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Flash Nonfiction by Kira Venturini

Unconditional Love, Whoever She Becomes



My niece doesn't like her hair. It sits on her head in little tufts, like feathers on a duckling, poking out in all sorts of

Princess Hair

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directions. At three years old, she still hasn't gotten it cut, because it's so short. I've heard her ask her mother—my sister-in-law—when it will grow, and I can tell she doesn't like looking different from her girlfriends in daycare.

When she asks me to make her look like a princess, she hands me one of her blankets and points to her head. I never liked princesses as a kid, but my niece wants my help, so I carefully wrap the blanket around her head.

"Whoa, you look so different!" I tell her. "What happened to your hair?"

She brushes her hands against her head to feel her makeshift wig, her eyes expectant. "It grewed!" she says triumphantly, before running to show her mother in the kitchen.

My sister-in-law is about ten years older than I am and has levels of patience and compassion I can only aspire to. She married my older brother when I was still in high school, and they live in Maine, a place I visit as often as I can. I watch her cook dinner and wonder whose idea it first was to put the blanket on my niece's head.

"Oh, my goodness," my sister-in-law says. "Are you a princess superhero?"

Her daughter runs around the kitchen, turning to watch the blanket drag behind her. I worry that as my niece grows, I'll start to lose her. What if she gets older and we aren't as close as we are now? The blanket falls off her head and onto the ground, exposing her duckling hair. I wonder when the next time I see her will be, and if she'll look any different.

There are very few differences between her and her mother. She has the same little nose, the same thin hair, and the same love of food. My brother and his wife try to tag the word "superhero" onto the end of "princess" whenever my niece says it. They want her to grow up understanding that a girl can be anything.

Sure, when I'm a mother, I'm going to secretly hope that my daughter will denounce all things princess-y and choose instead to reach for a soccer ball. But if she wants me to wrap a blanket around her head so that she can pretend she has longer hair—or that she lives in a castle and rules a kingdom full of pink flowers and horses and houses—of course I'll do it.

I'll put her hair in pigtails, fishtails, French braids, waterfall braids, Dutch braids—whatever she wants. I'll watch her grow up to be a soccer star, a doctor, or even a princess, and I'll still be elated just to have her in my life. Just as I feel now, watching my sister-in-law care for her daughter, unconditionally.

She'll be a different kind of princess, my sister-in-law tells me. "Right, sweetie?" she says, stroking the duckling tufts of hair.

My niece nods. Her eyes grow big as she says, "I'm gonna rescue the princes, but only the nice ones."

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A recent graduate of Emerson College, Kira Venturini lives in Boston, Massachusetts, and works in the nonprofit industry. She grew up in Wallingford, Pennsylvania, as the youngest in her family of five. In her free time, Kira enjoys reading, writing, and playing soccer.

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