

STEPHEN P. SMITH

THE LAST SECRET OF THE SOUL

ONE BOY. ONE HOLOCAUST. ONE SURVIVOR.

'Compelling' J.S. Monroe



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Feitel sat on the edge of the wagon, his legs dangling out the doorway above a concrete platform. All along the train, soldiers unbolted and slid open the doors of wagons, dragged people out and kicked them away. Other soldiers held on to dogs, which strained at their leashes and growled.

With an encouraging smile, his mother grasped his hand and he jumped from the stench, the filth and the dead into a sea of people crowding onto the platform. They shuffled forward. His body took a battering from suitcases and bags: some stiff, some soft, some made of leather, others of tin.

He took a deep breath, inhaling the sweet and sticky air. 'It smells horrid,' he said, glancing up to his mother. She did not reply.

To their left, a snarling dog leapt up at a woman. She screamed, hands covering her face. Her companion, a young mother in a woollen overcoat and headscarf, clutched her baby to her chest.

'What's that big fence for?' Feitel asked, pointing ahead to a line of concrete posts covered with barbed wire. Beyond the fence was a collection of wooden huts, dark and foreboding. His mother tugged at his hand and drew him close. 'Why's your hand shaking? What are they burning in that chimney?'

She bent down and, in a quivering voice, whispered, 'We need to be quiet.' She kissed him on the forehead.

He gazed up at the chimney, stark against the crisp blue morning sky. Flames roared out of its top and thick smoke curved away, catching the breeze. 'Where are we?' Feitel said. 'Is Father here?'

She squeezed his hand and he remembered not to speak. Her matted, brown hair was hanging over the collar of her coat. She smiled, revealing her special tooth – the one with the two gold fillings.

The crowd surged, tearing his hand from his mother's. His body was jostled and he tried to fight against the wave, which carried him away. He twisted, fell and screamed for her.

A volley of gunshots peppered the air. The crowd stopped and he stumbled back to his feet. His eyes hunted for her among a sea of women, all with long brown hair and long brown coats. He trembled, his teeth chattered and his heart hammered.

'Do not push!' someone shouted through a megaphone. 'You're being lined up for work selection. Stand still. Do not push.'

For a moment, the crowd settled and Feitel heard his mother calling him. He called back, 'Mama, Mama!'

He strained his ears and, perched on tiptoes, listened out for her reply. People began to yell out in fear and he couldn't hear her. He pushed forward. The crowd was packed tight, his head and shoulders hemmed in by knees, waists and suitcases.

He called again. 'Mama, Mama!' A few people drew closer to their cases and he threw himself into the gap they made.

She called out again, her voice a bit stronger: 'Feitel, Feitel!'

He shouted back and stepped forward; people stood aside, making way for an outstretched hand. The outstretched hand

became an arm, followed by his mother's face, her full lips pursed with anxiety. Her hand dropped to his and she pushed her way through.

'Oh, Feitel,' she whimpered. She dropped to her knees, held him by his shoulders and fixed her dark eyes on his. 'Oh, my boy. Oh, my dear boy.' Her voice was melodic, warm and reassuring, though her face was ashen. She drew him close and rested her trembling cheek against his.

'Where are we?' he asked.

'I don't know. I'm trying to find out. Keep close to me,' she whispered. 'Promise me you'll keep close.'

'I will,' he replied. She grasped him by the wrist.

Another burst of gunfire cracked above their heads and the person on the megaphone ordered them to be silent.

The train's engine gave out its final hisses and sighs. Feitel lowered his head and kicked a few small stones into a heap. The crowd shuffled forward and he nudged the heap. Whenever the crowd stopped, he prodded the stones into different orders. When they drew level with the engine, the final wisps of steam were swept away by the same wind that carried the smoke from the chimney.

He studied the feet of a man and woman in front of them: his were clad in black socks, worn through at the heel, while hers were bare and tapped out a nervous rhythm. The man clasped her hand. Between their ancient bony arms, he could see a line of soldiers standing, guns at the ready.

A figure, dressed in a black uniform, surveyed them. His tunic buttons gleamed and a cross lay on his breast pocket. A side parting broke his swept-back blond hair. The man flicked a hand twice to his right.

The old couple in front of them, bent with age and cajoled by the guards, shuffled away, shaking.

