

Time's Fickle Glass
Vol III:

The Greater Good

SAMPLE CHAPTERS

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First published in the United Kingdom, 2019

Cover Artwork by Kamila Donald

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FOR THE SIX MILLION – those who didn't return, and who never grew up to become my great-aunts, uncles, and other relatives.

“Is God willing to prevent evil, but not able?
Then he is not omnipotent.
Is he able, but not willing? Then he is malevolent.
Is he both able and willing? Then whence cometh evil?
Is he neither able nor willing? Then why call him God?”

- Epicurus (341-270 BC)

“G-d is the ultimate of good. He is good and His nature is to do good. Even within pain and suffering there is some good, although that may be obscured from the sufferer. Our faith leads us to believe that the Surgeon knows what He is doing.”

- Rabbi ND Dubov, *Belief After The Holocaust*

PART ONE

“Hope not
Ever to see Heaven. I come
To lead you to the other shore;
INTO THE ETERNAL DARKNESS;
Into fire and into ice.
And thou, who are there alive,
Depart thee from these who are dead”

- Dante, *Inferno*, Canto III

CHAPTER ONE

The dogs were getting nearer. I hadn't been aware of them at first; the barking of the human voices had masked their distinctive timbre but now I could distinguish them and they were closing in.

"Think. Quickly!" I said, to myself as much to Araminta.

"A time-loop? What about a time-loop, like at the Lake, with the lunch?"

"How?"

"Once we get out of here, we send the Chronosphere back in time and leave it over there so that, when we look now, we'll find it!" She said this, crawling to her right, where there was a little hovel. I held my breath, hoping for a miracle – a sure sign that we would make it out alive – that we could cheat death, or time.

"It's not there! Why isn't it there, Chris?"

There were two reasons that sprang to mind: the first was that we didn't know the precise date and time – without which we wouldn't have been able to programme the Chronosphere. The second reason was that we would never recover it – and that might be because we would never retrieve it from our enemies who had sent us here or, worse, because we would die. Here. In –

I shuddered. The barking and shouting was definitely getting nearer.

"We don't have time!" I pulled Araminta to her feet and looked into her eyes. The moon reflected in them but it was a cold light.

"They're going to take us," I said. "I'm sure they'll separate us. We need to decide what we tell them."

"What do you mean?"

"Age, place of birth. Why we're here."

"Do we need a reason?" The irony wasn't lost on me. The truth was

that there was no reason to any of this. No reason except hatred. I tried to remember a distant history lesson but I could hear my heart beating too loudly and I was shaking, clutching Araminta's shoulders. I looked over them at the invidious sign, leering its false promise in iron and saw its words seem to change to English in my understanding: *WORK WILL MAKE YOU FREE*

"Minty! German! We can speak and read German, remember!" I touched behind my ear and felt the black dot that served as a translator.

"OK, so tell them we're German – maybe we were arrested for political reasons. Maybe because we spent some time in England, or America, or something?"

"Yes; yes," I said, trying to think and talk as fast as I could.

"Tell them you play music. That might help?" I offered, pathetically. I could see them now: Alsations, being kept on short leads by their handlers. Behind us, a sea of victims had formed, almost imperceptibly. The timing seemed too precise, I thought. Almost convenient. But for whom?

"Men to the left, women and children to the right! Men to the left, women and children to the right!" A command went out. I hoped Araminta didn't see the fear in my eyes, couldn't sense my heart rise up into my throat, couldn't feel my hands tremble as I held her soft hand and tried to mouth, *I love you*.

I felt a blow to my stomach and heard Araminta scream. A soldier was working his way through the crowd, like Moses, parting the water. No, he was Pharaoh – using his rifle butt to separate any malingers. Her hand slipped from mine.

I strained my neck to drink in a last look at her; I tried to memorise her features – her freckled nose and dimpled smile – but a moment later her lips had been replaced by someone else's mouth – with a gap in their two front teeth and cold, hard, black eyes.

"Age?" It took me a second to realise he was addressing me. I gave it as sixteen. I had almost lost track of my biological age anyway, thanks to bouncing around in time, and I instinctively thought fifteen might not be as safe.

"Health?"

"Excellent, thank you," I replied, as if replying to a kindly uncle.

"Occupation?" What did I tell him? That I was a time travelling school boy from the 21st century, sent to hell by a sinister faction of other time travellers who seemed even more dangerous than the Third

Reich? I had no real skills. I had seen *Schindler's List* but had no idea about working in a factory. I always got an E for DT at school. In the back of my mind I could hear my sister saying, "*Fake it till ya make it!*" I smiled, thinking of Kirsty dressed up for a school talent competition last year. Would I ever see her again? I had better give an answer. Something close to the truth:

"Musician."

He sized me up and down quickly and, with a baton he was carrying (how had I not seen it before?) he pointed to his right; someone shoved me forwards into another queue and the man moved on. A moment later, the man who had been behind me was sent to the left. I didn't know what this meant but I started to fear it meant something dreadful. I looked at the others I was assembled with. They seemed mostly healthy. His baton conducted left and right, left and right – a broom, sweeping the human waste into different corners. For that is what we were, I began to see.

We were herded onwards, shoved into rough columns of fives. I tried to take in my surroundings: a load of red-brick buildings. Some electric lights; a tower (not very high) with a weathervane on; barbed wire; some trees. I didn't expect there to be trees.

I nearly tripped over someone as I looked around. I muttered an apology but was ignored. Either that, or he didn't understand.

"Faster! Faster!" screamed an SS officer (I recognised the lightning bolts on his collar). He was holding a dog, letting – no, encouraging – it to snap at our heels. I marched on, casting sideways glances at the men with rifles who were accompanying us.

One of them caught my eye.

"That looks like a nice watch," he said. I had, stupidly, forgotten I was wearing it – a cheap digital effort from Argos. Of course, in this century it would have probably astounded. Another thought flashed through my mind – our phones! No, I remembered – Minty had left hers at Olympus in Ancient Greece, and mine was at home, charging. Good. Probably. I didn't want that sort of technology falling into the wrong hands.

"Perhaps you would like to make a present of it to me?" said the guard. He was young – perhaps not much older than me. I was about to refuse but knew that I would have it taken from me later and (in all likelihood) before I would be able to smash it.

"Why not?" I said – as if he had asked me for a chewing gum – and took it off.

"I'm afraid I don't think I have the right time, though," I said, passing it to him. This made him laugh.

"I've never seen anything like it."

"It's a prototype," I said. "My father is an inventor, you see. He's been trying to sell them."

"Where?"

"America; England."

"Ah."

"Yes – how do you think I ended up here?" I said, perhaps too cheerfully. My habit of inventing complex backstories when time travelling had resulted in more than one argument with Araminta but she wasn't here, right now. I hoped she would approve. I hoped it would make sense. I hoped I could remember it.

"Anyway, I'll be happy to show you how it works or if you have any problems with it," I offered.

"I'm sure I'll figure it out," said the officer. My heart sank. I needed to be useful if I were to survive.

"Thanks," he added, affixing it to his left wrist before instructing me to quicken my pace.

We soon arrived at a sort of shed and were driven inside. There was barely enough light to see.

"You must undress fully, and quickly," said an officer; "take everything off but keep your belt and shoes. Leave the rest on the floor." That seemed a bit odd. I looked around me and locked eyes with a tall man wrapped in a trench coat with a yellow star sewn on. He said something to me but it couldn't have been German – I didn't recognise the language.

Some other officers entered the shed and laid some blankets down. I thought they were for us for a brief moment, but we were instructed to place our watches and other valuables on there. Perhaps I had made my first good decision, I thought. Perhaps the young officer would remember me. (It occurred to me that the reason he had seemed so civil – almost kind – was because he had wanted his pick of the watches

before they – presumably – were taken and put into some central kitty).

“Quickly, quickly! I will give you two minutes precisely!” He was carrying a whip. I didn’t want to find out how much it hurt, despite my aversion to public changing facilities. (Why, on earth do they still have those in the 21st century? I absolutely hate using them. It’s one of the reasons I hardly ever went swimming at the local leisure centre pool).

“One minute, fifty!”

Here was not the time to feel self-conscious. This was no leisure centre. I took off my belt, followed by my T-shirt, jeans, trainers, socks and – finally and awkwardly – my boxers.

It didn’t occur to me at the time (I was trying not to look too closely at the other naked bodies and tried to hold my trainers over my privates) but my nakedness might very well have saved me (at least, temporarily) – as it suddenly became very clear who was Jewish.

We were pushed into another room. There, dressed in their striped uniforms, stood some prisoners, with blades and clippers. We were going to be shaved.

My turn came soon enough. I was pushed, roughly, onto a chair and a hand steadied me (not unkindly, but forcefully). As the blunted clipper went over my scalp I thought to myself how I had said I had needed a hair cut. I almost laughed at the absurd irony. Almost. They didn’t just shave my head.

They took every hair from our bodies. I don’t know why. It made us look like children. As I looked down at the floor at the collection of hair I wondered if Araminta was going through the same thing. It felt like a particular crime to shave her beautiful red hair. I thought of our visit to the hairdresser in Bossingwood, weeks ago (and decades in the future). How it had cost £40 and what I rip-off I thought it was. I imagined running my fingers through her hair. I fought not to cry.

