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The Boy Who Saw

Written by Simon Toyne

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SIMON TOYNE

THE BOY
WHO SAW



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For my sister Becky, her husband Joe and for little
William Quinn Francesco Pingue, born 16/11/16.
Who knows what that boy will see?

I

*‘Three may keep a secret,
If two of them are dead.’*

Benjamin Franklin

1

Nothing else smells like blood.

Blood mixed with fear is something else again. Josef Engel had not smelled it in over seventy years – seventy years and he still remembered it like the years had been nothing. And this time the smell was coming from him.

He stared down at his shrunken body, his head too heavy to lift, old skin drooping like canvas over the frame of his ribs. Blood dripped vivid against the white of it, leaking from cuts in his chest that formed the Star of David. Other wounds tickled as they bled, slashes on his back where he'd been whipped, puncture wounds from something that had pinched his flesh together to cause fresh pain when he thought he'd already felt every kind there was. The pain was everything now, burning like fire through flesh that remained oddly slack and useless.

The man had come right before closing, walking into the shop and embracing Josef like an old friend. Josef had embraced him back, surprised by the action of this man dressed all in black like a shadow. Then he had felt the pinprick on his neck and tried to pull away, but the shadow man had held him tight and a cold numbness had quickly spread out from the pinprick and into his whole body. He had tried to call for

help but it had come out as a drooling moan and his head fell forward on neck muscles no longer able to support the weight of his skull. There was no one around to hear anyway and the man must have known, for he had not been agitated or hurried as he calmly steered Josef to the centre of his atelier through the headless mannequins. He had slumped to the floor in the centre of the room, his arthritic knees cracking like gunshots, another memory from seventy years ago.

Josef had watched the man's shadow, cast by the skylights above, moving on the polished wooden floor as he removed Josef's shirt. A blade had appeared close to his eyes, turning slowly so the light caught the sharpness of its edge before it moved to his chest and cut through white flesh down to the bone, the blood welling around the blade and dripping down his front to the floor. He had watched it all and gasped at the explosions of pain the blade drew from him, wondering how so much agony could be contained in his old body, and why the drugs that had numbed his muscles did nothing to block the pain. He was a prisoner in his own flesh, feeling everything but incapable of doing anything to stop it. Warmth spread over him as first his blood then his bladder and bowels emptied. When the smell of that hit him he had started to cry because the humiliation was painful too.

Josef had not been this afraid since the war, when pain and death had been commonplace in the labour camps. He had escaped death then but now it had caught up with him. He watched its shadow move away across the polished wooden floor, heard the front door being unlocked and hoped that maybe the shadow man was leaving. But the door was relocked and the shadow returned and something was placed on the floor in front of him.

Tears sprang to Josef's eyes as he read the faded gold

lettering on the wooden sewing machine box – *Pfaff*. It was the same make as the machine he had learned to sew on, before war had come and the world had gone dark, when all he'd wanted to do was listen to the purr of the busy needle and make beautiful things with it. Holes had been drilled in the curved top of the box and a small hatch fitted on one side with a sliding bolt keeping it shut. A faint scratching was coming from inside.

'Du weißt warum dies dir passiert ist?'

The man's German was accented and Josef didn't recognize the voice. He tried to look up again but his head was still too heavy.

'You know why this has happened to you?' the voice repeated, and a phone appeared in front of Josef's face, the light from the screen too bright in the evening gloom.

'Erinnerst du dich hieran?' the voice asked.

Josef squinted against the brightness and looked at the black-and-white photograph displayed on the phone.

'Erinnerst du dich hieran?' the voice repeated. 'Remember this?'

Josef did remember.

A hand swiped the screen and more photographs appeared, stark images of terrible things Josef had witnessed with his own eyes: piles of bodies in mass graves; skeletons behind wire fences, on their knees in the mud, too weak to stand, their bony shoulders tenting striped uniforms, shaved heads hanging forward while men in grey uniforms stood over them with whips and guns or the strained leashes of snarling dogs in their leather-gloved hands.

'You should have died in the camp,' the voice said. 'We should have wiped away the stain of you back then when we had the chance.'

Josef stared into eyes sunk deep in skull-like faces and imagined bony hands reaching out for him across the distance of seventy lost years, and pushing into his chest.