'Oh my god,' his mother whispered.

They were now at the head of the queue and the man glanced them over. She tightened her grip on Feitel's wrist, raised his hands and offered them up. 'Look how long his fingers are,' she said. 'He's clever with them. He's strong. I am too. I'm a good worker. I can work all day and half the night.'

The man pointed. 'You follow that decrepit couple. The boy goes over there.'

'No,' she gasped, dropping his arm and covering her mouth.

Feitel tugged at her coat. She gulped hard then bent down and gripped him by his shoulders.

'Feitel,' she began, glancing to his right, where the man was now pointing to. 'See those people? Run after them and find somebody to look after you.' His mouth crumpled and a tear leaked from his eye. 'You need to be brave. Go now.'

He did not move. She reached forward and the edge of her thumb followed the tear down his cheek.

A guard stepped forward, hooked his mother to her left with his rifle and rattled it between their arms.

'Go,' she said, pushing him away.

The light was fading when Feitel and a group of other new arrivals were hustled into a dormitory hut. Naked bulbs, hanging from flex, cast dingy light across the room.

Some made their way to empty bunks while others milled around, unsure of what to do. Feitel crossed towards a window at the far end of the room, perching himself on the tailboard of a lower bunk. He peered out of the window in the hope he might catch sight of his mother but, amongst the shadows, cast by powerful lights beaming from the watchtowers, all he could see were guards on patrol with their dogs. The windows of the other huts were dark, the ground between them grey and worn.

The chimney, silhouetted against the darkness, blasted out flames, lighting its upper brickwork. Smoke, pale against the sky, drifted eerily away.

A hand settled on his shoulder, pressing the coarse material of his tunic down. He glanced up. A tall, shaven-headed man smiled down at him.

‘What’s your name?’ the man asked.

A stab of dread struck his stomach as he remembered his mother’s warnings about talking to strangers. His mind flashed back to when she wiped away his tear, telling him to find somebody to look after him.

‘Feitel,’ he replied.

‘Mine’s Leon Gruner,’ the man said, his mouth breaking into a smile. ‘Where are you from?’

‘Berlin,’ Feitel replied. ‘Do you know where my mother is?’

His smile faded and his eyebrows drew together. ‘When did you last see her?’ His voice was low and serious.

‘When we got off the train.’ Sensing it was somehow significant, he added, ‘A man made her go a different way.’

Leon nodded like he was confirming bad news.

‘Will she come back for me?’ he asked, bowing his head. He scuffed his foot on the wooden boards. He hoped somehow Leon held the key to her safe return.

‘Feitel,’ Leon said cautiously. ‘This is a concentration camp in Poland. A lot of people die here. Do you understand that?’

The agonising pain of his mother’s loss pierced his chest. Salty tears streamed down his cheeks, running into his mouth.

‘Do you understand?’ Leon asked, offering him a hand.

Feitel sniffed, drew up his bottom lip and blinked back his tears. He pushed Leon’s hand away and faced the window.

Leon said, in a lighter voice, ‘Tomorrow you can come with me to where we work. We call it Canada. Would you like to do that?’

Feitel lowered his head.

‘It’s where we sort through the cases people carried with them on the trains,’ Leon added.

Feitel swallowed a lump in his throat. Leon was being kind, tempting him with something exciting. ‘Why is it called Canada?’

Leon pondered for a moment. ‘A few months ago, two prisoners arrived from Auschwitz. There, they called their sorting rooms Canada, and the name caught on here. It’s a

country where the people are rich and free.'

With pangs of guilt for having pushed Leon's hand away, Feitel turned to face him. 'Can we go there?'

Leon shook his head. 'No.'

Feitel, realising Leon meant there was no way out of the camp, replied, 'I don't want to die.'

Leon ran his palm down the back of his shaven head. 'Let's hope you don't.'

*

Through tear-filled eyes, Feitel stared out of the window, tracking the moon as it rose above the camp.

Late in the evening, the door swung open and a beam of torchlight reflected off the window.

'You, get to your bunk!' a guard shouted.

Feitel, realising he should have found a bed, stiffened. 'I don't have one.'

