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Olivia Voegtle
College of DuPage

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The Broken Girl's Blood

Olivia Voegtle

Paris, France
Summer 1789

The gunfire had stopped. The morning bells had not rung as they should have. But then again, nothing, absolutely nothing was as it should have been. Nicole Durand sat beneath the window in her family's single room, the mist of the morning crowding against the windowpane. The room was dank. The street, deserted. The whole city ripe with the smell and the sounds of death. "Come, Nicoline..." Nicole's mother held a work-worn hand to her daughter, who stared past it, uncomprehending. "We must do our part."

Nicole took the offered hand and prepared mechanically, like the cogs of the clocktower. She wrapped her threadbare shawl about her shoulders and accepted the bucket of suds her younger sister handed to her. Nicole stared down into the girl's face.

It was too old for a child of eleven; gaunt with suffering and too little bread, lines creasing her forehead, her blue eyes empty. She had seen. She knew. She understood.

She's too young to understand... Nicole thought as she stumbled down the narrow stairwell after her mother.

But when does anyone understand? When does one embark on the path to comprehending death and honor and sacrifice? When will the human mind be able to easily shift from one day where people are breathing and loving and living into the next day where they are not?

As they neared the doorway which opened out into the street, the fibers of Nicole's body rebelled. The cloud of blood infecting every breath she took hung thicker as they approached the street. She couldn't go out there. She couldn't face it.

Not again.

But you must. Her conscience demanded. For them.

From above, she knew her siblings would be watching, determining their own reaction from hers. If she, their eldest sister, who on this past night had suffered both loss of love and country could continue, then they would also. She hefted the bucket higher, her fingers pinched under the handle, and followed her mother into the square.

Red. Everything was red. Crimson fingerprints kissed the doorframes of the shopfronts and the cobbled streets were swimming in the stuff, unable to accept the revolutionaries' mortal offering. Tattered flags withered under the debris of broken carriages and carts, which were the sorry remains of the barricade erected during the battle that had waged here just hours before. Madame Durand was unfazed by the gore.

She knelt in the sticky tide, tossed her bucket of suds against the blood, and began to scrub. The older woman shook with the effort of the task. Nicole trembled with rage.

Her only thought was this: The blood soaking in through the holes of her shoes had flowed through the veins of her countrymen yesterday.

She could not kneel in it, condemning it, erasing it, dishonoring the sacrifice of men she admired. She continued to stand. "Nicole!" Madame Durand admonished Nicole's neglect, but continued to scrub around her daughter.

Slowly other women crawled from their apartments like worms from the ground after a spring rain. Women, young and old alike, knelt beside the elderly Durand, armed with their own buckets and brushes. This scene had been repeated many times before. After the battles raged, the dutiful French women always returned to the square to scour away the proof, obscuring their sorrow with

suds, and washing away the blood of their wounded hearts. Now the women whispered to each other while they worked and as the early morning slipped by the town began to awaken around them. Shop doors were propped open, smoke whisked through the cloudy sky like wolves through the snow, and the high-pitched titter of children's voices ground against Nicole's ears.

"Life goes on..." The thought appeared, unbidden and at odds with the outrage surging through her body. Those three words suggested submission. That she bend her will, throw down her bucket, and scrub with these women as she had time and time before. It would be a tiny thing. It would be a big thing.

Then, the crack of gunfire rent the security of the morning routine. The peasants who had just emerged fled like church mice back into their hovels. "Nicoline?" Her mother waited by their door for her daughter to follow.

But Nicole was no longer uncertain of her path. As the old men shut the doors and the women and children scurried back to their dank apartments, Nicole dashed her bucket against the stone and pulled a battered musket from a pile of rubble.

"Nicoline!" Her mother cried as she realized her daughter's intent. But she was gone, her bloody feet carrying her toward the battle, her mind fixed singularly on the thought that tomorrow the blood on the street would finally mean something.