

Braids

By Juan Francisco Lara

Girls, who part their long hair and braid it into two pigtails, put themselves at great risk. It is impossible for a boy to resist the primal urge to run up and pull them. Their head tolls backwards and the girl intones an age-old aria! "That hurts! I'll get you!" The chase begins anew as it has for generations. The schoolyard is most often the battleground. A girl is most likely to experience "the pull" after school, but the desire "to pull" among boys diminishes as we age, except in my case. I've never recovered from my fascination with braids, nor have I outgrown the instantaneous response to pull two braids when I see them, although I have learned to ask, "May I?"

My story begins when I was a Fourth grader at our parish Sacred Heart Grammar school in San Francisco, California. On the first day, a Lithuanian immigrant girl joined our class. Her hair was combed into two braids, or pigtails as we called them, and they stretched down below her waist.

In class we were seated alphabetically. Her last name began with a "P" and mine with an "L." A row of desks and inkwells separated us. She was smart and precise and never needed to visit the pencil sharpener that hid in the coatroom with our lunch pails. Had she entered it, I would have followed.

The schoolyard had a white line drawn between the boys and girls yards and the Dominican Sisters of San Rafael guarded the line. If she happened to play or run near the white line, I would dash towards it but I never succeeded in getting close to her at recess or lunchtime. When we were dismissed for the day, she disappeared.

The Dominican Sisters preached that we must accept the trials that God puts before us. I felt like Job. I waited patiently for an answer to my prayers for eternity-two long years. Sister Annunciata opened the Sixth grade classroom door and we filed into it in silence walking to our desks in alphabetical order. I sat down and noticed that the desk directly in front of me was empty. Sister announced that Junona Aldona Victoria Progriskis was now an American and that she would be known as Joan Jonas. "Take your seat." Joan Jonas walked over her desk and sat down in front of me. She was now "J" and I was "L" and we had no one with a "K!"

My heart pealed like the church bell at noon. The miracle of the braids outlined her shoulders and the nape of her neck. They looked like candles on an altar on either side of a statue of a saint. For two years, my desire to touch them had plunged me into purgatory. My soul had been granted an indulgence. I had been released. I sang the Magnificat in silence.

Did this mean that I could no longer say her beautiful name? I loved saying Junona Aldona Victoria Progriskis. I had recited it. I hummed it when I jumped rope in the schoolyard. Change her name? Yes! Change her name. Let Joan Jonas sit in front of me. Looking up at the ceiling that night, I recited her name like beads on a rosary, and prayed that Joan Jonas would sit in front of me for the next two years.

I had the best of all worlds. I could study her each day, gently touch her braids when she moved from right to left and examine her weave intimately. I imagined her Mother combing and parting her hair perfectly, weaving three or more strands of hair, first on one side and then the other. Today, years later, I often wonder if, when she combs her hair, she feels her Mother's hands weaving her hair with the love that only a Mother can bestow upon her daughter. I never confessed that I touched her pigtail braids until later in life when I confessed the deed to every woman that I ever met who wore braids.

I saw her for a last time as we walked in the Eighth grade graduation procession down the center aisle of our Church. Since that day, whenever I meet a girl with two braids, I tell her about the Lithuanian girl with braided pigtails who sat in front of me in Grammar school. And, I always ask, "May I pull your pigtails?" No one ever refuses. They only laugh and think I am silly, but they are touched by my request. The tear in their eye gives them away.

Perhaps, still today, if Junona Aldona Victoria Progriskis is alive, she wears braided pigtails that she curls around her head like a crown. I'd recognize her if she sat in front of me. And, if the time for weaving has passed, she wears a braided halo that encircles her head. My wait to see her again grows shorter by the year.