When I first saw the shower room I almost threw up. A panic set in me. Would this be it? Perhaps it was better for those who didn’t know, though the fear in some of the others’ eyes was visible. They, too, had heard the stories.

When we saw the water it was hard not to cry for joy – for relief.

Despite the temperature being too scalding one moment, and too freezing the next (I suspect the guards were deliberately alternating this for their own amusement), we scrubbed ourselves eagerly. I should have mentioned, before, that the stench of the other men was another reason why I kept having to stop myself from being violently sick. They were dirty. Most, I suspect, hadn't washed for a week. I remembered learning about the cattle trains that brought people here. At least I had been spared that.

As I lathered myself as best I could with the bar soap, I allowed my thoughts to turn, again, to Araminta. I thought of kissing the Orion's belt of freckles on her shoulder. I willed myself with her in the shower (not in a sexual way; I desired her, of course, but here, there could be no desire. I only wanted to be close to her. I wanted her to feel me with her. I wondered if the human spirit could transport itself – could transport our bodies? I wondered if there was such a thing as spirit. I thought back to a conversation we had had in the Tudor inn. It seemed a lifetime ago. That had been an adventure, almost a holiday. This was a nightmare).

My daydreaming was interrupted and I collected my belt and trainers. A guard stopped me. He took a look at my trainers and made me hand them over. I was given a pair of wooden shoes instead. They didn't look like they would fit. I opened my mouth to protest but the screams of someone a few metres away made me close it. He had done something to his boots, apparently. He was being whipped. I thanked the guard for the shoes and kept my head down. It pained me to do so. I could hardly believe I was ignoring the sufferings of another person – that I wasn't lashing out at the guards. Perhaps Mrs Gurnet was right about our survival instinct. I would never complain about sitting through her Biology lessons again. If I made it home.

I was handed some clothes: a blue and white striped jacket, trousers, a vest, and cap (also striped). The trousers were far too big. Fortunately, it seemed everyone was in a similar position. Despite the language barriers, we manage to swap articles of clothing with people until we had something resembling the right size.

There was no underwear. How could they not give us underwear? You don't see that in films. You look at pictures and you assume they have pants on. No pants, no socks. The shoes were already rubbing my feet. I'd never gone commando, either. The trousers chafed. The sleeve of my jacket was encrusted with someone else's snot. In fact, if these were supposed to be the clean clothes, I dread to think what they'd look

like when it came to laundry day. I hoped there was a laundry day. Surely I wouldn't be expected to wear this vest forever without washing it?

"What makes you think any of you is here forever?" A voice, somewhere inside me seemed to say. I realised the terrible truth – this was no ordinary prison. In prison, the inmates have changes of clothes because their sentences might be years, and the object is to reform and civilise them. This was an extermination camp. What was the point of giving us clean clothes? *And yet, I thought, some do survive. Will survive. Have survived. And I will be one of them.* I gritted my teeth and fastened the buttons on my jacket, placing the cap on my shaved head. As I did so, I thought of Jeremy – practically bald – and wondered if I, now, looked like my future self. *My future self...* the foreknowledge of what I would (or might) become had terrified me for the past eighteen months – ever since I had discovered Jeremy's true identity – ever since I had made the decision to go back and save Kirsty. But now the idea that I might, in forty or so years, become Jeremy gave me hope. And where there is hope, there is life.

There was no mirror but, as I looked around the room, I saw myself reflected in the uniformity of striped men and hoped I didn't look as stripped of my dignity as they did.

We were led outside again. I had lost all track of time. In 2017 it had been dusk; when we materialised here it was definitely night – but without knowing the time of year it was impossible to know how late it was. It might have been hours since then, or minutes. Time was dilated, somehow, and not just for me.

The moon had risen higher and the inky blue hue of the sky had been wrung out by the black hand of deep night. An officer yawned and looked at his watch and dispatched a subordinate who saluted him. We were marched towards a row of brick huts.

"Don't get too comfortable," a voice rang out, "you'll be processed in the morning and moved."

I stood at the entrance of a large room. It was dank inside. Bunks, on three tiers, lined the walls. We shuffled inside. A man in prison uniform stepped forward. He had a coat over his striped jacket, under which I could just make out a green triangle, and carried a stick. It was not for walking. An elderly looking man (he must have avoided the selection, somehow), asked where the toilet was and was immediately

struck on the nose. Some of his blood spurted onto my forehead. I didn't dare wipe it. I wished he hadn't asked – not just because of the blows he received; it made me remember I needed it, too.

"I am the kapo of this block," announced the prisoner-guard. "That means I am in charge of you for tonight. If any of you makes trouble for me, I will make trouble for him. Find a bunk and get some sleep. You will need it. Tomorrow, you will be put to work. If you do not work, you will go to the chimney." He snorted, bringing up a load of phlegm into his mouth, which he spat at one of the others.

We scabbled for a good spot – whatever that meant. In truth, we didn't know if it was preferable to be at the top, or the bottom. I crawled into a space on one of the bottom bunks, only to be kicked, violently, by its three occupants. Eventually, I managed to scabble up to the top of another bunk, a few metres down. Two men were huddled together, laying on straw. There were no pillows but they had rolled their jackets up and slept in their vests. I decided to to the same.

It was impossible not to touch them and equally impossible not to smell them. I tried, as much as possible, to keep my distance but only managed a centimetre or so. Usually, I sleep on my side, or stomach, but the stench was too much – I didn't want my nose anywhere near the bed (if you could call it that), so I turned, awkwardly, onto my back and stared up at the roof. There was a skylight over to the left, slightly. There were no stars, visible – only darkness, as if nature itself had abandoned me – had abandoned us. I felt truly alone.

Still, I thought, *it could be worse – there could be a light shining in your face, making sleep impossible*. I almost chuckled to myself. The words to Monty Python's *Always Look On The Bright Side Of Life* came into my mind and I had to stop myself from whistling it aloud. I sat upright and began to actively think. Since our arrival (in fact, since Zeus had attacked us in 2017, sending us here), we had only been passive; thoughts had occurred to me, but I hadn't deliberately thought – I hadn't *pondered*. I did so now, having an internal dialogue with myself:

"You can't do anything about your situation at the moment, Chris, so there are some choices to make: are you a glass half full, or glass half empty kinda guy?" I knew the answer to that – I had always been an optimist.

"Better not talk about glasses being emptied, or you might piss yourself."

"Fine. Let's keep going with the positives, then, shall we?"

I made a list, as follows:

1) Health. Although I wasn't in good shape, I'd never had any health problems. I'd never even had to have a filling. (This reminded me that I hadn't brushed my teeth. I didn't like going to bed with dirty teeth; especially since I had started kissing girls. Well, Araminta in particular. I forced my thoughts back to the list).

2) Knowledge. I wasn't just any teenager – I was born the year that the twin towers were destroyed. I knew that the Nazis would lose the War, and there were bound to be other bits of useful information along the way that could help me survive.

3) Skills. Well, I could play the piano and I was quite good with technology. Maybe that would be useful.

4) *Four*...I racked my brains for something else to list. Ah, yes, the translator! I still wasn't exactly sure how it worked, except that I was able to understand all the German, and speak it at will – without having to think in English, first. This seemed to be a particular advantage – there were lots of other languages here, which I would have to try to learn, but at least I could understand the Nazis. Orders seemed to be given in German. And perhaps I could let them know I speak English. That might be useful. As long as they didn't suspect I actually was English.

5) I thought again about the timing of our arrival here. On the one hand, if it had been earlier (or later) and we hadn't got caught up with the transport of prisoners, we might have been able to escape. "*Unlikely*," I told myself. "*You saw the electric fence, right? You'd have most likely been shot.*" True. Perhaps there was a particular fortune to being sent here at that moment. Or, perhaps, it was design.

I let my thoughts turn to Zeus and The Olympians. What interest would they have in sending us here, now? Why hadn't they just killed us? Perhaps they intended us to be tortured? Perhaps it was because they had promised Araminta's father to keep us alive? There was no way of knowing, of course, but I decided that the absence of other time travellers – particularly The Olympians – was a good thing. At least, it made this place less complicated, and less complicated was good because it meant we could concentrate on surviving.

"In fact," I said to myself, "they've done us a favour, really. By sending us back here, they've essentially let us know that they haven't made any significant changes to the timeline of the mid-twentieth century. Plus, I expect they've written us off. Meanwhile, it gives us plenty of time to plan our next move!" This thought cheered me, until

I noticed how much I had been thinking in terms of “us.” A sadness and a fear came over me: What of Araminta?

Somewhere, in the darkness, she would be experiencing similar terrors. At least, I could only hope so – only hope, that was, that she was still alive.

A wave of despair struck me.

“And what of the other list?” My other self seemed to say: “What of the negatives?”

I didn’t want to but I forced myself to draw up a mental list of the worst things:

1) I had no Chronosphere. That meant no means of time travel. That meant I...we (oh, please, let it be *we* and not *I!*) were stuck here.

2) “Here” was Auschwitz.

3) Death surrounded us. The living conditions were appalling. I’m sure it would only get worse. Hygiene and food were bound to be the priorities and, from what I could see (and what little I’d gleaned from history), they were in equally short supply. On the one hand, I was a little overweight so I wouldn’t waste away as fast; on the other hand, I get hungry very easily. In fact, I could sense my stomach gurgling. The last thing I ate was some frozen chips and a bit of melon. Oh, and some soup. It seemed like days ago. If I wasn’t shot, or gassed, I would probably die of starvation. I mean, really and truly.