The guard pounded towards him, his tunic flapping with the rhythmic motion of his gait. Feitel's heart froze and his stomach turned icy. He spun round and his eyes flicked across the bunks in search of a bed – each was a pigeonhole rammed with people glowering back at him. The guard grasped his arm in a vice-like grip, lifted him into the air and dumped him onto the rough boards of the nearest bunk.

'Always find a bed. And face me when you talk to me.'

The guard stomped off. With an aching arm and a bruised back, Feitel slid down between the bodies and the edge of the bunk. His hip pinched as it squashed against the boards.

'That's Otto Mark's space,' a boy said. 'He'll be back in a moment and he'll have you.'

'He always sleeps there,' another whispered.

'He collects the dead, and he'll collect you,' another added.

The whispers of the boys sent goosebumps shooting up Feitel's arms.

He lay awake amidst the grunts, snorts, coughs and cries of night terrors. Tears of loss pressed against his closed eyes; he wished and prayed for his mother's arms to cradle him. He remembered his first day at school, his mother leaving him behind, the hostility of the other boys – and her warm smile greeting him at the gates at the end of the day.

The door swung open and slammed shut again. Footsteps echoed down the hut and stopped at his bunk. Two hands slid beneath him and rolled him onto the other boys. His head hit the chest of one, his back hit the boards and his feet rested across another boy.

'Get out, this isn't your bunk,' one said.

Feitel didn't move. Elbows and knees were digging into him. They made room, keeping their blankets to themselves. He closed his eyes, praying for sleep to take him away from the loneliness and the cold.

He caught a sweet, sickly whiff from Otto's clothes. He tried to place it but couldn't remember where he had smelled it before. Cocking his head, he sniffed the unwashed bodies of the boys. Otto's scent was different.

Across the hut, a man began a deep and mournful chant in Hebrew. Others joined in. He longed for sleep to steal him away.

He remembered his father's words when he couldn't sleep. 'Think through your day, Feitel. Run it through your mind from start to finish and sleep will come.'

He began by recalling when he woke on the train, his body wrapped around his mother's feet as she reached down and stroked his brow. The air was stifling. Some people wailed, some banged the sides of the train, others screamed and pleaded for water. He remembered the brief exchanges his mother had with their new companions; the sobs of a family and the hushed whispers of his mother explaining their grandfather had been taken in the night; the pungent stench of urine, vomit and excrement; the long wait before the distant hiss of the steam engine; the jerk of the train as it clunked forward; people packed in, stood upright; how it ran for a few minutes until the engine let out a final, long hiss.

He thought about the unnerving clank of the wagon doors being slid open and the terror of the guards yelling, 'Out! Get out. Everybody out!'

He remembered the colour draining from his mother's face and the concern in her dark eyes as she wiped away his tear then pushed him away. Other memories thundered and raged through his mind: the men being ordered to throw their cases on a growing pile; men being beaten for hesitating; men being beaten for protesting; the series of barrack rooms they were forced to pass through; having to strip; and the piercing shame when he saw grown men naked.

Guards had prodded and poked their bare bodies as they jogged across a yard. A man, who cut his foot on a stone then stumbled forward and yelped with pain, was punched and kicked until he staggered back to his feet.

In the next room, Feitel's head was shaved, his dark brown locks tumbling to the floor. An ice-cold shower followed, and a dousing in powder pumped from a tube by a rotund female guard. She glared, unblinking, as they coughed and spluttered. Following that, he joined a long queue where they had to bend over to be examined using a pencil-thin torch.

The tattooist with the needle came next – a thickset man with a shaven head and a striped uniform. He'd grabbed Feitel's wrist and, without looking up, whispered, 'Any news from outside?'

Before Feitel could answer, the man in the queue behind replied. He was a towering giant with a protruding chin. 'The daily roundups are getting worse.'

The tattooist had nodded in resignation. As each dab of the needle bit into Feitel's arm, they continued their conversation. When the last digit was finished, he was waved towards a desk where a haggard-faced guard wrote entries in a book.

'Name?' the guard had asked.

'Feitel Scher.'

The guard wrote it in a book, glanced at Feitel's tattoo and wrote the number in a column next to his name. 'Go and stand by the door,' he ordered.

'Do you know where my mother is?'

The guard sneered. 'You'll see her soon enough.'

Feitel rubbed his arm to soothe the sting. The man with the large chin approached the desk, gave his name and held out his

arm for the guard to record the number.

