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ONCE A BOY

BY CHRISTOPHER WOODS

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- A German concentration camp, 1942.

I just took some bread to Papa. He was so hungry. He's beginning to look so bad, like a mussulman. Do you know what that is? When a camp prisoner looks like a dead man? Can't work anymore. Can't even eat. They get taken away. They don't come back. I won't let that happen to Papa. Not if I can help it.

Not if Franz will still have me. I pray every day that he still likes me. Without Franz, I have no bread ration. Without bread, Papa can't live. I tell you, I am learning so much. So quickly.

It's hard. Today I had to sneak one piece of moldy bread. There's been a crackdown again. The cooks are counting supplies. Papa said, "Moni, go easy for a few days, I still have my soup ration." He does have it. He hid it. I don't eat my ration because Franz gives me his scraps. Camp food is all grease, off the top of the pot. I told Papa, "You just get stronger so you don't look dead." Papa is so brave. He thinks he can take care of himself. But he can't. I must care for him. There's no one else.

And I must keep Franz happy. Tonight he's drunk again. Lately, all he does is drink his schnapps. You should see the size of his belly. At least he didn't beat me. Too drunk. Moody. He had dental duty this morning, with the new prisoners. That always puts him in a foul mood. He thinks he gets cheated of his share of all the gold fillings. I don't know.

I like to sneak around the camp. I pretend I'm a ghost that no one can see. It's safer to be a ghost. This morning another train came. New arrivals, maybe seven hundred people. Lots of children, but they don't have gold teeth. Franz told me that.

He's interested in their mothers and fathers. But even with seven hundred, there still wasn't enough gold to please Franz and the other Block Chiefs. There can never be enough.

I wonder if Franz still likes me. I worry. He hasn't used me for three days. But like I said, he's been drinking. I want to make him happy. I ironed his uniform twice today. I could see myself in his boots when I finished polishing them. I thought my arms would fall off. Papa says, "You must keep Franz happy. You are his piepel."

Do you know what that is, a piepel? I will tell you. A piepel is a boy the Block Chiefs use at their orgies. A piepel must make his Chief, his Master, happy. Always.

Block Chiefs like their piepels plump and healthy. A piepel's only reason for living is to make his Master happy. I try to make Franz happy all the time. If I lose Franz, I will die. And Papa would die. He wouldn't have any protection. I would rather be dead than think of Papa dying.

I do my best. I learn all kinds of tricks to please Franz. He teaches me things from all the piepels he's had before. I only wish he wouldn't get drunk. He scares me. Maybe he doesn't know what he's saying. The next day he doesn't remember. But when he starts on his schnapps, it all comes back again.

He says he's going to find a new piepel, that he's tired of me. He says he doesn't want a piepel who that looks like a mussulman. He wants a plump boy for his sex. He kicks me across the room. He says he's going to send me to the butcher, Ludwig Teine. That's the camp senior. He is nothing but evil. Teine likes to seesaw his boys, the ones the Block Chiefs don't want anymore.

Do you know the seesaw? Teine puts a stick across their necks. Then he stands on the stick, a foot at either end. Back and forth, back and forth, across their necks, until they snap. He's the devil, Teine is.

I remember different seesaws. Back home, in the park. I remember Mama talking with her friends while I was laughing with my friends. I wonder, was it ever that way for Teine? Did his mother take him to the park?

I imagine even the devil was once a boy. Don't you think so?

Franz only says these things when he's drunk. And sad. I know he likes me. I just need to eat more. Get chubby again. You'll see. Franz will like me even more then.

The war won't last much longer. We hear the rumors. If we can hold out a little longer...

In the latrine today I heard that England won't fall to Hitler. And I heard America is going to help. I don't mention this to Franz. If Hitler loses, so does Franz.

I saw Mama today. I told Papa, but he acted like he didn't hear me. But I'm sure it was Mama. She was walking with some other women on the other side of the wire, by Block Ten. It was some kind of labor duty. I was running an errand for Franz, but I stopped to watch her.

"Mama! Mama, is that you?" I called.

It was her. I know it was. Papa asked if I saw her face. I said no, but I know her hair. Cut short, but it was her hair. No one has prettier hair. I would know it anywhere. Even here, where the air is full of smoke.

Papa said it couldn't be Mama. He said Mama is still in Warsaw, waiting for the war to end. But it was her. I don't think Papa wants to believe Mama is in a place like this.

I told Papa I could ask Franz to check, to find out for sure. But Papa said no, that I shouldn't say a thing to Franz about Mama. Never. He's right, I know.

All I can do is make Franz happy. Poor Papa. He was so upset. He is getting weaker and weaker.

Do you want to know a secret? I know I didn't see Mama. I might have, but I know I didn't. I wanted to see her so badly that I made myself see her. I love her so much. But Papa is right. I know she isn't here. No, what I saw was a dream. A dream of a woman who looks like Mama.

I have to go now. Franz is waiting for me. I can't keep him waiting. He gets angry. I hope he still wants me.

Will you do me a favor? Please say a prayer that he still wants me. Thank you.

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Christopher Woods is the author of *The Dream Patch*, a lyrical novel about a Texas family during the 1940's. His collection of prose poems and brief fictions, *Under a Riverbed Sky*, was published by Panther Creek Press. His collection of stage monologues for actors and actresses, *Heart Speak*, was published by Stone River Press. His work has appeared in more than four hundred publications including *Columbia*, *Southern Review*, *Confrontation*, *Rosebud*, and *Glimmer Train*. His plays, such as *A Woman on Fire* and *Moonbirds*, have been produced in a dozen major cities. He has received a grant from the Mary Roberts Rinehart Foundation. He has received residencies at the Ucross Foundation in Wyoming and the Edward Albee Foundation in New York. He has taught creative writing workshops at Rice University Continuing Studies Program, The Women's Institute Of Houston.