4) I had no way of knowing what was happening to Minty. This was, by far, the worst of it. I still felt responsible for everything that had happened: I was the one who had persuaded her to involve her father. If not for that, we wouldn’t have been lured back to Ancient Greece and from there to the encounter with The Olympians in 2017... “*But it was Minty’s decision to try to save Arti,*” said the other voice in me. “*Yes,*” I replied, “*but it was the future me that got us into this mess in the first place.*” I sighed. It was no good rehashing the past. Especially when time travel is involved. I needed to concentrate. The list. The list meant a plan.

5) I didn’t know Poland (that’s where I was, I was sure my historical geography was right) or Polish, or whatever other languages I kept hearing. I needed to be able to spin a convincing story to the Nazis as well as my fellow prisoners.

6) Between now, and the Allied victory stood who knew how many days? How many weeks, or months – or years? Could I survive long enough? Even if I could, how would I return to my own time? How would we defeat The Olympians?

The list ended here, for it had brought me back to the beginning and

the first problem. I laid back down and stared into the darkness.

“There is nothing you can do to change your situation,” I told myself. “You have been sent to an extermination camp. You are not in control anymore – *they* are.” But who were *they*? Feeling the rough material of the prison uniform stick to my skin I realised it wasn’t Zeus and his pantheon – it was the Third Reich. But history had dealt with them. Most of these soldiers were dead. Some had even been executed. It was not us who were living on borrowed time – it was them!

I closed my eyes and let the feeling of panchronosthesia take hold me me – the sense that all times are happening simultaneously: *Now*, we were confronting The Olympians; *now*, I was meeting Araminta for the first time; *now* we were saving the world – saving Time; *now* I was going to sleep in a concentration camp that was already liberated, seventy years ago...

Liberation. Yes – it *would* come. *Has* come. I just needed to hold on. *We* needed to hold on. Evil was having its day but night would fall on it – as surely as it had fallen tonight. I only hoped that we had arrived at twilight. “Please,” I whispered into the void, “please, don’t let this be the dawn of Evil’s Day. Please, not its dawn.”

Only the silence answered. Sleep overtook me.

CHAPTER TWO

It was still dark when they woke us. We were directed towards some sort of washroom and allowed to use the latrine. I shan't describe that, now. Perhaps, later, you'll be able to stomach the details.

They gave us something approximating black coffee. It was wet, at least, and fairly hot. I was thirsty. For some reason, a memory surfaced of a hot August afternoon in the summer holidays. I had gone cycling with Josh and Sam – we'd been going about an hour when Josh got a flat, so we decided to pause for a rest whilst he got his puncture kit out. I'd gone to take a drink from the bottle I kept on my bike but it was empty. I'd forgotten to fill it. Sam had just drained his and Josh had only taken cash to buy a drink at the shop we'd planned on stopping at for lunch. It was only another half hour to get there but, at the time, I thought it was the most thirsty I could be.

There was, as it turned out, a fair amount of waiting around. I tried to engage a few men in conversation but they were either foreign or uninterested.

A few hours after the sun came up, those of us who had arrived the previous night were marched off, through the camp and under the ominous *ARBEIT MACHT FREI* gate, to a large, red-brick building (or mini-complex of buildings). Architecturally, it didn't look similar from my school.

Inside, we queued for what seemed like hours, until we got to a table. Prisoners, overseen by SS officers, were taking our details.

"Name?"

"Christof Bonhoeffer," I said, giving the name we had used in 1923.

"Date of birth?" I froze. Not knowing the year meant I was in danger of giving a date making me too old, or too young. Younger was

probably more dangerous. I made some quick calculations and said,

“20th September, 1925,” deciding to keep as much to the truth as possible. I held my breath, expecting a query but it seemed to pass. That probably meant it was earlier on in the War than I’d hoped.

“Place of birth?” That was trickier. I didn’t know Europe very well, let alone Germany. The only place I’d visited was Munich. I could remember a few street names from our visit. It would have to do.

“Munich,” I said, as confidently as I could. The man recording my details looked up.

“You’re German?”

“Yes.”

“Criminal?”

What did I say? What was the right answer? I didn’t know what sort of crimes one committed to be sent to Auschwitz. Apart from the “crime” of being Jewish of course.

“No. I...err...” I faltered, and went with something like the story I had started to tell the SS officer last night.

“My father – ” I started.

“Name?”

“My father’s name?”

“Yes.”

“Jeremy. Bonhoeffer,” I added.

“Occupation?”

“His? He’s an inventor.”

“Yours.”

“Musician.” This didn’t seem to impress him, so I added that I was a translator.

“Languages?”

“English. I speak English and German.”

“Why?”

“My father’s work. We travelled America and England. I suppose that’s why I’m here.”

“A political,” he said. I wasn’t sure if it were a question. He wrote something on a slip of paper and passed it to me.

“Next!” he called.

I was herded to another table, where I was to hand the slip of paper to the prisoner sat behind it. Without warning, he grabbed my left arm, tore at the sleeve and started to stab me with an implement, scratching the numbers into my skin as he read them from the slip. He took some

ink and rubbed it into the wound. I stood back from the table and nursed my arm. Through the blood I could make out the numbers 28643. I no longer had a name.

More waiting. I supposed it must have been something of a logistical nightmare to process so many people, mostly arriving at the same time.

Eventually, I was directed to another barracks, or *block*, as I learned the term was. It was empty, apart from us. We were told everyone else was at work. We would be assigned to a *kommando* (work party) for the following day. We were not permitted to sit down on the bunks, so we just wandered around.

I tried to make some conversation again and managed to get a few words out of a man with a particularly pointed chin, who told me, in broken German, that he had been a professor of logic but now he had seen, first hand, the Nazi's logic, he would have to tear up his papers and start again. I think it was a sort of a joke – he certainly made a snorting sound that approximated laughter but there were tears in his eyes.

At around midday (not that I had access to a clock at the time but that, I learned, was when we were fed) we were given soup. As it was our first “meal” in the camp, we were given a red tin bowl and spoon. The spoon was rough around the edges.

“Guard these with your lives,” we were warned. It was not hyperbolic. We would not get a replacement bowl or spoon. They were, officially, the only possessions we were allowed. The soup tasted disgusting, I'm not going to lie. It was (I think) supposed to be potato, or vegetable. It was thin, and brown, and tasted bland – but, somehow, not in a neutral way. At least it was warm. The sound of us scraping the bottoms out a few minutes later reminded me of the first rehearsal I went to of the school steel pan band. It was so bad I didn't go back again. I think it's because Ryan Chetwind had signed up for it, thinking it would make him look cool. He kept saying he was going to spend the summer in Jamaica. It was funny – if you'd asked me about Ryan a week ago, I'd have said I couldn't stand him; not because he was unpleasant, just stupid. He took the mickey out of me for getting things right. Now, I'd have given anything to hear him call me a stupid name. I'd have thrown my arms round him. The truth was that, although surrounded by people, I felt lonely. No one was my countryman. No one belonged to my time (or, rather, it was I who didn't belong). I spoke Araminta's name aloud, hoping, somehow, she might hear me.

After this, we were taken outside to a huge square and made to line up, for what seemed like an eternity. The shoes were definitely beginning to rub my feet. I wished I'd been able to keep my trainers. I thought back to what the professor had said about Nazi logic. If I were to run this camp (I mean, if I were sick enough to want to), I would, at least, see to it that people had right-fitting clothes. It seemed so inefficient to make people unnecessarily ill – supposing, that is, that one wanted to actually get work out of them. I was still holding on to the naïve view that Auschwitz was, primarily, about labour, instead of extermination. Perhaps the execrable gate had got to me. Perhaps that was all their cunning – I was starting to believe that work might make me free. At least, that it might save me from immediate death.

At the very moment I was finishing this thought, I heard a trumpet blast and a band struck up, playing a march. I generally hated march music. Back in Year 8, the Head of Music, Mr Whistler (I know, right? I'm not making this up. One of our Food Tech teachers was a Miss Baker, and Mrs Carpenter taught DT. We used to think it was deliberate) kept me behind after class:

“You don't blow anything, do ya, boy?” he said. Like many of our teachers, he seemed a bit old-fashioned, although he hadn't gone as far as Mr Travis, calling us all by our surname. He also had a bit of a Cockney accent, which Josh could impersonate pretty well.

“Sorry?”

“You're a pianist, ain't cha?”

“Sort of. I'm practising for my Grade V. And my teacher promised to teach me the Jazz syllabus next.”

“Fine, fine,” he said, more to himself than to me, and made a clicking sound with the roof of his mouth.

“Trouble is, bit of a lonely instrument. And, now that Matthew's left, there's no one at the bottom end.”

“Bottom end, sir?”

He looked me up and down and nodded, before taking out his enormous collection of keys (which he clipped onto the belt hook of his faded, green trousers – the only pair I ever saw him wear – such that he had to keep pulling them up during lessons) and unlocking one of the music cupboards, which he promptly disappeared into.

“Here,” he said, stepping back out of the cupboard backwards with a few clangs and handing me a battered instrument which probably used to be gold coloured (well, brass) but was largely encrusted in green rust (or mould). It was heavy and almost as big (or as small, depending on

how you look at it) as me (I grew a lot that summer holiday).