'*Der bleiche Mann,*' he whispered, his numbed tongue blurring the words.

The shadow on the floor moved closer. 'Tell me about him. Tell me about the pale man.'

'*Er kommt,*' Josef replied, his tongue wrapping around a language he had not spoken in decades. 'He is coming.' His mind was drifting now, fogged by the intense pain spreading out from his chest. 'He will save me *und die Anderen* . . . *Comme la dernière fois.* He will come and save us again.'

'*Die Anderen,*' the voice said. 'Tell me about the others. Tell me what happened back in the camp. State your name and give me your confession.'

Josef hesitated for a moment before starting to speak, the words flowing out of him in a steady stream, loosened by the drug and the feeling that as long as he continued to talk he would be allowed to live. 'I kept it safe,' Josef said when he had finished his confession, his hands tingling as the drug began to wear off. He reached up to where the skeleton fingers continued to tear at his heart and pain bloomed.

'What did you keep safe?'

'The list,' Josef gasped.

'Tell me about the list.'

'*Der weiße Anzug,*' Josef clutched his chest and pushed back against the pain. 'The white suit. We promised to keep it safe and we did. All these years we kept it safe.'

Josef managed to raise his head a little and stared up at the outline of his killer silhouetted against the skylights. The man reached down and Josef closed his eyes and braced

himself for some new pain, but something touched his face and he opened his eyes again and saw a white tissue in the man's hand, dabbing at the blood around his eyes as gently as a mother cleaning jam from a child's mouth. Josef started to weep at this unexpected gesture of kindness. He could smell disinfectant on the man's hand and saw that he was wearing thin surgical gloves the same colour as skin.

'Remember the camp,' the man asked, 'remember what it was like at the very end, all those bodies piling up and no one left to bury them?' He moved over to the wooden box and twisted the tissue until blood squeezed out between his latex-covered fingers. 'Do you remember the rats?' He bent down and fed the tapered end of the tissue into one of the larger holes and the scratching intensified. 'All those walking skeletons but the rats never went hungry, did they?' The tissue twitched and was tugged inside the box with a flurry of squeaks and scratching. 'I caught these rats near a chicken farm almost a week ago. They haven't eaten much since – only each other. I wonder how many there are left?' He reached down for the bolt holding the hatch shut and Josef felt panicked pain explode in his chest. 'Or you could tell me more about the white suit and I'll keep the box shut.'

Tears dripped down Josef's face, stinging as they salted the wounds on his chest. The pain was unbearable now. He had never escaped the camp, not really. He had carried it with him all this time, and now it was bursting out of him again.

'Tell me about the suit.' The man slid the latch across but held the door shut.

'The pale man,' Josef said, shaking uncontrollably, his breathing shallow. 'We made it for him.' He dragged his eyes from the box and looked desperately over at the door

as if hoping he might be standing there. ‘He said he would come for it. He said it would keep us safe. We made a deal. He will—’

Pain erupted inside Josef, a jagged explosion of glass and fire that forced all the air from his lungs. His eyes flew wide and he crumpled to the floor, gasping for breath but getting none. He lay on his side and saw a thimble lying deep under one of the workbenches, worn and familiar and bent to the shape of his finger over long years of work, the same thimble he’d had back in the camp, back in that cellar. He had lost it a month or so ago and looked for it everywhere. And there it was. And here was he. The pain was consuming him now. Swallowing him whole. Pulling him down. His killer dropped to the floor, cutting off his view of the lost thimble, and Josef felt a pressure on his neck and smelled rubber and disinfectant as fingers checked for a pulse. Josef’s view shifted as he was rolled on to his back and he heard a thud and felt a fist hammer down on the centre of his chest, heard a rib crack but didn’t feel anything because the pain inside him was already too great.

Josef looked beyond the silhouette of the man and up to the sky where thin white clouds slid across the deepening blue sky. He had worked in this room for over forty years but this was the first time he could remember looking up. He had never looked at the sky in the camp either, had always found it too painful to gaze up at such simple, boundless beauty when all around him was ugliness and horror.

