

Honorable Mention Division I – Writing

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The Picture Book

Copley-Fairlawn Middle School

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Word Count 1000

The Picture Book

When I was six, my dad corralled me and my little sister to a crumbling pile of bricks in a South Akron alley that we called our church.

He sent us off to a sparse little backroom as he plodded up a creaky, unvarnished staircase with an old man whom I didn't know.

My sister and I were left standing in the late-evening sunlight that flitted through the translucent glass window,
fracturing into rainbow stripes of light across the ugly, mustard carpet.

My sister's frizzy blonde curls were outlined with halos of light as she swatted at the floating dust particles in the air,
while my purple Hello Kitty sequin shirt reflected the yellow dusk, casting silvery-pink dots onto the white-washed walls.

A pitiful table that looked as if it was made of a corkboard was the only furniture decorating the sparse room, left a floating island amidst the gaudy rug.
Upon the tabletop sat a stack of thick, weighing books with golden scrawl on their spines and faux leather covers.

As my sister tried to slap the dusty flecks from the sky, I perched on the edge of a rusty folding chair, huddling over the books.
My sister followed at my heels like a puppy, and we lugged the biggest, heaviest book in the stack open to a random page.

I'd expected rows of fine print and columns of paragraphs.
Instead, there were pictures.

It was a picture book, I realized, just like the Corduroy books I'd read in my grandma's basement.
But the pages didn't hold a little brown bear in overalls.

I'd opened to a black and white photo of a desperate, Japanese soldier, hunkering in a shallow ditch, clutching a gun to his chest like his life depended on it.
I didn't understand then that it probably did.

We turned to the next page to gaze at a sea of children bundled in rags and smudged with grime.
They looked like they could be in my class at school; trading Pop-Tarts and apple juice and learning to read.
Some of them looked like they could be one of my sister's friends, not even old enough to circle around a grimy carpet and recite colors.

My sister's brow wrinkled, and I assumed she was thinking the same thing.
Why're they outside in the bitter cold?
Why're their faces twisted in angst?
Why're they so small and gaunt when they surely have a family to tend to them?
We studied their hollow faces for a moment before my sister lost her patience and turned the corner, dismissing the malnourished children and their struggles like vermin.

The next picture made me wince.
I was no stranger to blood, as I had endured many scraped knees after trying to rollerblade in the potholed street, but this was no scratch able to be patched by a band-aid.

A towering, hefty man whose face was too grainy to discern stood wielding a glinting blade, standing loftily above several gruesome corpses.
They were sprawled out in the dirt, limbs splayed in all directions.
Not something a six and four-year-old should see.
Nevertheless, we kept looking.

We flipped through crowds of uniformed soldiers with their arms raised at an angle,
sickly men with protruding bones crammed into splintery bunks,
little boys lacking shoes roosting on a cobblestone curb,
bread infested with mildew tossed into a lake of grasping bodies,
anguished mothers reaching through barbed fences for their children.

Every photograph had a little caption written in italics, so tiny I had to squint to read it.
I recognized some words, simple ones like "they", "the" and "as".
But some words had no meaning to me.
Words like "Holocaust",
"Kristallnacht",
"Nazi",
and "Hitler".

As I scanned the text, I saw a word that came up almost every other page.
"German".
To me, that word meant the bubbly girls who we called our cousins that would giggle with us in the treehouse,
not the bulky men who always had guns at hand portrayed in the book.
I was confused.

It was overwhelming, not knowing why I hadn't heard of "Auschwitz" or "Swastika" before.
Why no one told me why so many people had faded stars stitched to their threadbare coats,
why there were pages of blood-stained sand,
why there were children without their parents holding their hands across the street?

As I looked at a print of a smiling crowd waving flags with a symbol that could only be described as a black, four-legged spider, I heard the rhythmic creaks of the old, straining stairs.

My blood went cold.

I felt the old man whose name I didn't know loom behind me, followed by my father.

They leaned over my and my sister's heads, peering at our literature of choice.

I felt ashamed.

I knew I shouldn't've seen this-
whatever it was.

I shouldn't've let my little sister see it, either.

But to my surprise, no one tore the book from my palms and snapped it shut.

They just stood behind me, staring at the four-legged spider.

So I turned the page.

It was a field of mangled bodies-
sitting in broad daylight.

I expected the old man to snatch the book away then, hide the grisly contents of the book away in a tall bookshelf I couldn't reach, just as Mom took the remote and hid it on the mantle whenever Spongebob played.

But the book stayed open.

So my sister asked what we'd both been wondering the whole time;

"What's this?"

My father hesitated.

He wanted to shelter me,

but I didn't want to be sheltered.

So we were told the story of the Holocaust,

The death camps,

Hitler,

the Nazis.

How Jews were herded and slaughtered like sheep.

All those children in the pictures were dead

It burdened me.

But the weight I carried would've been much heavier if they hadn't told me at all,
if they stole the picture book away and hid it on a tall shelf where I couldn't reach.

Works Cited

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