The guard stared at the tattoo, checked his book and glared at the tattooist. 'That's the same number as that boy,' he said, pointing towards Feitel. 'You've tattooed the same number twice.'

The tattooist sat up straight, terror flashing across his face. 'I can change it.'

'Get on with your work,' another guard, who appeared to be in charge, ordered.

The tattooist shrank back in his chair.

'Which Jew was tattooed first?' the man in charge asked.

Terror washed over Feitel, raising the fine hairs on the back of his neck.

The guard at the desk waved an arm towards Feitel. 'He was.'

'Right,' said the man in charge. 'He can go, but that one,' he added, stabbing a finger towards the prisoner with the large chin, 'can go to the chamber. Take him there, before they close up. I don't want any confusion.'

The man was dragged away, his screams piercing the air.

They were then ordered to another barrack. The men calmed as each was allocated a striped uniform with a yellow triangle stitched onto the chest. Feitel collected a set from the smallest pile. A guard glanced down at him and spat.

He'd queued for a cap and a pair of clogs. They had run out and he shivered as a soldier was sent to find cloth caps and cloth shoes, which were emptied from a hessian sack. Once he had pulled them on and straightened his cap, a guard divided them into groups.

His group was marched to this hut, pushed inside. The door slammed shut behind them. He'd stood and gaped at the rows of hollow-eyed men packed into bunks.

Feitel woke in the dormitory hut, shivering with cold and covering his nose to mask the acrid stench of unwashed bodies. Otto Mark had gone, but the other boys were still in the bunk. Leon's words, that his mother was dead, crept through him, filling his veins with icy tendrils. He squeezed his eyes shut, trying to hold back the tears welling in his eyes. But the tears broke through and he began to sob.

'Shut up,' one of the boys to his left whispered, 'otherwise I'll take you to the gas chamber.'

Feitel screwed up his eyes and clamped his mouth shut to control his sobbing. He remembered his father's words – when he'd cried, *Think of something else to take your mind off it.*

A lone wasp landed on the bedframe. He flicked it, tracked its pathetic progress, then dozed for a few minutes. When he opened his eyes again, he counted the slats of wood high above the roof timbers, hoping to get back to sleep.

The door crashed open. Feitel jumped and his mouth turned dry.

'Get in line,' a guard shouted.

The boys to his left clambered over him, their feet landing on his stomach, chest and face. One of them muttered, 'Muller again.'

Feitel rolled over the edge of the bunk and dropped down, smacking his feet onto the floorboards. He shuffled forward and joined the back of the line, shaking with cold and dread in case he did something wrong. Muller strutted down the line, jabbing his finger at the men and boys as he counted. Once satisfied, he sneered and ordered Feitel and the men to file out of the hut. The other boys remained.

In the cold morning air, Feitel recognised a smell. Sweet and nauseating in the sticky air. It was the same smell that hung on Otto's clothes.

They were marched to a barrack where a line of wooden tables ran down the middle. The floor was made of wooden planks with grit, gravel and earth trodden in. The windows, covered in filth, allowed the glimmer of the camp's floodlights to filter through as squares of pale light. Cobwebs clouded the corners of the roof.

A man in front of Feitel hesitated, as if choosing which side of the tables to walk down. A guard lurched forward, striking the side of his face. The man sidestepped a second strike, then, from the table, collected a cup of dark brown liquid and a small ration of bread.

With the guard now appeased, Feitel copied the man's every move – stood back as he stood back, sipped from his cup as he sipped from his cup and lowered his head to avoid the eyes of a guard before collecting his rations. He bit into the bread; it tasted stale and was difficult to chew.

'Hurry,' Muller shouted.

Feitel jumped and panic rose in the faces of those around him. He swallowed his bread, chased it down with the coffee and wiped his mouth on his sleeve.

The man in front of Feitel glanced around. In one swift

movement, he shot out his hand and transferred a piece of bread to his pocket. Feitel froze. A feeling of dread crept up from his stomach; time stood still but no shout came from any of the guards.

The men edged forward and Feitel followed, his head hung low. They filed out into the overwhelming stench of the camp. A small amount of vomit rose into his mouth which he swallowed back down.

