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The Book Thief

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Extract

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Death and Chocolate

First the colours.
Then the humans.
That's usually how I see things.
Or at least, how I try.

Here is a Small Fact

You are going to die.

I am in all truthfulness attempting to be cheerful about this whole topic, though most people find themselves hindered in believing me, no matter my protestations. Please, trust me. I most definitely *can* be cheerful. I can be amiable. Agreeable. Affable. And that's only the As. Just don't ask me to be nice. Nice has nothing to do with me.

Reaction to the Aforementioned Fact

Does this worry you?
I urge you – don't be afraid.
I'm nothing if not fair.

Of course, an introduction.

A beginning.

Where are my manners?

I could introduce myself properly, but it's not really necessary. You will know me well enough and soon enough, depending on a diverse range of variables. It suffices to say that at some point in time, I will be standing over you, as genially as possible. Your soul will be in my arms. A colour will be perched on my shoulder. I will carry you gently away.

At that moment, you will be lying there (I rarely find people standing up). You will be caked in your own body. There might be a discovery; a scream will dribble down the air. The only sound I'll hear after that will be my own breathing, and the sound of the smell, of my footsteps.

The question is, what colour will everything be at that moment when I come for you? What will the sky be saying?

Personally, I like a chocolate-coloured sky. Dark, dark chocolate. People say it suits me. I do, however, try to enjoy every colour I see – the whole spectrum. A billion or so flavours, none of them quite the same, and a sky to slowly suck on. It takes the edge off the stress. It helps me relax.

A Small Theory

People observe the colours of a day only at its beginnings and ends, but to me it's quite clear that a day merges through a multitude of shades and intonations, with each passing moment. A single *hour* can consist of thousands of different colours. Waxy yellows, cloud-spat blues. Murky darknesses. In my line of work, I make it a point to notice them.

As I've suggested, my one saving grace is distraction. It keeps me sane. It helps me cope, considering the length of time I've been performing this job. The trouble is, who could ever replace me? Who could step in while I take a break in your stock-standard resort-style holiday destination, whether it be tropical or of the ski-trip variety? The answer, of course, is nobody, which has prompted me to make a conscious, deliberate decision – to make distraction my holiday. Needless to say, I holiday in increments. In colours.

Still, it's possible that you might be asking, Why does he even need a holiday? What does he need distraction *from*?

Which brings me to my next point.

It's the leftover humans.

The survivors.

They're the ones I can't stand to look at, although on many occasions, I still fail. I deliberately seek out the colours to keep my mind off them, but now and then, I witness the ones who are left behind, crumbling amongst the jigsaw puzzle of realisation, despair and surprise. They have punctured hearts. They have beaten lungs.

Which in turn brings me to the subject I am telling you about tonight, or today, or whatever the hour and colour. It's the story of one of those perpetual survivors – an expert at being left behind.

It's just a small story really, about, amongst other things:

- a girl
- some words
- an accordionist
- some fanatical Germans
- a Jewish fist-fighter
- and quite a lot of thievery.

I saw the book thief three times.

Beside the Railway Line

First up is something white. Of the blinding kind.

Some of you are most likely thinking that white is not really a colour and all of that tired sort of nonsense. Well I'm here to tell you that it is. White is without question a colour, and personally, I don't think you want to argue.

A Reassuring Announcement

Please, be calm, despite that previous threat.
I am all bluster –
I am not violent. I am not malicious.
I am a result.

Yes, it was white.

It felt as though the whole globe was dressed in snow. Like it had pulled it on, the way you pull on a jumper. Next to the train line, footprints were sunken to their shins. Trees wore blankets of ice.

As you might expect, someone had died.

They couldn't just leave him on the ground. For now it wasn't such a problem, but very soon, the track ahead would be cleared and the train would need to move on.

There were two guards.

There was a mother and her daughter.

One corpse.

The mother, the girl and the corpse remained stubborn and silent.

'Well, what else do you want me to do?'

The guards were tall and short. The tall one always spoke first, though he was not in charge. He looked at the smaller, rounder one. The one with the juicy red face.

'Well,' was the response, 'we can't just leave them like this, can we?'

The tall one was losing patience. 'Why not?'

And the smaller one damn near exploded. He looked up at the tall one's chin and cried, '*Spinnst du?* Are you stupid!?' The abhorrence on his cheeks was growing thicker by the moment. His skin widened. 'Come on,' he said, traipsing through the snow. 'We'll carry all three of them back on if we have to. We'll notify the next stop.'

As for me, I had already made the most elementary of mistakes. I can't explain to you the severity of my self-disappointment. Originally, I'd done everything right:

I studied the blinding, white-snow sky who stood at the window of the moving train. I practically *inhaled* it, but still, I wavered. I buckled – I became interested. In the girl. Curiosity

got the better of me, and I resigned myself to stay as long as my schedule allowed, and I watched.