“What is it?”

“It’s a tuba.”

“Oh.”

“Well, whatcha say?” He was panting from the effort of retrieving the instrument and wiped his large forehead with the sleeve of his yellow shirt (which really didn’t go with the trousers).

“Thank you?”

“No, no, no – take that as read. I mean, will you play it?”

“Well, I don’t know how to, sir.”

“Easy! Just blow a raspberry into the mouthpiece like this” – he demonstrated and, after wiping it with the other cuff of his sleeve, invited me to do likewise.

“Don’t puff your cheeks out. Push the air through!”

I managed to make a note which sounded like the fog horn of a ship. It was quite pleasing, actually. Mr Whistler gave me a nod of approval and showed me how to hold it and where to place my right hand on the three valves.

“You know about the harmonic series?”

“No, sir.”

“Why not? It’s on the Year 9 Scheme of Work – I wrote it myself. Haven’t you been paying attention to my lessons, boy?”

“I’m in Year 8, sir.”

“Oh, yes, quite right, quite right.” He proceeded to lecture me on the harmonic series – basically the notes one could naturally make by adjusting one’s embouchure (shape of the mouth) and the force of blowing. It took a bit of practice but I was able to pitch higher and lower notes. The valves simply altered this series by a semitone or more.

“That’s the theory, at least. In practice, you just want to learn which stops to put down for which notes. Here, you’d better have this.”

He thrust a faded *Tune A Day* book at me and told me to get on with teaching myself, promising to check in with me once a fortnight or so.

“I’ll expect you in Junior Windband after Easter, all right?”

“I’ll do my best, sir.”

“That’s the spirit.”

“Err, sir?”

“Yes?”

“Is there...a...um...case for the tuba, please?”

There wasn’t but he let me keep it in school until I could transport it home, having promised I would practise it every day. As Mum could

never finish work in time to pick me up I managed to bribe Josh with some sweets one day to help me carry the blasted thing home (Kirsty point blank refused). Within six months I'd managed to pass Grade 2 which was enough of a standard to *oom-pa* my way through most of the music in windband. However, it was really difficult to see my music over the top of the instrument and this Year 9 boy kept emptying his spit valve onto my shoe during rehearsal so I gave it up the following Autumn. Whenever I heard a windband play a march I thought back to that slightly torturous year. No...not torturous. That word had a much more literal meaning here.

The next day I learned the reason for hearing the band: there was a camp orchestra who played every morning as the *kommandos* marched off to work. We paraded (if you can call it that) in columns of five. I had been assigned to a work party a mile or so up the road. Having been up since 04.30 or so I was tired, to say the least. I was also hungry, having scoffed the bit of dark bread I'd been given the night before, instead of saving it, as I saw many of my fellow prisoners do.

It was heavy work. I had to break bits of stone up and transport them in a cart (which I could barely lift) to the other side of the quarry. Within the first five minutes, I had slipped and cut my finger. It wasn't deep – a scratch, really – but I almost asked for a plaster, forgetting where I was. I sucked it instead, and then received a blow from the kapo for “resting.”

Fortunately, it was overcast. No one wanted the sun to beat down on us – not without suncream or water to drink. At least we had our caps to keep the bit of sun which made the odd appearance, out of our eyes.

We were given a short rest for soup at around midday. I took no shame in licking the bowl like a dog afterwards. I'd even got a bit of potato peel in it. Perhaps things were looking up. I started whistling to myself. I still had *Always Look On The Bright Side Of Life* as a sort of earworm. (Bloody Josh – it was his fault for making me watch classic British comedy films and TV. And for introducing me to all his dad's old records). Without thinking – whilst the others were still resting – I turned the bowl over and put it on my head like a hat and started singing.

Needless to say, this attracted the attention of the kapo, who screamed something about my not having enough work to do and

launched at me with his truncheon. I instinctively ducked and the bowl came off my head. I put my arm up to shield myself from the blow. It never came. I tentatively lowered my arm and saw the hand of an SS officer grasping the truncheon. My watch was on the wrist.

“So, we meet again,” said the officer. Now, in the daylight, I could observe him more fully: he was perfectly Aryan. A small mole on his left cheek the only blemish on his chiselled face; a Roman nose hovered over medium lips. He looked about twenty.

“Good day, sir,” I said, as cheerfully as possible.

“And what were you singing about on this fine day?” The softness of his voice and the apparent politeness were disconcerting. One wrong move and he might have me shot (or shoot me himself) – or, at the very least, beat me.

“It’s called, ‘Always Look on the Bright Side of Life.’” This elicited laughter.

“But you were singing in English, I think?”

“Yes – I’m sorry. I learned it in English, you see,” I said, truthfully.

“And what is it in German?”

I gave a translation of the main lyrics (those I could remember). It seemed to amuse him.

“Come, teach it to me,” he demanded.

I started with the chorus and the whistling part. He was having difficulties with whistling.

“You, kapo – whistle!” The kapo obliged (he was quite good).

“It’s catchy, isn’t it?” The officer called some of his comrades over and I was made to teach them the chorus. They clearly enjoyed it as much as he did and I had to make up most of the words of a verse I only half remembered.

“Franz!” said one of the others – with dark hair and a slightly wonky nose, “Imagine Herr Himmler whistling this next time he goes to meet the Führer!”

“Hey, we could write our own verse,” he continued: “When you’re feeling all alone and you’re working to the bone, just remember things could get a whole lot worse: for whoever is your boss – be it Himmler, Hanz, or Höss, at least we don’t live in this bloody hearse! And...”

The men gave a resounding chorus and clapped each other on the back, applauding their lyrical comrade in particular.

As suddenly as a squall forms, a cloud seemed to come over Franz who looked at his (my) watch and straightened himself up.

“Back to work,” he commanded. “We’ve quotas to meet.”

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I bowed my head in deference and he fished inside his coat pocket and produced a cigarette, which he offered me. Perhaps sensing my hesitation, he said,

“If you don’t smoke, someone will.” His lips curled in a smile and I thanked him and put the cigarette in the only pocket my jacket had (on its breast).

When he fell, I didn’t notice, at first – only that the cart seemed to suddenly get heavier. I was at the front anyway, so I had my back to him. We had only paired up after lunch. He didn’t give me his name (he didn’t speak German) but we managed to communicate enough to work out the mechanics of loading the cart and transporting it across the site. His clothes were particularly soiled and his body, practically skeletal. I wondered how long he had been there. How long he had suffered. When he fell, his suffering was at an end.

It wasn’t like seeing the bodies I had seen in other centuries. They had all been murdered, in the prime of life. The violence of those deaths had made me sick, of course, but, looking at the emaciated corpse of this man felt entirely different – perhaps because there was so little to distinguish his dead body from how he had looked five minutes before. Perhaps it was because I felt, as I looked into his vacant eyes, that I was looking on my own future. Perhaps it was because none of our eyes danced with life in that place.

We loaded him onto a particular cart and I helped another two prisoners carry him – and the three others that fell that afternoon – back to the camp.

As we marched through the gate that evening, the cheerful music the orchestra played seemed especially macabre.

A group of prisoners took our dead off us and we returned to our block. A few men started singing something. I couldn’t understand the words but it was plaintive and beautiful. Seeing how intently I was listening, an older man next to me, who wore a yellow triangle imposed on an inverted red one, explained what it was:

“It is the *Kaddish* – the prayer for the dead. ‘*Y’hei sh’mei raba m’varach l’alam ul’almei almaya;*’ this part means, ‘Blessed be God’s great name for all eternity.’”

“It’s beautiful,” I said. It was the first time I had heard God invoked here and it surprised me.

“But, forgive me,” I said, “Does it not seem to you that God’s great name is being...how do I put this? Sullied?” (Sullied is a good word. Mum said it sometimes if I had ever done anything that she thought brought the family into disrepute).

The old man stared at me and nodded, slowly. He put his hand to his chin, as if stroking a beard that used to be there.

“God’s name can never be sullied as long as we remember Him.”

“But has He remembered you?” I blurted out, without thinking.

“Tell me, young man, that song you taught the Germans this afternoon – do you remember it?” I hadn’t noticed him being there and I felt, somehow, ashamed. I nodded affirmatively.

“And did you intend for them to sing it?”

“No,” I said. “No, it was for me. And,” I added, truthfully, “I was hoping I might cheer some of us up.”

“But they took your song and made up their own words, didn’t they?”

“Yes.”

“And all the time, you remembered what it had meant to you, and what it was meant for?”

“Yes.”

“It must have made you sad to think what they had done with your song.”

“It did. I started to hate them for it. I started to hate myself. But there was also something in the way that they were singing that made me sort of sad for them. That probably sounds silly. Crazy. Sick.” It was only in answering his questions that I managed to find the strength to process all I had felt that day.

“My son...” he said, and leaned in close to me so that I could feel his breath on his face and see deeply into his eyes – his eyes where life still danced:

“And so it is with God.”

That night I didn’t notice the stench of my bunkmates or curse their bones sticking into me.

CHAPTER THREE

The next day was a Sunday. I wouldn't have known, had it not been for the fact that there was no work. Frankly, this took me by surprise. I couldn't imagine the Nazis giving us any slack. Perhaps it was because even they realised it would be impossible to keep us working 365 days straight; it soon became clear, though, that they wanted some down time themselves: with very few *kommandos* to oversee and minimal guards needed to police the perimeter (the electric fence and guard towers with snipers were effective enough), most of the men had the day off to enjoy. And enjoy it they did:

I could hear the orchestra playing what must have been a concert for several hours during the afternoon. As for me, I desperately tried to find someone who could tell me about Araminta.