Muller kicked and spat as he marched them to a large workshop with rows of workbenches interspersed with pillars cut from roughly sawn wood. The floor was made from planks and strewn with sawdust. Naked light bulbs hung from braided flex. Wafts of stale air teased his nostrils. A second guard – a lean, sharp-faced man – joined Muller.

‘What are we doing today?’

‘Teeth and money,’ Muller said.

Each man made his way to a bench. Feitel stopped, his hands clammy and his shoulders tightening, not knowing where to go until the second guard pointed him towards a row of workbenches.

He eased forward, passing three rows of workers, and reached two free benches. Terrified of making the wrong choice, he stopped, blood pounding inside his skull.

‘Yes, that one,’ the guard said, pointing to the bench nearest to Feitel.

Muller stood over Feitel's bench, a canvas bag gripped in his hand. He untied the string around its neck and tipped out wads of banknotes and coins, scraping out the final few with his shovel of a hand.

'Sort it into piles,' he ordered. 'One for each type of note and one for each type of coin. And *don't* get any ideas, boy.'

Feitel busied himself, convinced Muller's eyes were never more than a blink away from him. He made piles of different notes and piles of different coins. He pictured the coins as towering buildings and the notes as the roads below.

The bench was covered in fine grey dust and when he was finished, he scraped it into a pile. He drew the dust towards him, coaxed it over the edge of the bench and scuffed it onto the floor.

A man with a crooked prison cap and deep-set eyes collected the piles of money. 'They'll beat you for cleaning the bench,' the man whispered, 'and they'll beat you for not cleaning it. Best save your energy for the beating.'

Feitel stared ahead, unsure of what to say or do. In his periphery, he was aware of Muller approaching with a small hessian sack. He stopped at Feitel's bench, opened the drawstring around the sack's neck and tipped out the contents. A pile of teeth scattered across the bench, some white, some yellow. Each had a forked root and a gold filling.

'Remove the gold,' Muller ordered.

Feitel lifted his hand, covering his mouth to stifle a scream. He did not want to touch the teeth but he had no choice. His heart quickened as he reached forward and plucked one from the bench. It was dull and hard. His stomach churned at the yellow enamel and the long, twisted root. He swallowed back sour-tasting bile. Vowing not to touch the root, he selected a small file from the tools on the bench and attempted to prise out the sunken filling. His right hand, clasping the file, quivered each time he stabbed at the filling and, try as he might to keep the tooth steady with his other hand, it slid all over the bench.

Muller approached his bench shouting, 'No, no, no!'

Feitel's stomach retracted and a small amount of pee wetted his crotch with an unwelcome warmth.

Muller grabbed a hammer and thrust it in front of his face. 'Tap the tooth until it breaks.'

Muller dropped the hammer, sending it clattering onto the bench. Feitel jumped and, hands trembling, picked it up. Muller stormed away.

Feitel took a deep breath and waited until his hand steadied, then brought the hammer down on the tooth. The tooth broke and so began the pile of gold on his bench.

Feitel found a rhythm and worked without pause or a break. He selected a tooth with his left hand, placed it down, cracked it, added the gold to one pile and swept the enamel onto another. He learnt to judge the swing of the hammer by the state of the tooth. And when he'd become skilled, when the job no longer required thought, when his mind was no longer so occupied, the chill memories of those last moments with his

mother knotted his stomach, weakening his knees.

'Don't pause, boy,' a man from behind him whispered. 'Muller is a hawk. Any change in rhythm and he'll have you.'

Feitel glanced up. Muller's eyes were upon him. He picked a tooth. It had two deep-set gold fillings – identical to his mother's. He staggered back a step. He wanted to ask somebody, to know for sure whether it was hers as his mind quivered in terror. But there was nobody to ask.

He rolled the tooth between his fingers. The two points of gold gleamed on the yellow enamel. It was similar to the fillings his father had been proud to pay for. He remembered how his mother would show him the tooth whenever he asked.

He slipped it into his pocket and glanced up – Muller was staring at him. Feitel plucked another tooth, but his hand shook so much he raised the hammer by no more than an inch. He had to strike the tooth to get Muller to look away. Shaking, he forced his arm up and pushed down hard. The hammer cracked onto the tooth.

'You!' Muller shouted.

Feitel's head shot up and, feeling dizzy, he clutched the edge of the bench with one hand.