Twenty-three minutes later, when the train was stopped, I climbed out with them.

A small soul was in my arms.

I stood a little to the right.

The dynamic train guard duo made their way back to the mother, the girl and the small male corpse. I clearly remember that my breath was loud that day. I'm surprised the guards didn't notice me as they walked by. The world was sagging now, under the weight of all that snow.

Perhaps ten metres to my left, the pale, empty-stomached girl was standing, frost-stricken.

Her mouth jittered.

Her cold arms were folded.

Tears were frozen to the book thief's face.

The Eclipse

Next is a signature black, to show the poles of my versatility, if you like. It was the darkest moment before the dawn.

This time I had come for a man of perhaps twenty-four years of age. It was a beautiful thing in some ways. The plane was still coughing. Smoke was leaking from both its lungs.

When it crashed, three deep gashes were made in the earth. Its wings were now sawn-off arms. No more flapping. Not for this metallic little bird.

Some Other Small Facts

Sometimes I arrive too early.
I rush,
and some people cling longer
to life than expected.

After a small collection of minutes, the smoke exhausted itself. There was nothing left to give.

A boy arrived first, with cluttered breath and what appeared to be a toolkit. With great trepidation, he approached the cockpit and watched the pilot, gauging if he was alive, at which point, he still was. The book thief arrived perhaps thirty seconds later.

Years had passed, but I recognised her.

She was panting.

From the toolkit, the boy took out, of all things, a teddy bear.

He reached in through the torn windscreen and placed it on the pilot's chest. The smiling bear sat huddled amongst the crowded wreckage of the man and the blood. A few minutes later, I took my chance. The time was right.

I walked in, loosened his soul and carried it gently out.

All that was left was the body, the dwindling smell of smoke, and the smiling teddy bear.

As the crowd arrived in full, things, of course, had changed. The horizon was beginning to charcoal. What was left of the blackness above was nothing now but a scribble, and disappearing fast.

The man, in comparison, was the colour of bone. Skeleton-coloured skin. A ruffled uniform. His eyes were cold and brown – like coffee stains – and the last scrawl from above formed what, to me, appeared an odd, yet familiar, shape. A signature.

The crowd did what crowds do.

As I made my way through, each person stood and played with the quietness of it. It was a small concoction of disjointed hand movements, muffled sentences, and mute, self-conscious turns.

When I glanced back at the plane, the pilot's open mouth appeared to be smiling.

A final dirty joke.

Another human punchline.

He remained shrouded amongst his uniform as the greying light arm-wrestled the sky. As with many of the others, when I began my journey away, there seemed a quick shadow again, a final moment of eclipse – the recognition of another soul gone.

You see, to me, for just a moment, despite all of the colours that touch and grapple with what I see in this world, I will often catch an eclipse when a human dies.

I've seen millions of them.

I've seen more eclipses than I care to remember.

THE FLAG

The last time I saw her was red. The sky was like soup, boiling and stirring. In some places it was burned. There were black crumbs, and pepper, streaked amongst the redness.

Earlier, kids had been playing hopscotch there, on the street that looked like oil-stained pages. When I arrived I could still hear the echoes. The feet tapping the road. The children-voices laughing, and the smiles like salt, but decaying fast.

Then, bombs.

This time, everything was too late.

The sirens. The cuckoo shrieks in the radio. All too late.

Within minutes, mounds of concrete and earth were stacked and piled. The streets were ruptured veins. Blood streamed till it was dried on the road, and the bodies were stuck there, like driftwood after the flood.

They were glued down, every last one of them. A packet of souls.

Was it fate?

Misfortune?

Is that what glued them down like that?

Of course not.

Let's not be stupid.

It probably had more to do with the hurled bombs, thrown down by humans hiding in the clouds.

For hours, the sky remained a devastating, home-cooked red. The small German town had been flung apart one more time. Snowflakes of ash fell so *lovelily* you were tempted to stretch out your tongue to catch them, taste them. Only, they would have scorched your lips. They would have cooked your mouth.

Clearly, I see it.

I was just about to leave when I found her kneeling there.

A mountain range of rubble was written, designed, erected around her. She was clutching at a book.

Apart from everything else, the book thief wanted desperately to go back to the basement, to write, or to read through her story one last time. In hindsight, I see it so obviously on her face. She was dying for it – the safety, the home of it – but she could not move. Also, the basement no longer existed. It was part of the mangled landscape.

Please, again, I ask you to believe me.

I wanted to stop. To crouch down.

I wanted to say.

'I'm sorry, child.'

But that is not allowed.

I did not crouch down. I did not speak.

Instead, I watched her a while. When she was able to move, I followed her.

