouting, “Judith, we’re going to be late!” Judith laughs. “Well, we should get going then!” The girls skip out the door, still giggling. They go quiet as they see a soldier walk by, though. Judith remembers what her mama said about those soldiers. “Don’t bother those soldiers,” she had told Judith. “They don’t like people like **us**.” So Judith whispers to her sister, “Let’s go to the other side of the street, okay?” Her sister nods, and her chestnut pigtails bob as she moves. She’s worried, but follows Judith across the street anyway.

When the girls enter the school, they split apart to go to their classes. Judith walks into her fifth grade classroom, a grin spread across her face. She skips over to her seat and sits down.

“Hey.”

Judith looks to her left. A girl with smooth hazelnut hair tied back in a ponytail and bright, crystalline blue eyes is leaning towards her, and whispering, “What’s your name?” Judith whispers her name to the girl. The girl replies, “I’m Elisabeth. Your hair looks silly.” And with that, she promptly turns her back on Judith and begins to whisper with the boy behind her. Judith feels hurt. What was wrong with her hair? All she did was put it in pigtails. Maybe she should change it? But she liked the pigtails. So why didn’t Elisabeth? The teacher raps the desk, and the students straighten up, ready to listen for directions. Judith snaps to attention, brushing away her thoughts. She’ll ask her mama about it later.

Soon Judith walks out of school, her sister’s hand in hers. Judith asks how her sister’s first day was. Her sister makes a face. “It was alright. The girls with ponytails gave me some

funny looks. They told me, 'Angelika, your hair looks funny.'" "The girls with the ponytails?"

"The pretty ones that everyone likes," Angelika pouted. Judith frowned. "You're pretty."

Angelika sighed and said, "The other girls don't seem to think so."

It's the second day of school. The girls skip out the door, and move to the other side of the street when a soldier strolls down the sidewalk, whistling a tune. Judith and Angelika split up once more when they reach the school, heading off to class.

Judith is sitting in her seat when she feels a tug on the back of her head. She whips around, ready to catch the culprit: a girl with hazel eyes and hair like spun gold tied back into a ponytail. Her hand is on one of Judith's pigtails. "Did you just pull my hair?" The other students are giggling now. "She looks so silly," they whisper. Judith looks to the teacher for help, but he looks away indifferently.

*He doesn't care, Judith thought. He doesn't care if they hurt me.*

Later that day, during recess, Judith is walking over to a bench when she feels a violent yank on her right pigtail. Tears well up at the corner of Judith's eyes as she swats the hair-puller's hand away. But when her hand comes back, a red substance is smeared across it. Blood.

The next day they tease Judith more, whispering behind her back, just loud enough for her to hear. But the girls with the ponytails don't get teased, only praised for their beautiful hair. Soon Judith is getting shoved into lockers and beat up in alleyways on the walk home from school. Not long after that, the teachers start to poke fun at her too. They assign extra homework for her.

Another Monday. The teacher raps the desk, and the students snap to attention. An empty desk sits in the back of the classroom. A student is missing. The teacher speeds through

attendance.

“Judith!”

Silence. The teacher doesn’t care. Oh well. That’s fine. It’s not like she mattered anyway.

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