'Yes, you,' Muller continued, pointing, to Feitel's relief, towards a middle-aged man with marks and pfennigs piled high on his bench. The man trembled and shrunk. 'What is your name?'

'Miklos Wiesel,' the man whispered.

The workshop fell silent. Tools lay motionless or were suspended in mid-air as each pair of eyes turned to the man.

Muller now stood over Wiesel. 'Turn out your pockets.'

Wiesel flinched. Muller grabbed him, pushed him to the floor and pulled a five-mark note from his pocket. He stuck his face in front of Wiesel's and yelled, 'You've been stealing!' The veins on Muller's thick neck bulged and his fist tightened around the note.

Wiesel tipped his head back but Muller caught him by the collar. The second guard joined them and Muller showed him the note. 'Squad Leader Baer, we have a thief.'

The colour drained from Wiesel's face, his hands shook, and his teeth chattered. 'That... that money is mine. It belongs to me. I-I brought it to the camp with me.'

'No money is yours. Jew money belongs to the Reich.'

'It is *mine*. I earned it outside.'

'Jewish money comes from theft. You ate while we starved. Now you starve while we eat. You didn't earn it outside, you stole it.' Muller tightened his grip once more and let go.

'No,' Wiesel whimpered.

Muller's face glistened with sweat. 'How do you look so well fed?'

Wiesel trembled. 'I'm not well fed.'

'You eat *more*,' Muller said.

'I *don't* eat more...' Yet his protest waned and the words tailed off.

In a second, Muller plucked his gun from its holster, spun Wiesel around and pushed the gun into the back of Wiesel's head. He cocked the weapon, the click echoing across the silent workshop. Wiesel trembled and his eyes widened.

The crack of the bullet echoed around the room, echoed off every bench, every wall, the ceiling and the floor.

Feitel raised his hands to his ringing ears. Wiesel slumped backward. Blood spread in a circular pool around him and turned the sawdust on the floor crimson, lifting specks that floated with the tide of death.

Muller straightened himself, glared at the workers and thrust out his chest. 'Work, damn you! Work!'

Wiesel's body twitched until death held it still.

A whisper came from behind Feitel. 'A man may swat a wasp in front of others, whereas alone he might let it go.' The words sounded unnatural, like those his father read out from magazines on a Sunday afternoon.

Muller kicked open the door. 'Baer, get him to the crematorium.' He pointed to two men working at nearby benches. 'You and you, carry the body.'

Feitel knew he had to return the tooth from his pocket but he hesitated, not taking the opportunity while Muller and Baer were distracted. Nor did he while the two men dragged the body, head first, towards the door. Instead, he shivered as Wiesel's cloth tunic rubbed across the floor like the sea running up a beach.

A guard was patrolling the grey ground outside – he stopped and stared at the body being dragged through the doorframe. Wiesel's tunic rode up, exposing his bare midriff. His right shoe was missing and, when his foot reached the threshold, his crooked toes and a bunion were silhouetted before they were dragged from the step. Baer exited with the men, slamming the door shut behind him.

Muller strutted down an aisle of workbenches, running a hand through his thick brown hair. 'Work, damn you! Work!' he ordered.

Each time Feitel broke another tooth, swept the enamel into one pile and shuffled the gold into another, the image of the pocketed tooth flashed across his mind. What if they had counted the teeth? What if it fell out and gave him away? He longed for another opportunity to return it but the eyes of ten thousand guards, and a thousand prisoners, willing to give him away, pierced his imagination.

As Feitel broke open the last tooth, Muller collected another small hessian bag from a bench near the door. Feitel took his chance, reached into his pocket, seized the tooth and placed it on the bench. He straightened his neck.

Muller stood over him. Feitel's hands trembled afresh, and he wondered if he'd been seen. But all the guard did was scoop the gold into the empty sack.

Muller's eyes fell on the solitary tooth left on the bench. 'Why have you stopped when there's a tooth left?'

Feitel quivered. 'I don't know.'

'Break it!' Muller shouted.

Feitel hesitated.

'*Break* it.'

'I think it's...' Feitel said, his voice fading.

'You think it's what?'

Feitel lowered his head.

'Break it!' Muller shouted again.