The man continued to pound on his chest but Josef knew it was pointless. There was no saving him now. The man in the white suit was not coming. He would not cheat Death a second time. He took a last, deep, jagged breath. Stared up at the indigo sky. And closed his eyes.

* * *

He stopped pounding on the brittle chest and looked down at the tailor's broken body. He could see the outline of ribs beneath the dark blood and papery skin and watched for a while to see if they moved. They didn't.

He took another tissue from his pocket, balled it up and wiped it around the slashed, wet edges of the star then stood and moved through the silent, headless crowd of mannequins to a blank section of wall on the far side of the atelier. He pressed the bloody tissue to the wall, dabbing it on the chalky surface and returning to the body whenever the tissue ran dry. It was full dark by the time he had finished but he could see what he'd written on the wall. Death was not enough for *Die Anderen*, they also had to know it was coming and feel its shadow on their backs, exactly as it had been in the camps.

He began to search the atelier. No one was due back here until morning, so he took his time, working steadily and searching the main house too, looking for the list and the suit Josef Engel had mentioned. He found nothing.

When he had finished, he stood in the centre of the atelier and looked down at the still figure on the floor, listening to the scratching and squeaking rats and the clock striking midnight in the hallway. He wondered if Josef had wound the clock that morning, not realizing it would keep ticking after his heart had stopped. Time had run out for the old man, like it did for everyone in the end – like it would for him soon enough.

He felt tired and empty and the pain in his head was starting to grow but he wasn't finished here, not quite. He moved over to the wooden box, lifted the hatch on the side and dark shapes poured out, scraps of darkness scrabbling across the polished floorboards towards the scent of blood.

They swarmed over the body, fighting and squeaking as they tugged at the cooling flesh and each other as they went into a feeding frenzy.

The man watched them for a long time. Listening to the tick of the clock and thinking about the list and what he had missed, and everything he had to do before all of this would be over.

2

Madjid Lellouche snicked away another withered vine before looking up. He knew he would be in trouble if he was seen to stop work, even for a moment, yet something made him pause and turn – and then he saw him.

The man was maybe fifty feet away, passing in and out of view between the plane trees lining the Roman road built at the same time as the vineyards. The road was directly behind where Madjid was working and lower down the hill, so no movement could have caught his eye. He was also far enough away that the sound of footsteps could not have reached him, even if the wind had been in the right direction, which it wasn't. There was no wind today anyway, only sunlight and the melting ground mist and the promise of another day of solid heat that would sit like a boulder on his back as he worked, drying the ground to dust between the green lines of vines.

Madjid shielded his eyes against the glare of the morning sun and watched the man pass in and out of view between the trees, moving through the mist that pooled in the lower valley. He was pale and slender and tall and wore a light suit jacket that looked formal and old, and his hair was white though he seemed young, moving with the smooth grace of

a dancer and not the stiffness of a man of advanced years. Madjid listened out through the whine of insects for the sound of his footsteps and heard instead the snap of a twig behind him, and the swish of a cane cutting through the air followed by the sharp burn of sudden pain.

‘The fuck I’m paying you for?’

Madjid turned and raised his arms against the next blow. ‘*Désolé*,’ he called out, backing away from the man with the stick in his hand. ‘*Désolé, monsieur*.’ Madjid bumped against the vines and a handful of grapes pattered on to the dust, their skins wrinkled and spotted with blight.

‘Sorry doesn’t get the work done.’ The cane sliced back down and Madjid felt the bite of it on his forearm and fell to his knees. He stared up at the large, sweaty figure of Michel LePoux through a gap in his raised arms and saw anger burning in piggy eyes staring out from a bright red face. ‘*Désolé, Monsieur LePoux*,’ he said.

The cane rose again and Madjid closed his eyes against the blow. Heard the swish of it coming back down and the slap of it striking skin, only this time he felt no pain. He opened his eyes and looked up. LePoux was standing right in front of him, silhouetted against the bleached blue sky – and so was the man from the road.

‘Ouch,’ he said, in a voice that was low like thunder and soft as the wind through the vines. ‘*Ça fait mal*’ – *That hurt*. He stretched the word ‘*mal*’, like the locals did, and it came out sounding more like ‘*mel*’.

