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What Makes Them Tick?: The Ravages of War

by Kara Stevenson

(English 1101)

Robert E. Lee once said, “What a cruel thing is war: to separate and destroy families and friends, and mar the purest joys and happiness God has granted us in this world; to fill our hearts with hatred instead of love for our neighbors, and to devastate the fair face of this beautiful world” (“Quotations”). Hilary Isaacs' short story "Not Even 'Girl'" uses the character of Lt. Alfred Hoffman to prove that war leaves no soldier unwounded. Set in a concentration camp in Nazi Germany during World War II, Isaacs's piece focuses on Lt. Alfred Hoffman and his brutalization of a Jewish prisoner named Batia. Lt. Hoffman, once a romantic and a genuinely kind man, has become a tyrannical beast, hiding under the cloak of rank, and blinding himself with denial in order to live with the atrocities he has committed.

The beginning of the piece proves Lt. Hoffman was once a compassionate man. Thus, we see him standing in the doorway of the crematorium staring at the woman we will come to know as Batia. As he stands there he thinks to himself, “In another day, another time, [I] might have met her in a café. She would have been reading a book, some poetry... [I] would have walked up to her and asked if [I] might sit with her. Later [I] would kiss her as [I] walked with her in the evening. Some little gifts. Then who knows” (Isaacs 76-77). Through Lt. Hoffman's fantasizing it is discovered that he not only has a passionate side, but truly cares for Batia. However, this is not a time when peace triumphs over war. Lt. Hoffman must strike these thoughts from his mind or find a way to convince himself that what he is doing is not immoral and against regulations. Lt. Hoffman chooses to do the latter. Thus Isaacs writes, “He would enjoy Batia while he could, how and when he wanted. His superiors would not care. They would be glad he was making good use of all his resources...Hitler wanted to make sure the men were being taken care of...So it is nothing that he had Batia. Until he decided he was done with her. That was how it had to be” (78). By hiding under his rank and attempting to justify his feelings for Batia and actions towards her, Lt. Hoffman proves that the war has altered his way of thinking. As this is not another time, Lt. Hoffman must persuade himself that he is not a traitor for having feelings towards one of the “repulsive” Jews.

Again, the romantic side of Hoffman is shown when he calls out for Batia while she works: “‘Batia’, she heard him clearly now, how soft his voice was and how near. For a moment the softness of his tone startled her, made her feel off guard” (82). By calling Batia's name in a gentle voice, Lt. Hoffman is reminiscent of a man calling to his lover. As Lt. Hoffman gives Batia the ring he brought her, his true self is exposed again, “‘I want you to have this’, he said, ‘beautiful Batia. For you.’ He raised his eyebrows, hopefully, unintentionally. Like a boy” (85). In his innocence Hoffman reveals the side of him that is untarnished by false ideals, and hatred. Conversely, when Batia refuses his gift he becomes enraged, “‘You little Jewish bitch,’ his voice barely louder than a whisper but tight and cold as a knife edge. ‘You will say no to my present? My gift, to you’ Lt. Hoffman was white in the face and his lips had become thin and pale. ‘You will not,’ he followed her to the ground, kneeled over her, hit her again and again across her face, ‘You will not say no to me’” (86). Rejected by the intolerable Jew he cares so much about Lt. Hoffman turns on Batia, becoming the militant he was taught to be, angry, cold, and violent.

Then, Lt. Hoffman drags Batia into a small room and proceeds to rip off her clothes until she is completely naked. He forces her to turn in a circle and while she is turning Hoffman begins to feel guilty for what he has done to her, “His head started to pound and he could hear along with the trucks

outside the pounding of his own blood in his temples like someone was beating him from the inside out. He grabbed Batia. 'Stop' (88). It is through his guilt that Lt. Hoffman's true nature is again revealed; repulsed by his own actions, he begins to feel physically ill. Nonetheless, his military training takes over; and he knows he must teach Batia, a Jew, that *he is God* in his camp. He rapes her while she fights for her dignity. "'Hold still, bitch.' He would not call her woman, not even girl, ever again. He certainly would not call her by her name anymore now... 'You will not say no to me now. Will you? Not anymore.' Then he said, 'Tell me your number.' Batia closed her eyes. 'Open your eyes and look at me and tell me your number'" (88). So humiliated at being rejected by the Jew he cares for, Lt. Hoffman disgraces her in the most cruel way he knows how. Every human being, in every walk of life has a name. Jewish prisoners were stripped of their names, and it is in this loss, they were stripped of their last shred of humanity. By asking Batia for her number, Lt. Hoffman is refusing to acknowledge her as human anymore.

War has the power to turn brother against brother, and the power to turn man against himself. In this power we see the never ending struggle to choose between the side of yourself that is kind and honest and side of yourself that has been taught hatred and violence. The cruel monster that Lt. Hoffman becomes is evidence that war not only devastates the body, but the mind, heart and soul.

Works Cited

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