



GONE

Rehann R. Rheel

She's gone. She left two days ago, and nobody has heard anything about her. Or, if anyone has, we aren't in contact with them. I've been holding out for that long. I've been praying so hard. She's my sister...my best friend. I don't want her to be...she can't be...if she's gone

My mother thinks she is, though. I can see it in her eyes. She won't say it, not with my little brothers around, but it's obvious. To me, at least. Her shoulders slump more, too. She talks less. It's hard, being here, but she's managed to be as...cheerful about it as anyone can be. Until now.

I've been sitting here, like I do every day, trying to remember. Trying to remember how the sunshine felt on my face...the sensation of the wind blowing through my hair...the smell of rain. But I can't. It's just gone. I've been locked in this basement for so long, I've started to forget. I didn't think it was possible. How can you forget the sun?

When this whole thing started, I knew it wouldn't be easy. I knew things would be lost. I wouldn't be able to see my friends. Maybe not ever again. And no one could guess how much time would pass until it would be safe to go outside. But I didn't know that the sunshine would disappear entirely. I've been robbed of even its memory. If I don't have memories, what do I have?

If she's gone...

Lotte has always been just so spirited, so free. I remember, when I was real little, watching her play with some of the kids in our neighborhood...she seemed so unstoppable. The boys were older and bigger than her, but she wasn't afraid. She wouldn't let fear stop her. Nothing could stop her. I can't remember a time when she wasn't on the move. She was never one to be cooped up for even a short amount of time. Honestly, I'm surprised she was able to stay in this basement as long as she did. I just wish...what? That she had taken me with her so I could know for sure if she was safe or not? Maybe I should wish she would have waited just a little bit longer before

leaving? A minute of time could have made a difference between getting caught and coming back. Better yet, I wish this whole thing was over with already. Why isn't it over already?

I am so mad at her. I know that it was hard for Lotte to stay here, in the Falkes' basement, but I don't think that excuses her. I guess she didn't feel her life was worth the discomfort? If that was the case and she was alone then her actions might be understandable. Unbelievably stupid, but maybe comprehensible. What makes this case different, though, is that she had us. Her family. The ones who love her. We should have been worth it. She should have stayed for us, if for no other reason. But she didn't. She just left us here without a thought and NOW look what's happened to her.

I wish I could yell. I wish I could scream at the top of my lungs. I wish I could shout so loud I cause ears to ring. We always have to be so quiet down here. I swear, mice make more noise than we do. The most I can do, though, is to yell inside my head. It's too dangerous to do anything more. Someone could hear us and report us. We'd be sent to a concentration camp without a second's hesitation, and the Falkes...they definitely wouldn't deserve what they'd get. They are good people, and they only want to help us. We owe them our lives. Lotte did, too, before

If she's gone...

No. There has to be some reason other than that they got her. I mean, we've already lost our father. And we're stuck here. And...I guess other people have lost more. I bet there are girls just like me without anyone at all. At least I have a mother and two brothers left here with me. Still...Lotte's half the reason I was able to keep going. She's my big sister. We don't always get along, of course. Sisters are supposed to fight now and then. Sure, I've wished her gone before. I swear, I never actually meant it. Never. I've known her my entire life.

I really shouldn't be thinking this way. My mother has obviously given up, but I should still believe. Even if it seems impossible. I'm not a very good liar, after all, so if I give up I won't be able to tell my brothers that Lotte is coming back. She could still come back. Maybe she was just almost caught and had to hide somewhere. It could be that she's just not able to come back yet. I would even rather believe that she has no plan to return at all. Perhaps she purposely isn't coming back. If that's the truth, then I could be angry rather than sad. And she'd still be alive.

Maybe it's selfish of me to be so consumed with thoughts of Lotte. There are millions of others out there who are scared and sick and dying and wishing so strongly for a loved one to come back. It's selfish of me to not think and pray for them, to want for only myself and my family. Then again, if there ever was a time that God would forgive selfishness, this is probably it.

Mr. Falkes is back. I just heard him walk through the door. That's different. Usually he's at work until 5 or so. It's probably nothing, of course. He is an absent-minded man who doesn't have a memory at all. He probably just forgot his lunch or something. I mean, a person has to eat, right? That would be a good reason for him to have returned so early.

If she's gone...

My heart is pounding so loudly. I wouldn't be surprised if that sound alerts someone to our hiding place. The fact that I'm almost hyperventilating probably isn't helping all that much, either. And it's stupid, to be reacting this way. Lotte just ran away. She's fine. I know it. How can someone who is always so alive die so soon? It's impossible. Death isn't that powerful. He can't be. He shouldn't be.

The only sound I can hear coming from upstairs is a soft, undecipherable murmur. It suddenly seems like the Earth's volume has been turned down. I know I've stopped breathing, and I feel as if my heart's stopped beating too. I look across the room and see my mother in a position similar to mine. Our eyes lock, and I can see that

our fear is the same. The only things that seem to move at all in the basement are my brothers. Totally oblivious to everything except each other and the toy cars they each have. If only I could be so ignorant, so self-centered.

The basement door's just opened, and I can hear Mr. Falkes' footsteps bang on each stair. Why does the sound have to remind me of an ax chopping, of all things? Why not the sound of my old dog's tail thumping against the floor? Why not anything else?

Mr. Falkes finally reaches the basement floor, and his face turns to scan the room until he spots me. Our eyes connect, and I see sorrow and pain and pity in his blue ones before my vision blurs, and I can see nothing clearly. My mother makes a low keening sound that startles my brothers, who look at me for an explanation. But I have no words. I have no freedom, no memories, and now I have no words. And no sister. Because...

...she's gone.

Afterword:

The target audience for my research paper includes two specific groups: the Holocaust deniers, and those who believe. It's this latter group for whom I've written this short story. "None," is, of course, fictional. I made the characters up. Nothing in here actually happened. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is nothing but a coincidence. But that's the point. It could have happened. The experiences of these characters are not un-experienced. Lives were lost during the Holocaust. Families were broken apart. Innocence disappeared in a second.

Lotte died long before she should have, and with her death, all the potential she had died also. If she had lived, Lotte might have fallen in love. Maybe she would have had children, who would have in turn had children. Perhaps Lotte would have become a nurse who saved lives or a teacher who shaped them. With a few simple taps of my keyboard, I could change every "what if" into a "what is," of course. It wouldn't be that hard. I could bring her back to life. I could give her a future. There are millions of people who died, however, that I can't bring back to life. They're dead. Sadly, they're being murdered once again. This time by Holocaust deniers who would have them eradicated from your memory.

The reason I chose, of all things, to write this short story is that I hope it made you think of the real people who went through real things. And that you, unlike all those deniers out there, will be absolutely certain that the Holocaust happened. Approximately six million lives were lost, and any one of them could have been a Lotte. Remember, and don't let Lotte be lost again.

As for the rest of the characters in this piece, their work is not yet finished. I'm actually pretty fond of the narrator, whom I've named Isolde, and am not quite ready to let her go yet. Some time in the future, I plan on continuing with this story, writing a beginning and an end for the reader. I don't yet know much about this future project, but I've tentatively decided to make it a multi-genre. We'll see how that works out. After all, who knows what the summer may bring?

Thank you for reading,

Rehann R. Rheel