

The Shaven Head

hen the war ended,
the banners came down,
but fear and rage stayed up.

In the village, they said the fighting had passed them by —
but it hadn't. It had just worn quieter shoes.

One morning, a woman appeared on the road.

She was barefoot.
Her cloak torn.
Her hair — shorn to the scalp,
patchy.
Her cheeks, hollow.
She did not speak.
Her eyes were the
color of rain on stone — piercing and almost lifeless at the same time.

She passed through the square like a shadow.
No one spoke to her.
A child whispered, “Is she one of them?”

By afternoon, the stories had spread.

“She was a ‘horizontal collaborator’,” said one.
“I heard she shared bread
— and more — with them,” said another.
“Her head is shaved. What more
proof do you need?”

No one asked her. No one offered food.

The innkeeper said the rooms were full, though they weren't. The baker claimed no bread
remained, though loaves steamed in the window. So she made camp beneath the old tree on
the hill —
the one burned by lightning long ago.
She lit no fire.
She sang no songs.

Each day she rose and walked into the woods.
Each evening she returned with something small:
a fallen apple, a bundle of wild cucumbers,
once a baby bird cradled in cloth.

Still no one spoke to her.

Until the boy with the crooked leg followed her.

He couldn't help himself.
He saw her pick something from the roots of a
tree and kneel as if in prayer.
When she rose, he asked, "What's that?"

She showed him — a mushroom.

"Is it for eating?"

She nodded. "If you soak it overnight in water steeped in fennel and moonlight."

He sat beside her. "Why don't you talk to the others?"

"I don't know how to talk to people who won't listen."

He looked down at her bare head. "Why did they shave you?"

She paused. "To keep the lice from spreading in the barracks."
Then: "And to remind us we weren't human."

"What's that?" the boy said, pointing to the number tattooed on her arm.
She quickly covered it with her shawl and turned away.

The boy said nothing.
But he reached up and touched his own hair,
as if it too were a question.

That night, he returned to the village and said,
"She was in a camp. A prison.
She was not their friend. She was their prisoner."

Some didn't believe him.
But the next morning, someone left bread at the tree.
The next, a blanket.
By the end of the week, someone came to sit beside her.
Not to question. Just to sit.

And in time, the village remembered that a shaven head
is not always a brand of shame.

Sometimes it's the *sign of one*
who has walked through hell-fire
and gathers mushrooms from the ash.
Who still cradles broken birds
and listens gently to children.

— *William Zeitler*
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