I was able to glean – from several broken conversations – that this was the first transport of women. Most (so it was heard) had come directly from Ravensbrück concentration camp. They had, temporarily, been housed in blocks 1-10. My block was 18. I asked how difficult it would be to sneak into the women's barracks, past the iron sheets and concrete posts they had erected. I was laughed at by the first person I asked. The second replied, “Not at all, difficult. All things are easy. Like choosing if you want us to say *kaddish* for you after your visit or before?”

It seemed ill-advised to try.

Two of the men I was sharing a bunk with, Jakob and Eli, became almost cheerful as we headed to the barber. I had only started shaving last year (which was really hard; not having my Dad around meant there was no one to teach me how to do it and, despite Sam trying to show me once, I mostly just cut myself a lot and came out of the bathroom covered in tiny dots of tissue) and my facial hair didn't grow very quickly but it was something to do so I went along and stood in the queue with them.

“So today is Sunday,” I said. “Do you have any idea what date it is?”

“Why?” said Jakob, “Do you have somewhere to be?”

“Oh, you know how it is – hot date.”

“Where will you take her?” said Eli, playing along. He spoke better German than Jakob and had a wide grin, although he limped rather badly, from an injury he had sustained six months ago, when a pile of bricks fell on him. Jakob told me, in private, that he had actually dived in front of an SS officer when he saw the bricks fall, and saved his life. This had caused quite a stir in the block – some spat on him and said he should have let the Nazi pig die but Eli quoted the Talmud and said all life was God-given and that, to save a single life, was to save the world. The officer, in gratitude, had seen to it that Eli was not sent to the gas – despite being unable to do hard labour. He was sent to an “easy” *kommando* in the kitchens, peeling potatoes – where he didn’t need to use his leg. Eli did tell me that his stay in the camp “hospital” was not one he wished to repeat and advised me not to get ill.

“You, know – the pictures,” I said, trying to get the language right, although none of us was speaking his mother tongue.

“What’s on?” asked Eli.

“There’s a new film out, actually, that I’ve been meaning to see – *Wonder Woman*?”

“Never heard of it.”

“So, she’s this Amazonian princess, right, who’s grown up on an island with no men...”

I proceeded to tell them as much as I could remember from the comics – leaving out anything past the 1940s and emphasising her crushing Nazis. It seemed to amuse them. I wondered if I shouldn’t draw on my film knowledge to entertain more of my fellow prisoners.

“Sounds like this *Wonder Woman* has captured your heart more than your young lady,” said Eli. “I’d lay it off a bit if you talk to her about this Amazonian.”

“Oh, no fear of that – Araminta knows how much she means to me all right,” I said – hoping it was true. I made a mental note to tell her at the first opportunity, and to take her to see *Wonder Woman* when we got back. It was bound to still be showing, somewhere – it had only been out a couple of weeks. I exhaled, slowly – I was doing it again – thinking with my 21st century brain. I might have left my time in June 2017, but this was, now, my present. “No,” I told myself, “You’re a time traveller, remember. All times are simultaneous to you. It doesn’t matter if you

miss a film – you can go to see whatever you want on their release dates without having to wait!” Yes, I thought in reply to myself, *but only with a Chronosphere. Without it, I’m stuck here. Now. But when is now?*

“So, you see,” I said, aloud, to Jakob and Eli, “I really do need to know what date it is – in case I miss the film.”

Eli chuckled. “Well, it’s March, I’m almost certain. You’ll forgive me, it’s sometimes rather hard to keep track.”

“You can’t be more precise than that?” I asked.

“Sorry. It’s late March, judging by the weather.”

“And the year?” I asked.

“Now you’re just being funny, kid.”

I laughed along with him but pressed the question until he told me, in an exasperated tone:

“The same year it’s been since New Year’s Day – 1942.”

1942. That meant three years. We had to survive *three years!* I could feel the tears welling up in my eyes. We were nearly at the front of the queue for the barber, and I went to push past Eli, out of the line.

“What’s the matter?” asked Jakob.

“Something I said?”

“I...I didn’t think I’d have to be here that long,” I managed, hearing my voice crack.

“That long? What do you mean?” said Jakob. He and Eli exchanged a few words in a different language I didn’t understand and then said:

“We all assume this is it – forever. You know, old Moishe who shared a bunk with us was convinced we’d be saved by New Year. He kept himself going through it all but at roll call on January 2nd, he was dead.”

“That’s what hope will do to a man,” added Eli. “False hope is about the worst thing you can give someone in here. Just about the worst thing you can give yourself. Much better to face the truth: there is no end to this prison because Auschwitz is not a prison, it is a purgatory. No, it is not even that – it is the first layer of hell, and the sooner you accept it, the sooner you will be able to endure this crepuscular – I do not say existence because it isn’t that – but this...shadowy not-quite-being.”

I studied his face. The mirth had gone from it, as if it were a sponge which someone had wrung out. His cheeks were pallid and the stubble on his chin seemed suddenly less distinguished than it had half an hour before. I almost believed him, almost sank to my knees right there and begged someone to shoot me. Almost.

But he was wrong. Gloriously, desperately wrong. My hope was not false. My knowledge was certain. This was certainly the worst prison I could imagine but a prison it was and it was the guards who were under a sentence. I did a mental calculation: a little over a thousand days. Once I'd been able to confirm what date it was in March, I'd be able to know for sure how many days left. I turned to my bunkmates and smiled:

“Moishe was right. Right, and wrong. Right month – wrong year,” I said, confidently. I wasn't sure if I should tell them the date – not because I thought they wouldn't believe me but because, if they did, they might find three years was too long a time to endure, so I kept it to myself and watched as Eli took his seat in the barber's chair. It was, of course, not a real barber's chair – just a stool, really – but I imagined him sitting in a proper one, after our release. “He'll only need another hundred and forty or so beard trims here – assuming one a week,” my inner optimist said.

“Yes,” I agreed, aloud. “We can hold on. January 27th, 1945. Put it in your diaries, gentlemen.” (It was probably just as well that they hadn't heard me).

That evening, around twilight, the orchestra gave a concert for us on a podium next the kitchen near to square where we stood for roll-call. It surprised me that not everyone went to listen, though I still had to do a bit of mild shoving to get near the front.

They played Beethoven and (I think) Mozart. (It sounded like him though, I suppose, it might have been Haydn. Despite listening to lots of classical music to get through the aural part of my piano exams I clearly hadn't paid enough attention). I recognised the main melody and started humming along. One of the violinists shot me a glance so I stopped.

Afterwards, I plucked up the courage to speak to the conductor. He didn't give me his name but his uniform had the number 994 sewn on it, which I took to mean he must have been there for some time. He also wore a kapo's armband (most of them wore these to advertise their position in the camp hierarchy).

“Excuse me,” I said, as deferentially and confidently as I could, “I

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really enjoyed the concert. Thank you very much.”

I received a sort of growl.

“I don’t suppose you have any places in the orchestra, do you?”

Another growl, accompanied by a scowl. He thrust his conductor’s stand at me and told me to carry it to the music room.

“You have until we reach inside to convince me to give you an audition.”

I picked up the stand and shuffled along with him (not knowing quite where the music room was, of course). As we went along, I embellished my musical education slightly and stretched the truth about having played for the King of England (which is to say, I let him infer I meant the current king, rather than Henry VIII, whom I had sort of ‘composed’ Greensleeves for, back in 1541). I added that I also played the tuba and wrote songs and knew a lot of English and American music that might not have reached them.

The walk was practically no distance. We entered Block 24 (basically, next to the kitchen) where there was a large room, with cabinets and shelves – where instruments and music scores were stashed. There were even portraits of composers lining the walls.

“There,” said the conductor, pointing to a space in the corner, where I deposited the stand. He said nothing else and I took it as a sign to retreat; it seemed I had failed to pique his interest.

“Well, thank you for your time, sir,” I said, bowing my head slightly to him. Something made me remember the cigarette in my pocket and I took it out and handed it out to him. He raised his left eyebrow (which was, I thought, particularly bushy) and, after an uncomfortable pause, took it.

“I’m sorry, it’s my only one,” I said, without knowing quite why (perhaps I was worried he’d think I had an endless supply and would come to rely on them).

“You’ve got initiative, kid, I’ll give you that. And balls. Let’s see if you’ve got some music in between those ears of yours.”

“You mean –?” I gestured towards the piano that stood over to the left.

“Not now. I’m tired. Some of us don’t have a day off work, you know.” He sighed and put the cigarette away in his own pocket.

“Come back after rehearsal on Tuesday and I’ll see what you’ve got. No promises, mind.”

I thanked him and returned to my block.

I'm sure it was because I was excited – nervous and excited – by the prospect of auditioning for the orchestra that I was careless the next morning.

We had got up at the *Apelle* as always and made our beds (yes, I know – they were hardly beds, but the stubenältester – or room leader – who was responsible for hygiene – itself something of a joke of course – was more insistent than my Mum about making your bed and he administered particularly harsh blows – mostly at your legs – as I found out first hand). Next, we went to wash.