She dropped the book.

She kneeled.

The book thief howled.

Her book was stepped on several times as the clean-up began, and although orders were given to clear only the mess of concrete, the girl's most precious item was thrown aboard a garbage truck, at which point I was compelled. I climbed aboard and took it in my hand, not realising that I would read her story several hundred times over the years, on my travels. I would watch the places where we intersected, and marvel at what the girl saw and how she survived. That is the best I can do – watch it fall into line with everything else I spectated during that time.

When I recollect her, I see a long list of colours, but it's the three in which I saw her in the flesh that resonate the most. Sometimes, I manage to float far above those three moments. I hang suspended, until a septic truth bleeds towards clarity.

That's when I see them formulate.

THE COLOURS

RED: **WHITE:** **BLACK:**

They fall on top of each other. The scribbled signature black, onto the blinding global white, onto the thick soupy red.

Yes, often I am reminded of her, and in one of my vast array of pockets, I have kept her story to retell. It is one of the small legion I carry, each one extraordinary in its own right. Each one an attempt – an immense leap of an attempt – to prove to me that you, and your human existence, are worth it.

Here it is. One of a handful.

The Book Thief.

If you feel like it, come with me. I will tell you a story.

I'll show you something.

PART ONE

THE GRAVEDIGGER'S HANDBOOK

featuring:

himmel street – the art of saumensching –
an iron-fisted woman – a kiss attempt
– jesse owens – sandpaper – the smell of
friendship – a heavyweight champion – and
the mother of all *watschen*s

Arrival on Himmel Street

That last time.

That red sky . . .

How does a book thief end up kneeling and howling and flanked by a man-made heap of ridiculous, greasy, cooked-up rubble?

Years earlier, the start was snow.

The time had come. For one.

A Spectacularly Tragic Moment

A train was moving quickly.
It was packed with humans.
A six-year-old boy died
in the third carriage.

The book thief and her brother were travelling down towards Munich, where they would soon be given over to foster parents. We now know, of course, that the boy didn't make it.

How It Happened

There was an intense
spurt of coughing.
Almost an *inspired* spurt.
And soon after – nothing.

When the coughing stopped, there was nothing but the nothingness of life moving on with a shuffle, or a near-silent twitch. A suddenness found its way onto his lips then, which were a corroded brown colour, and peeling, like old paint. In desperate need of redoing.

Their mother was asleep.

I entered the train.

My feet stepped through the cluttered aisle and my palm was over his mouth in an instant.

No-one noticed.

The train galloped on.

Except the girl.

With one eye open, one still in a dream, the book thief – also known as Liesel Meminger – could see without question that her younger brother Werner was now sideways and dead.

His blue eyes stared at the floor.

Seeing nothing.

Prior to waking up, the book thief had been dreaming about the Führer, Adolf Hitler. In the dream, she was attending a rally at which he spoke, looking at the skull-coloured part in his hair and the perfect square of his moustache. She was listening

contentedly to the torrent of words that was spilling from his mouth. His sentences glowed in the light. In a quieter moment, he actually crouched down and smiled at her. She returned the gesture and said, '*Guten Tag, Herr Führer. Wie geht's dir heut?*' She hadn't learned to speak too well, or even to read, as she had rarely frequented school. The reason for that, she would find out in due course.

Just as the Führer was about to reply, she woke up.

It was January 1939. She was nine years old, soon to be ten.

Her brother was dead.

One eye open.

One still in a dream.

It would be better for a complete dream, I think, but I really have no control over that.

The second eye jumped awake and she caught me out, no doubt about it. It was exactly when I kneeled down and extracted his soul, holding it limply in my swollen arms. He warmed up soon after, but when I picked him up originally, the boy's spirit was soft and cold, like ice-cream. He started melting in my arms. Then warming up completely. Healing.

For Liesel Meminger, there was the imprisoned stiffness of movement, and the staggered onslaught of thoughts. *Es stimmt nicht.* This isn't happening. This isn't happening.

And the shaking.

Why do they always shake them?

Yes, I know, I know, I assume it has something to do with instinct. To stem the flow of truth. Her heart at that point was slippery and hot, and loud, so loud so loud.

Stupidly, I stayed. I watched.

Next, her mother.

She woke her up with the same distraught shake.

If you can't imagine it, think clumsy silence. Think bits and pieces of floating despair. And drowning in a train.

Snow had been falling consistently and the service to Munich was forced to stop due to faulty track work. There was a woman wailing. A girl stood numbly next to her.

In panic, the mother opened the door.

She climbed down into the snow, holding the small body.

What could the girl do but follow?

As you've been informed, two guards also exited the train. They discussed and argued over what to do. The situation was unsavoury to say the least. It was eventually decided that all three of them should be taken to the next township and left there to sort things out.

