

## **Gli Innocenti**

*June 8, 2004*

It's raining in Munich on a Friday night as we wait outside the operating room. My cousin Tom is excited beyond belief, setting up his video camera and adjusting the light for the best possible shots. Christine's parents, especially her mom, are pacing with nervous anticipation. At 9:08 the silent halls of Munich University's hospital are shaken by the cry of Azalea, delivered by emergency C-section three days before the scheduled surgery. It's a spectacular sound--the sound of new life--and in a heavy accent the giddy new grandmother shouts quietly, "It's her!"

A nurse comes out and in perfect unaccented English tells Tom he can enter. I grab the camcorder from him and zoom as far into the next room as I can, seeing nothing but hearing the baby's cries and Tom's first greetings toward his first child. Suddenly he bursts out of the room with a smile on his face and a baby in his arms and into the room assigned for Azalea and her mother. We follow, and watch as he sits into the rocking chair and holds the infant to his chest.

"Are you getting this?" he asks me. "No, no, get this angle over here!" Even in the first moments of fatherhood, Tom embodies the quintessential artist, the same one who used to regale me with Brooklyn-based tales of dumpster-diving for food and shearing the fabric off abandoned couches for canvasses.

Azalea starts to whimper, but upon hearing Tom's voice she stops, opens her bright blue eyes and sticks out her tongue. Just minutes old, she is one of the most amazing sights I have seen, both in Europe and in my lifetime.

Twenty minutes later, the mother is wheeled in on her bed, still high as a kite on painkillers but motherly instinct ever-present as she grabs the baby and holds her to her breast. The new grandparents stand slightly back, tears mixing with sparkles in their eyes. And I can only marvel at this child of two foreigners and smile for those brief moments when the outside world doesn't exist and all I can feel is love.

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It's raining in Dachau as I pass a white guard tower and enter through the gate. I've walked two miles from the train station at a brisk pace to get here, but suddenly my legs grow heavy.

My first stop is the museum, where I watch video and read about the camp and its many uses. I read the statistics, look at the charts, memorize the dates. I learn about the torture endured, about the punishments doled out beyond the misery of being forced to stay in these conditions. Of persons hung by their arms, which were first tied behind their back. Of persons being sent to cells so small they were forced to stand for days at a time, a torture still performed by the American government. I read about the numerous medical experiments that went on here, and see photos of a prisoner's face as he endures sudden changes in pressure.

I feel I've read enough and walk back into the rain, crossing over the roll call area, where mornings and evenings prisoners were brought out for hours, and the sick separated from the healthy, the living from the dead. I start to wonder how many times it was raining. I wonder how many were younger than I.

I reach the crematorium on the far side of the camp and walk through the waiting room, through the undressing room, and I stop in the shower room. In the dim light I examine the showerheads--obviously fake, but realistic enough to get most prisoners through the door. I peer through the vents and the pipes inside which would have pumped out poison gas had they been in operation. I want to feel relief that for reasons still unknown the room was never used for mass execution, but I know full well that those relegated to death were murdered one way or another, in one camp or the next. I linger in the room longer than I need to--wondering, pondering, imagining--and then I move on to the ovens next door, each capable of incinerating three people at once. Even this marvel of efficiency wasn't enough, and when the Americans liberated Dachau they found the waitlisted bodies piled in the center of camp.

The rain is pounding now and I'm tempted to hurry or at least stop the water from streaming down my face but I feel it would be wrong to do either. I'm cold but I know I've never known cold. I'm hungry but I've never known hunger.

Before I leave I stop by the main building one more time and enter a small room dotted with plaques. And here, seeing names ascribed to faces ascribed to real people, is when the shock and horror wear off and I feel something deeper, and more personal. I see the plaque for Mario Gasparutti from "la tua sposa," and the face of Gino D'Este, whose sister wrote "per sempre sarai con noi," you will always be with us; the name of Viliam Popik and below, that of his son Andras, aged eighteen years; remembrances for Den Juden, Den Homosexuellen, "Gli Innocenti."

From mothers, from sisters, from wives. They are no longer a number among numbers, a corpse among piles.

I step back out into the rain and ponder and think and try to find hope. I focus on those who helped others survive, those who rebelled and fought as martyrs, and those who lived to tell about their experiences. And I think of Azalea, born just fifteen hours before, and the love and hope in that room. I reflect on her name, and remind myself that even in the darkest of times a flower can still grow.

But that doesn't stop my tears from mixing with the rain.