This washing was done stripped to the waist and with very cold water. We were always thirsty of course but there were signs saying we shouldn't drink it and – for once – it seemed genuinely put there for our health. The trick was to sandwich your bowl and spoon (and any other possessions you might have retained) rolled up in your hat and jacket, in between your legs whilst you washed. My attention slipped and, before I noticed it, someone had pinched my bowl.

You might think it an odd thing to do; it was certainly a cruel thing – as I said before, we were permanently hungry and, without a bowl, you would get no soup. Without soup, you would die – well, quicker than with, I suppose. I looked around for the culprit but there was nobody in sight. At least, nobody obvious. Everyone around me was busy washing themselves, bowls between their knees. I hoped, for a moment, that I was mistaken – that it had simply fallen onto the floor. I didn't want to think the worst of any of my fellow prisoners. I wanted to believe in their goodness at least, but the truth of it was that desperation drives men to desperate measures. I wondered if I would ever sink so low as to steal from another prisoner. I hoped not. I wanted to retain whatever morality I had (and I still wasn't sure exactly what made an action moral but I was pretty sure stealing something from someone who might starve as a result was right out).

"Someone took my bowl," I said to Eli as we returned to the block to receive our morning coffee.

"That's bad," he said. "I'll see if I can organise you another."

I thanked him, unaware that the word "organise" was employed as a euphemism for "stealing." He disappeared and returned, a few minutes later, with a broad shouldered prisoner who wore a green triangle – marking him as a criminal.

"You need a bowl and spoon, I hear?"

"Yes. Someone –" I didn't complete the sentence, thinking it might

well have been him who took it.

“It’ll cost you.”

“Of course,” I said, wishing I hadn’t given the conductor the cigarette. I had nothing else of value.

“Shall we say, four rations?”

My heart sank but Eli came to my aid and admonished the man in (what I now recognised as) Polish.

“Three rations.”

“How about one?” I tried.

“You must be crazy!”

“No,” I said, “I hear the going rate for a spoon is half a ration.” I was making it up, of course but it was probably a good idea to appear to be in the know.

“That’s true. But a bowl is worth more than a spoon.”

“One and a half,” I tried.

“Let’s make it an even two,” he said. “I’ll give you the bowl now and you can eat at lunch; then, tonight, you give me your bread. When you do that, I’ll give you a spoon and you’ll pay the other ration of bread tomorrow evening. Agreed?” I looked at Eli, who nodded and shook hands with the rogue, accepting my new bowl.

“Here,” said Eli, passing me the knife he had managed to obtain some months before, “I recommend scratching your number on the bottom – like I have, see?” He showed me his bowl with his serial number on. I didn’t suppose it would prevent theft but it would probably prevent the same person selling me back what they’d just stolen – which was the distinct impression I got from the green-triangled man. As I paid him my bread that evening I realised that food was not only life in this place – it was currency.

By the time Tuesday evening came I felt weak. Eli and Jakob had been kind enough to tear off a handful of their bread ration the past two evenings but the labour was so exhausting I could barely muster up the energy to trek round to Block 24 for my audition. Somehow I did.

The light in the room seemed warm. The conductor was waiting for me and sat behind a table with another two prisoners. It was a bit like any other audition, I supposed. For the briefest of moments, I thought of the piano competition I was supposed to have been playing in, back in 2017. I wasn’t expected to win that and, even if I did, it would only

really be my reputation and Mr Thomas' that would be affected. Here, I had the feeling that something rather more urgent was at stake.

I took the seat on the piano stool as invited.

"What will you play?"

"Some Bach, first?" I said, raising my voice at the end out of nerves and making a mental note to be more assertive in my playing.

"Well, go on then."

I took a breath and ran my hands across the top of the keys. I hadn't played a piano since I had a quick practice at home before we time-jumped to 2005; it must have been weeks since then (for me). Could I even remember the first bar?

My fingers remembered. As I brought the left hand in, I gained more confidence; I closed my eyes and was back in Mr Thomas' study, hearing him shout out the dynamics. I was glad he made me learn everything by heart. That tricky ornament was coming up; the bit I always fluffed. I caught the cut on my finger and slipped but carried on.

"Sorry," I muttered as I brought the piece to a finish with a slight *ritardando*, "I cut my finger a few days ago."

"It was fine," said the conductor. "A little eager, but quite fine. Have you anything else?"

"Yes. Would you like to hear one of my songs?"

One of the others whispered something and the conductor stood up and said he would test my sight-reading first.

There were fistfuls of notes and it was in six sharps. I racked my brains as quickly as possible: F# major or D# minor. No obvious accidentals. Looked like it was in the major. The first four bars were marked *Adagio*. My favourite. Slow is good. Then it became *Allegro ma non troppo*. Less good but still, not too much. Lots of ledger lines in the left hand part but it looked like they were octaves. I placed my hands and reached my foot out for the pedal. I hoped I hadn't taken too long to look over it. In exams they usually give you thirty seconds or so.

I played the first chord, observing the *piano* dynamic and tried to bring the right hand out over the left and used the pedal to help me achieve the required *cantabile* direction.

Halfway through the fifth system of the *Allegro* section, I was interrupted. (Just as well – there were some semiquavers I couldn't quite read coming up).

"That'll do, that'll do. A few wrong notes but that's to be expected. At least you play with sensitivity."

"Thank you."

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“Well, as you’re here, we might as well hear one of these songs you mentioned.”

“All right,” I said, and searched my memory for the chords of *Fly Me To The Moon* – hoping they would approve of the sentiment and wouldn’t find it too modern. (I thought it was written in the fifties but couldn’t be sure). I forgot not to sing in English.

With my back to the door, I didn’t notice him walk in. I must have been halfway through the head for the second time though, when I heard a foot tapping. Taking it as a good sign, I decided to do a glissando and upped the tempo slightly. It was only when I came to the end and turned round that I saw that the foot was a highly polished black boot.

It was a senior officer, judging by the insignia on his collar. The other prisoners were stood to attention. The conductor started to apologise for allowing me to sing in English. My heart started racing.

“You will come with me.”

I leapt off the piano stool as quickly as possible and, avoiding eye contact, stood beside him as he marched me out into the night. We turned right out of the music room. Although I was still getting my bearings, I knew that the execution wall was to the right somewhere, and then, left. His heels clicked like bullets. He promptly turned right again and we were soon marching under the gate. I glanced at the little hovel where Minty had looked for the Chronosphere when we first arrived. He stopped.

We were stood outside the main fence, now. There was a clearing in front of the reception where we had been sent to get our tattoos. I heard they executed people there, too.

The officer cursed under his breath and turned right. He marched quickly and had long legs; it was a bit of an effort to keep up. Right again. I smelt something and looked up. Snow flew into my face. No, not snow. Not snow. I looked to the left and saw it – the chimney of the crematorium, billowing smoke and ash. I felt my legs tremble, resisted the urge to scream, or cry, or vomit and wiped my face with my sleeve.

We walked past.

“Here,” he said, pausing at the entrance of a hut. “Now, before we go in, I want you to answer me truthfully.”

“Of course, sir,” I said, knowing that the real truth would likely get me shot, or deported to some experimental facility where I would be tortured until I gave up the secrets of time travel. Here, truth was often

dangerous. When a Nazi said he wanted you to tell him the truth, he meant he wanted to hear a very specific answer to the question. It was, essentially, a game of *guess what I'm thinking of*. If you got it wrong, you didn't get to play again.

"Are you Mr Bright Side?"

"I'm sorry, I don't quite understand, sir," I said, truthfully – although I couldn't help but think of *The Killers*. Ironic.

"I heard from one of my subordinates that you have taught a song about the Bright Side of life? Yes?"

"Yes, sir."

"Tell me – what this song you sang tonight meant."

I translated the lyrics into German and he nodded.

"It's what I thought. Good. Good. I like this music. I like this positive thinking; you see – in here, there is too much...grimness. It doesn't do my men any good. Mozart and Beethoven are all very well but your music is more...upbeat. I want to put together a special band with some new songs. You'll be in charge."

"Me?"

"But this is to remain between us, understand? I'll have you transferred to the music block with the rest of the orchestra and you'll have your usual duties with them but I want you to form a five-piece, or whatever you need, for me."

"Of course!" I said, a little too enthusiastically.

"But watch your language," he cautioned me: "Not everyone is as tolerant as me about you singing in the Enemy's tongue."

"I'm sorry, sir – it won't happen again."

"Now, let's get you processed. Which block are you in at the moment?" I told him and he nodded, and, going up the steps to the hut, held the door open for me.

Inside, prisoners were typing up and making corrections to lists. A guard saluted the man I was with and he was instructed to have me give my details to one of the prisoner-secretaries and then have me escorted to block 25.

"I'll inform Nierychlo," he said to me and, pulling my sleeve up to read my tattoo, added, "Congratulations, 28643 – you have passed your audition."

"Thank you, herr..."

"Standartenführer Gross."

"Thank you, Standartenführer."

He turned on his heel and left.

“This way,” said the guard, and led me to a table where a tired looking prisoner glanced up.

“Number?”

I gave it.

“Name?”

“Christof Bonhoeffer.”

“Christof Bonhoeffer,” repeated the prisoner to himself as he typed. Over in the far right corner, under a desk lamp, another prisoner looked up. I glanced over but my attention was arrested by the one taking my details.