This time the train limped through the snowed-in country.

It hobbled in and stopped.

They stepped onto the platform, the body in her mother's arms.

They stood.

The boy was getting heavy.

Liesel had no idea where she was. All was white, and as they remained at the station, she could only stare at the faded lettering of the sign in front of her. For Liesel, the town was nameless, and it was there that her brother Werner was buried two days later. Witnesses included a priest and two shivering gravediggers.

An Observation

A pair of train guards.
A pair of gravediggers.
When it came down to it, one
of them called the shots. The
other did what he was told.
The question is, what if the
***other* is a lot more than one?**

Mistakes, mistakes, it's all I seem capable of at times.

For two days I went about my business. I travelled the globe as always, handing souls to the conveyor belt of eternity. I watched them trundle passively on. Several times I warned myself that I should keep a good distance from the burial of Liesel Meminger's brother. I did not heed my advice.

From miles away, as I approached, I could already see the small group of humans standing frigidly amongst the wasteland of snow. The cemetery welcomed me like a friend, and soon, I was with them. I bowed my head.

Standing to Liesel's left, the gravediggers were rubbing their hands together and whingeing about the snow and the current digging conditions. 'So hard getting through all the ice,' and so forth. One of them couldn't have been more than fourteen. An apprentice. When he walked away, a black book fell innocuously from his coat pocket without his knowledge. He'd taken perhaps two dozen steps.

A few minutes later, Liesel's mother started leaving with the priest. She was thanking him for his performance of the ceremony.

The girl, however, stayed.

Her knees entered the ground. Her moment had arrived.

Still in disbelief, she started to dig. He couldn't be dead. He couldn't be dead. He couldn't –

Within seconds, snow was carved into her skin.

Frozen blood was cracked across her hands.

Somewhere in all the snow, she could see her broken heart, in two pieces. Each half was glowing, and beating under all that white. She only realised her mother had come back for her when she felt the boniness of a hand on her shoulder. She was being dragged away. A warm scream filled her throat.

A Small Image, Perhaps Twenty Metres Away

When the dragging was done, the mother
and the girl stood and breathed.
There was something black
and rectangular lodged in the snow.
Only the girl saw it.
She bent down and picked it up
and held it firmly in her fingers.
The book had silver writing on it.

They held hands.

A final, soaking farewell was let go of, and they turned and left, looking back several times.

As for me, I remained a few moments longer.

I waved.

No-one waved back.

Mother and daughter vacated the cemetery and made their way towards the next train to Munich.

Both were skinny and pale.

Both had sores on their lips.

Liesel noticed it in the dirty, fogged-up window of the train when they boarded just before midday. In the written words of the book thief herself, the journey continued like *everything* had happened.

When the train pulled into the *Bahnhof* in Munich, the passengers slid out as if from a torn package. There were people of every stature, but amongst them, the poor were the most easily recognised. The impoverished always try to keep moving, as if relocating might help. They ignore the reality that a new version of the same old problem will be waiting at the end of the trip – the relative you cringe to kiss.

I think her mother knew this quite well. She wasn't delivering her children to the higher echelons of Munich, but a foster home had apparently been found, and if nothing else, the new family could at least feed the girl and the boy a little better, and educate them properly.

The boy.

Liesel was sure her mother carried the memory of him, slung over her shoulder. She dropped him. She saw his feet and legs and body slap the platform.

How could she walk?

How could she move?

That's the sort of thing I'll never know, or comprehend – what humans are capable of.

She picked him up and continued walking, the girl clinging to her side.

Authorities were met and questions of lateness and the boy raised their vulnerable heads. Liesel remained in the corner of the small, dusty office as her mother sat with clenched thoughts on a very hard chair.

There was the chaos of goodbye.

The girl's head was buried into the woolly, worn shallows of her mother's coat. There had been some more dragging.

Quite a way beyond the outskirts of Munich was a town called Molching, said best by the likes of you and me as *Molking*. That's where they were taking her, to a street by the name of Himmel.

A Translation

Himmel = Heaven

Whoever named Himmel Street certainly had a healthy sense of irony. Not that it was a living hell. It wasn't. But it sure as hell wasn't heaven either.

Regardless, Liesel's foster parents were waiting.

The Hubermanns.

They'd been expecting a girl and a boy and would be paid a small allowance for having them. Nobody wanted to be the one to tell Rosa Hubermann that the boy hadn't survived the trip. In fact, no-one ever really wanted to tell her anything. As far as dispositions go, hers wasn't really enviable, although she'd had a good record with foster kids in the past. Apparently, she'd straightened a few out.

For Liesel, it was a ride in a car.

She'd never been in one before.

There was the constant rise and fall of her stomach, and the