The workshop fell silent. Everybody was staring at him. He remembered Miklos Wiesel and began to tremble.

'Break it! smash it!' Muller roared, thrusting the hammer into Feitel's hand.

Feitel lifted it and brought it down with one sharp tap. The tooth broke. Muller collected the two gold nuggets, poured out the new bag of teeth and ordered Feitel to continue.

*

Feitel kept his head bowed, only glancing up from his task at the bench when Baer and the two men returned. His hands throbbed and he longed for the work to end. After what felt like another hour, Muller checked his watch, nodded towards Baer and called, 'Halt!'

Feitel stepped towards the door, recoiling when he realised nobody else had moved. Muller and Baer moved amongst the workbenches, collecting the gold and money. The gold was tipped into hessian bags, the paper money rolled into bundles and banded, the coins placed into separate bags.

They were marched, at a jogging pace, to another barrack. Feitel collected a bowl of watery soup from a side table and found a place to sit.

The man opposite Feitel lifted a wooden spoon to his lips. His nails were grey and pitted and his tunic slipped back to reveal a yellow, skeletal arm. 'Turnip today.'

'Do we have a choice?' Feitel asked, and the men around him laughed quietly as if they did not want to alert the guards.

'Yes, we've a choice. We eat what we're given or we starve.'

'Is it not always turnip?' Feitel said.

'It's been cabbage for as long as any of us can remember. Turnip is a change. Drink it before the guards move us on.'

Feitel fell silent and ladled the soup into his mouth.

They were marched to the latrines then to the dormitory hut.

*

The stale air of the hut was cold. Feitel's workmates filed to their bunks. Conversations murmured as they began to settle. Otto Mark lay alone, puffing out small, misty clouds of breath.

'Where are the other boys?' Feitel asked.

Otto stared at the wooden ceiling. 'They've gone.'

'How long have you been here?'

'Mind your own business,' Otto said. He rolled over and turned his back to Feitel.

Feitel did not fear Otto. Somehow, he understood he sought solitude rather than argument.

A voice spoke from behind him. 'He's been here longer than any of us.'

Feitel swung round and was thankful to see Leon Gruner. His mouth broke into a smile.

'Anybody who's been here a few days,' Leon continued, 'is an old-timer, expert in the trains and the signs from the chimney. Otto Mark has been here longer than that. Haven't you?'

Otto didn't answer. Instead his body tensed, pulling his tunic taut across his back.

'Don't ask him what he does though,' Leon said. 'Don't ask him how come he's better fed than us.'

‘Why?’

‘In every hut, there’s a man who has done a deal with the devil. A man might do awful things to gain another minute of life, but to gain another day, week or a year requires despicable things. Doesn’t it, Otto?’ He addressed Feitel: ‘They can’t just replace a man like that with another off the train.’

Leon’s dark eyebrows and dark eyes were a perfect match. Feitel admired his confident expression.

‘I want to keep this bunk,’ Feitel said.

‘Nobody is allocated their own bunk,’ Leon said. ‘But the others will get used to where you sleep and won’t bother you.’

‘They didn’t want to share it with me last night.’

‘The thing is, Feitel, a shared enemy doesn’t always make somebody your friend.’

Feitel didn’t comprehend what Leon meant. ‘Where is Canada?’

‘It’s where you work.’ He leaned his thin arm against the boards of the upper bunk. He smiled and added, ‘It’s also a country way across the sea, above America.’

‘How can I get there?’

Leon chuckled and his tunic swayed over his thin frame. ‘You have to head west to Berlin, then Paris, then perhaps England. There, you can board a boat for Canada. But—’

‘Can we go?’ Feitel asked.

Leon hesitated. ‘It’s not... Well, it’s not easy to escape. And if we did, we’d not be free long and...’

‘And what?’ Feitel said.

‘No, nothing.’

‘Please tell me.’

Leon pursed his lips as Feitel waited. ‘Well,’ Leon said, raising his eyebrows, ‘if you’re caught, you don’t get a second chance. They kill you.’

Feitel was silent for a moment, his hopes dashed. He said, ‘If you could go, can I come?’

‘How old are you?’ Leon asked.

Feitel thought to lie, to say he was older. However, he chose the truth. ‘Ten.’

Leon closed his eyes and gave a slow nod, smiling through tight lips.

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