“And you’re to be transferred to Block 25?”

“Yes.”

“A member of the orchestra. That means you’ll be in a new *kommando* – the kitchens. Report there, first thing.” He carried on typing. I let my eyes wander over the room to the far corner again. The prisoner in question was a woman. I had not seen a woman for almost a week. Not this close. I could only really tell by the slight bulge in the shirt of her uniform (I couldn’t see her legs). She was looking at her work again. Her short hair stuck up at one point; the barbers on arrival hadn’t been exactly careful. *Poor girl*, I thought; *I bet she used to have beautiful hair*.

The light was poor over that side of the room and it was so short I thought my eyes were playing tricks with me at first but, no – it was definitely red. I held my breath and, as I was handed a slip of paper by the man who’d been dealing with me I willed, as hard as I could, for the girl to look up from her work. I felt my neck pulse and my heart fluttered.

Look up! Look up! I thought, intently. Perhaps I didn’t want her to look up. It was like with the Standartenführer – here, you didn’t want truth, you just wanted to hear what you wanted to hear.

I flinched as the guard took my arm.

“Come on, quickly, I don’t want you stood here all night.”

I apologised as he turned me around and started to march me away. I looked over my shoulder and saw the girl look up. My eyes met hers. They were blue.

Araminta was alive!

My heart raced all the way back to my new block – except it felt like

excitement, rather than fear. To my shame, I didn't notice the chimney excreting human remains as we passed it; afterwards, I felt a little guilty: after all, why should her life matter more than any of those others, now going up in smoke? She didn't – of course; she didn't matter any more because they didn't matter any less. I'd heard it said somewhere that a million deaths is a statistic and a single death, a tragedy. Being there – surrounded by death – was horrific of course, but the worst of it was that I felt I was becoming inured to it. I didn't want to be (and yet, in order to survive, I must); the ash that fell on my face – used to be a person whose face was precious to someone else. It wasn't six million – a number – it was six times a million – that many individuals. It was this that they tried to take from us – giving us uniforms, shaving our heads, taking away our names. I couldn't believe I hadn't recognised Araminta straight away. It had been less than a week. Forgiving myself for such thoughts, I indulged in thinking about Araminta. How had she seemed only another prisoner to me?

We had arrived at block 25 – which was only the other side of the kitchen (it was where, apparently, most of the members of the orchestra resided).

The SS guard who was accompanying me – who seemed bored, more than anything else, judging from the way he had been swinging his arms – instructed me to wait outside for a moment while he went in and spoke to the block elder. I was shown to a bunk with only one other occupant, on the second tier, and crawled in. He was trying to get to sleep and clearly resented having to share his blanket (which I didn't blame him for). I rolled my bowl, spoon, hat and shoes into my jacket – as I had been doing the past few nights, following Jabok's suit – and tried to go to sleep. I'd had no trouble sleeping the other nights (probably through sheer exhaustion) but my mind was racing. I tried to sit upright but bumped my head, so turned on my side and looked out into the rest of the dormitory. (Of course, calling it that makes it seem like some sort of boarding school; if it helps disillusion you, I'd remind you of the stench of the place. Although I hadn't mentioned this before, there was no toilet paper – we had to make do with grass – and as we had no underwear, our trousers were almost always soiled. I had taken to trying to wash mine in the mornings – you weren't supposed to, strictly speaking – but I hated the idea of stinking, even though I knew I did).

As I meditated on my restlessness, I realised that my mind was not racing about food (as it usually did) or how I was going to survive the

next day; instead, I was thinking of what we were going to afterwards. Yes – *we*. It occurred to me that, for the past six days, I had only *hoped* that Minty were alive; now, I knew. The first thing was to get to talk to her, somehow, and then – then we could begin to hatch a brilliant plan. “After all,” I said to myself, “I’m quite clever but, together – together, we’re unstoppable!”

The next morning I was told to fetch a tuba from the cupboard in 24 and take my seat with the band playing the marches for the *kommandos* going out to work. The tuba in question was silver in colour and in much better condition than the one Mr Whistler had lent me. It was also a lot heavier (or perhaps it only felt heavier; I was sure I had lost some weight already in a week). The other thing I noticed was a fourth valve somewhere towards the bottom of the instrument for my left hand (which I decided to leave well alone in case I messed it up more than I was probably going to anyway – after all, I hadn’t played a tuba for a year).

The parts weren’t too difficult, thankfully – although reading them was, as most of them were handwritten. There was also quite a wind and I had to use the bell of the tuba to keep steadying it – which then made it hard to see the conductor.

Over my shoulder I could make out the columns of stripes trudging past us. Occasionally, someone would catch me eye and – depending on the eye – glare or smile. More than occasionally, I would see one of the members of the column fall or flinch as they were beaten by a kapo, or officer.

My lips started to hurt after the third march and we must have played for an hour. The piano was definitely less physically exhausting.

Finally, the last column disappeared and, although we were halfway through a bar (and with a page of music to go), the conductor stopped us.

“Why didn’t we play to the end?” I asked one of the band members who played the cymbals as we carried our instruments and stands back to the music room.

“Why? It’s *prima aprilis!*” he said, with a wry smile. I gave him a blank look.

“First of April – fools’ day. It is Polish tradition we have a joke; so, today Franz stops before end.” He chuckled and I joined in – which made him laugh even harder. The truth of it was – as I found out from

subsequent experience that week – that the Nazis refused to let us play to the end. It was to remind us that *they*, not us, were in charge – and that we were not playing for the sake of the music but for their own purposes. We were, literally, instruments of the Nazi machine: it was simply more efficient to have the prisoners march to music in order to count them out of the camp (and back in again); it also made them walk faster.

After returning the tuba, I went to report to the kitchen. I was on potato peeling duty.

This might not sound so bad but, firstly, being surrounded by food all the time when you're starving hungry is something of a torture; secondly, the instruments we had were more like the sort of blunted thing you pick up in a pound shop; thirdly, my hands begun to hurt after a while.

The boredom, on the other hand, was not a problem. It gave me time to think:

The first thing I did was to calculate the number of days left: if it really were the 1st April, 1942, that meant I had...(mental arithmetic was never my forte, if you'll excuse the pun) 1032 days to wait out until the camp would be liberated. (I was doubly glad our school made a bit of a thing for Holocaust Memorial Day each year, else I might have forgotten the date). I told myself that each potato was like a day – the blade scraping the dirt off was really scraping hours off my incarceration – and each minute that passed was one closer to freedom.

The second thing was to think about this music group I was meant to organise for Gross. I didn't really know where to start. I had started singing the Monty Python song only because I'd had it in my head, and *Fly Me To The Moon* seemed, equally, to come fairly naturally. I had no real idea what would go down well, here – not just Auschwitz, but this decade. I didn't think some of the bands Kirsty listened to would be appropriate. I racked my brains for inspiration. The problem was that, even if I remembered some of the tunes, I was hopeless at remembering all the lyrics. Then again, I thought, it wasn't as if anyone else knew them, was it?

It really was as if a light bulb had gone on. I stood, staring at a potato I was halfway through peeling and it suddenly seemed so obvious: there *was* someone who knew the lyrics to these old songs (or at least, might): Araminta! But how to get her involved? Would I really be allowed to enlist a girl into this special band the Standartenführer wanted?

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“Faster, 28643!” I was cautioned. I grabbed the next potato.

The other benefit to being a member of the orchestra was that we were given a little more food. The conductor’s name was Franciszek (though everyone called him “Franz”) Nierychlo. He had been deported to the camp in 1940 (hence his low number) and become kapo of the kitchen. Some of the others told stories about him; others said he was not as good a musician as themselves – or others – but, somehow, he had been able to obtain a certain respect from the Nazis, who tolerated his sneaking us an extra ration of soup here and there; possibly because he kept such a tight discipline on the orchestra. Mind you, I’d rather have strict discipline and more to eat. I think the other reason that the Nazis tolerated us having the odd extra bit of soup was because we needed it, frankly: whilst the other *kommandos* got a day off on Sunday, we had to perform for the SS most Sundays. We also rehearsed twice a week (on Tuesdays and Fridays), in addition to our normal, twelve-thirteen hour shifts in the kitchen (in my case).

The cymbal player, was also a low number – lower, even, than Nierychlo: Czeslaw Sowul, number 167. He was, it turned out, quite the comic (hence his little April Fool’s gag with me, I suppose). The next Sunday (which was the first “concert” I performed in), he took me totally by surprise:

We had just finished playing Beethoven’s third symphony (which, after only one rehearsal, I found rather more challenging than the usual march music) and were switching round our scores when, from out of the corner of my eye I saw someone carrying a ladder, dressed as a chimney sweep. He put the ladder up to the kitchen and used it to climb to the roof and then, leaning into the chimney, started pulling out a string – like a magician might – at the end of which was a sausage. It was only when he brandished the piece of meat that I recognised Czeslaw. The SS officers (who had been enjoying champagne and beer all through the symphony) cheered him and one threw him a packet of cigarettes, as he took a bow.

Perhaps it was the key to his long survival. In that moment I made a decision to also use humour – not to pretend that we weren’t in hell – but to remind myself that even the Nazis couldn’t take away my core personality, or stop things being funny. I mean, when you think about it – the very fact that a fifteen year old boy, born in 2001 was teaching

Nazis Monty Python songs was so absurd I doubt even Terry Gilliam could have made it up. And I was determined to use that very absurd fact to my advantage.

