

George Bandy

The Bread Watcher

The third shift is the most difficult, but I do it, because the food must be watched. It is an elegiac time of the night when one almost forgets one is in the camp. The men snore, and the few that won't make the night are the quietest, with no strength left. My chair is propped against the door and by leaning a little towards the window, not an entirely awkward position, I have enough light from the guard tower to read. Our store of books is as small as our food, but it is rich and priceless and lasts much longer. Enough to sustain a thousand men, if they would only ask. *Little Dorrit*, *Huckleberry Finn*, *Look Homeward, Angel* all in translation, but a joy. All the books we get have been either condemned and deemed worthless by the state or leftover from an attempt to reeducate us.

Tonight I guard the food and read, in English, *Murder Must Advertise* by Dorothy Leigh Sayers. For a few hours I will be drawn into the frothy and aristocratic world of Lord Peter, a world as unreal and in some ways more improbable than my own.

After a night of no sleep, I will still have to work in the hospital (Another joke, only the naive go there for treatment.), but it is a fair trade. For a few days, I will be full of language, and it never hurts to have the good will of desperate men. There are ten and a quarter loaves of hard black bread of varying quality, some must be eaten soon or spoil. The smell fills me, and my hunger, always there, tries to convince me that a small taste would not be missed.

I will feast on words.

They don't think us dangerous, not really. We've been catalogued with a passion—yellow star (Jew), pink triangle (homosexual or in the gutter German: *arschficker*), brown (Gypsy), violet (Jehovah's Witness), red (political prisoner), blue (emigrant), green (criminal), black (antisocial) and all the composite variations quilted to the left shoulder and right trouser leg of a vertically striped uniform. We keep arriving and arriving, yet none leave except as smoke.

I am blue and red and, if they knew, pink, but that means nothing: All men here are made over. I am what is known as a *concentrationare*. A survivor who has lived on in an environment where the average life span is

270 days. Nine months—as long as to arrive as to leave. Though I am university trained and political, I am respected because I've been here four years.

This is my survival. The stink of one hundred men with six and seven to a bunk, stacked four high, in an unheated barracks in the middle of winter. I am a survivor, I know I must have the top bunk and only the healthy to huddle for warmth. Otherwise, it rains piss and watery stools from dysentery—there's always a bit of blood. And I know the rule of the camp—when you have nothing, everything is important. The piece of bread that you've saved to fight the hunger in the middle of the night; the errant piece of metal shaped like a “U,” which might be a nail, somebody will trade for; the tin cup or can for soup or *you have no soup*. The dead leave everything, but only after they're dead.

Men die for that bit of bread. Die in the not having—having everything taken. Men die for the taking, it's the law. But some men, animals—not our guards (I would not insult the beasts.)—like the toy dog or the Persian kitty, the good, faithful companions, until that fateful day that the master dies and they, left in the apartment for days or weeks to starve, nibble a little of their master's juicy calf. They do this without the naming; they don't want to do it, but it is survival. But a man . . . We are men.

The door behind me moves and I, startled from my posing, jump to my feet. It's Sostra, the Russian—green and black; he pushes into the cramped room which belonged to the *kapo* until we killed him. Sostra killed him first, then we took turns. Even in the dark, where he chooses to stand, I see his black eyes on me.

“Asleep,” he says.

“I'm standing watch.”

“Sitting?”

“So I am. What do you want?”

“A book.”

“You know the rules. Sit, you can read it here. What would you like?”

“One for the shitter. I'll take this—nice and thick; a lot of use.”

“That's *The Critique of Pure Reason*.”

“Perfect.”

“No.” I took the book away without resistance.

“Then *him*. He'll give me more pleasure, he can soak up my crap for a change.” He grabbed *Mein Kampf* and I drew it back, but this time more forcefully.

“We need this to know our enemy.”

“He needs to know my backside.”

“Go.”

The wood smoke from the *kommandant's* house wisps from his chimney, and, if you look above the frozen mud paths and the guards' planked walkways, it is idyllic. The chateau, built from logs cleared from the mountain, the stone quarried from the far side, could be out of a fairy tale. I could be a child again: The hunger eased, the certainty of survival unquestioned, and the perfect ease of a midnight stolen to read beneath the covers in secret.

George Bandy is currently at work on a collection of stories related to war crimes and exploring the nature of punishment.