LePoux tugged at his cane, trying to free it from the man’s grip but he held on to it with little apparent effort, despite the fact that LePoux was twice the weight of the stranger. LePoux stopped tugging and glared at the man. ‘You’re trespassing.’

‘And you are violently assaulting someone,’ the stranger replied, ‘which of those crimes is the greater, do you suppose?’

‘Crime?’ LePoux spat on the ground. ‘There is no crime. This man is mine and what I do with *my* property on *my* land is *my* business.’

He yanked the stick again and the stranger let go, sending LePoux stumbling backwards. He grabbed at the vines and more shrivelled grapes pattered to the ground. The stranger dipped down to pick one up. ‘Your country banned slavery in 1831.’ He crushed the grape, sniffed the pink juice, then licked the end of his finger and looked up at LePoux. ‘So how can this man be your property?’

LePoux stood up and pulled his sweat-damp shirt away from his skin. ‘I don’t know who you are, monsieur. Your accent’s local but I know that you’re not. I know everyone around here – law, lawyers, judges, everyone – but I don’t know you and you’re trespassing on my land, so if I want to chase you off it with a stick or a shotgun, no one here would say a thing against it.’

He raised his cane again but the stranger didn’t move. ‘How long has this land been yours?’ he asked.

‘My family’s been here for five generations,’ LePoux replied, puffing out his chest.

The stranger stared at LePoux and shook his head slowly. ‘Pity you won’t make it to a sixth.’

LePoux’s face flushed red and his knuckles whitened. He lashed out with the cane, bringing it down hard on the stranger. LePoux was fast but the stranger was faster. He stepped aside as quick as blinking and the cane smacked on to the ground where he had been standing. LePoux stumbled forward, unbalanced by the force of the blow, and the stranger stamped

down on the middle of his stick, breaking it in two with a sound like snapping bone, then twisted and kicked LePoux so hard he flew right through the vines and landed in the next row in a tangle of wire and foliage.

He smoothed his suit jacket down and held out his hand to Madjid and he felt the strength in it as he pulled him to his feet. His hand was solid like marble and strong like a blacksmith's, though with none of the coarseness of work upon it, and he seemed both old and young, his white hair ageing him but his smooth skin making him seem youthful. He could have been any age between twenty and sixty, though his eyes were old and black and deep, like staring into a well.

'The next town,' the man asked in his low voice, 'what's it called?'

'Cordes,' Madjid replied. 'Cordes-sur-Ciel.'

He nodded. 'And is there a tailor there?'

'Monsieur Engel.'

'What about a man or a place called *Magellan*?'

Madjid frowned and searched his memory. He wanted to help this man who'd helped him but the name meant nothing. 'I'm sorry,' he said. 'I've never heard that name.' He felt bad, like he had let him down in some way.

The stranger nodded and frowned. 'Thank you for your time,' he said, then he turned back to LePoux. 'Your land is rotten,' he said, plucking a leaf from a branch and holding it up so the sun lit up the orange and black tiger stripes on the green leaf. 'You have esca in all your vines but, given the sorry state of your land and the way you treat your workers, I would imagine you have neither the funds nor the reputation to get the help you need to cut it out. Your harvest will fail and you will be forced to sell, sooner rather than

later.’ He dropped the leaf and turned back to Madjid. ‘You should leave,’ he said. ‘There’s nothing for you here but pain.’ Then he tipped his head in a courtly way and walked away.

Madjid watched him leave, moving through the vines and back towards the road. Behind him he heard crashing and huffing as LePoux scrambled back to his feet.

‘Get back to work,’ he said, picking up the broken halves of his cane and looking at them before throwing them to the ground.

Madjid looked around at the vines, the tiger-striped leaves glowing orange on almost every plant. The stranger was right, the crop was already lost. And when rot had claimed the whole harvest, LePoux would blame him, call him lazy and beat him as he drove him from the land without pay. He needed to get away from here. It was so obvious he felt like he had woken from a spell. He had been blinded by his lack of options and by his blind faith in hard work. He looked back at the stranger who had opened his eyes. He was almost at the road now. ‘What’s your name, monsieur?’ he called after him.

‘Solomon,’ the man replied without looking round, his voice as soft as before but carrying back to Madjid as clearly as if he had shouted it. ‘My name is Solomon Creed.’