Nierychlo had obviously been told about the “special group” I was supposed to put together and informed me that Gross had requested (or rather, demanded) a first performance the next Sunday afternoon – which gave me just under a week. I decided to keep the band fairly small; it was important that it was a success, of course, but I didn’t want to lose control of it and, besides, I was hatching a daring plan to meet with Araminta.

The first willing recruit was a trumpeter called Zygmunt. He also played the cymbals (who didn’t?!) and was particularly adept at improvisation. In fact, he told me, he used to sneak variations of Polish songs into the marches that the orchestra played to boost morale. He had thin lips but they curled in a smile with a dimple in his right cheek; it was impossible not to like him. I said he was different to the usual trumpet player (at least the ones I had met).

“How so?”

“Well,” I said, “You know how most trumpet players introduce themselves to each other?”

“No?”

“Hi!” I said, shaking his hand, “I’m Better-Than-You!”

It was a joke that Mr Thomas had told me, years ago, when he couldn’t be bothered to give me a proper piano lesson. Fortunately, Zygmunt found it funny and gave me a slap on the back.

“I like you – yes! Yes! We must keep up the humour.”

We needed someone on bass, I thought, but there was only one double bass and the man who played it was very serious about classical music, so we made do with the piano. We didn’t have a full drum kit but there was a snare drum and cymbals. Czeslaw volunteered himself but I was a bit worried he might get carried away with his practical joking, so I signed up another, older man called Kaz. Of course, there were no electric guitars, but I thought a clarinet would make a good addition and persuaded a younger Pole around my age (I thought) called Jan that it would be “a lot of fun.”

As for repertoire – aside from *Fly Me To The Moon* and *Always Look On The Bright Side* of life, I was drawing a blank. It was like the time, last Christmas, when Minty and I did karaoke and I couldn’t think of a single

song to sing.

“Well? What’s next, maestro?” said Zygmunt.

“Yes, come on Christof – I’m too hungry to wait for you to decide.”

A lyric came in my head.

“She gets too hungry to wait for dinner at eight!” I sang, and tried to work out the chords to *The Lady Is A Tramp* at the piano. Fortunately, about six months ago, Mr Thomas had decided to teach me how to vamp on the piano a bit.

“You only really need to know five chords,” he had said, chewing a soft pencil with one of those rubber caps you can put on at the end. He’d probably had the pencil for about fifty years – it was, basically, a stub, and full of his own teeth marks.

“One, Four, Five – those are major; two and six are minor. Assuming you’re in a major key of course.” I’d clearly looked confused.

“Here, I’ll show you.” He had shooed me off the piano stool and sat down in my place.

“So if we’re in G major, chord I – G, is major. Chord II, A, is minor; chord IV – C major, you see? Chord V is obviously D major – using the F# in the key signature from G of course – and chord VI is E minor. So, whatever your tune is, one of those chords will fit under any note of it – you see?”

I remember nodding but not understanding, until he demonstrated with a bunch of songs as I named them – showing me how to fit chords underneath all of them.

“Then you just add some extra notes – like a minor or a major 7th here, a second there – a suspended fourth and so on...till it sounds a bit more interesting.”

I whispered a “thank you” to Mr Thomas – wherever he was (probably a baby asleep in his mother’s arms) and another one to Josh – for making me listen to all those old records of his dad’s – and tried to remember the lyrics.

The others were obviously much better musicians than I was and they soon picked up the music. I’d managed to think of nearly a dozen songs which, when you factored in the time for improvisation, would give us an hour’s set or so. I hoped it would be enough.

The week went by quickly. We were rehearsing every evening after roll call and supper. A few other members of the orchestra came to listen to us, with a mixture of approval. I don't remember feeling quite as hungry – perhaps because of the adrenaline; perhaps because I knew that the time it would take to queue for the latrines was time we needed to secure the set, so I sold some of my bread rations for extra soup (it was easier to find somewhere to take a leak. In fact, the truth of it was there was a bucket in the dormitory. You *really* didn't want to have to take a dump in there but number one was all right – as long as the bucket wasn't full. The last person who used it when it got full had to go and empty it. That's assuming you'd be let out. I discovered how difficult this task was on the first Saturday night after joining the orchestra. As the putrid contents splashed my trousers, I made a mental note to get better at running without spilling things. At least I'd be able to win any future egg and spoon races at school).

On Sundays, when performing for the SS, we wore special clothing: white jackets with a red stripe on the back, and trousers with red stripes down the leg (just as well – it took me two weeks to get rid of the poo stains on my regular trousers). We also wore white caps and – bizarrely – yellow shoes. (I have no idea why). The best thing was, we got to wear socks. It was like a holiday for your feet.

The concert lasted about three hours. The SS men listened politely enough for the first fifteen or so minutes but they were mostly there to drink and smoke. They never applauded us but if they were in a particularly good mood we might get thrown a bit of food, or a cigarette.

As the others headed back to the music room, my band was escorted – by armed guard of course – to another room of the SS garrison (we had been playing in a larger hall).

There, Gross sat, with a dozen or so other men – mostly dressed in various SS uniforms, although there were two in ordinary suits. A maid, dressed in a traditional apron and black dress, served them cigars and other, blonde women (heavily made up) sort of draped themselves on the arms of several of the men, seeming to take their direction from Gross.

“Well then, let's have it, shall we?”

I gave a nod to Kaz and he used his drumsticks to count us in as we began to play *I Get A Kick Out of You*. I realised I had been holding my breath during the intro and barely took in enough air to sing the first

line but soon saw Gross tapping his foot. I hoped I wouldn't get a kick out of those boots. Zygmunt gave an astonishing solo and one of the men in suits (probably forgetting himself) even clapped his hands briefly after it, receiving a raised eyebrow from another SS officer.

We were clearly a hit.

"What did I tell you?" Gross said to one his compatriots as we finished our last number, "I have a mind for these things."

I was still sat on the piano stool and almost jumped when I felt his hand on my shoulder.

"Here, kid – at least you're German so I don't suppose you're all bad." He thrust the dregs of a glass of beer in my face. I drank it, gratefully (although hating the taste) and thanked him. I must have got foam on my mouth because he said something about looking like a dog – and then, as if someone had switched off a light, his tone lost its mirth and he shouted outside of the room. A guard came and, having saluted him, took us back to our block (via the music room).

That night I tapped my bunkmate on the shoulder. He spoke German very well and did not snore very loudly; we had become friendly enough.

"Johann, do you believe in God?"

"Certainly," he said. "Who else is there to *really* hate in this place?"

"You hate God?"

"Don't you?"

"Well, I'm not sure I believe in Him. That's why I asked." There were no Jews in the orchestra, and most of the men in our block were members of the orchestra, so I had not heard the muttered prayers I had done in my previous block.

"It is no good hating any particular German," he said, correcting himself to *Nazi*, after apologising to me.

"Why not?"

"Well, most of them are following orders. Yes, they can be cruel, or weak but they are just parts of the machinery, you see. Even the ones who give orders – even the commandant himself, is a cog, really. Albeit a cog with very sharp teeth."

"Yes, I suppose you're right; I hadn't thought of it before."

"Only God sits above it all – capriciously watching us suffer and inflicting suffering. What a bastard He is!" He had raised his voice here a little too much and got a few *ssbles* from those around.

"Let me put it quite simply," he continued: "If you were walking along the street back home and you saw an old lady being set upon by

two small children – wouldn't you do something about it?"

"Of course," I said. "I'd probably kick them in the shins and tell them to bugga off or something."

"Exactly."

"So why don't you kick the Nazis' shins, Christof? Why don't you pull them off the old men here?"

"I'm afraid of them."

"Well of course you are – who isn't? They have guns and dogs and there are thousands of them. You'd have to be mad to seriously contemplate it."

"So?"

"So, you have just proved my point – the only excuse for not intervening to help others is when you lack the power to do so. But God is all-powerful. So the only explanation is that He is malicious. That He, somehow, *enjoys* all this! Unless He doesn't know about it of course – but then, what sort of God is He? Either way, not one to worship, that's for sure."

"Then why say you believe in Him?"

"Well, Christof, for starters – I can't otherwise explain our existence so I assume there must be some sort of higher force."

"Can't it just be physics and evolution?"

"The problem with evolution is that it suggests things will steadily improve and that the weak will perish. And as I am feeling particularly weak, Christof, I prefer to have Someone to blame for the injustice of it all – rather than resign to there being no such thing as justice."

"I suppose," I said, slowly. Something didn't quite add up in his logic, though. Under Johann's system, there was a malicious, or unjust God. But that surely meant there must be a sort of sense of Absolute Justice above God by which He could be judged. It seemed easier to just assume we were alone – not that God hated us or had abandoned us, but that it was human beings who abandoned and hated each other.

"Hey, kid – why did you want to know, anyway?"

"Oh, just making conversation," I lied. My heart sank a little. After my encounter with the old man last week and everything that had happened since: the conspiracy of (what might be described as) minor miracles that had allowed me to glimpse Araminta; the *kommmando* I was in; even down to the lyrics and tunes I was able to remember...I had started feeling like there was a guiding hand, helping me. I wanted it to be true. But wanting things to be true is never a good reason to believe in them.

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The next morning I awoke a littler sadder and, I thought, a little wiser.



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