

“Once” by Morris Gleitzman . Chapter 9

Felix tells us he lay on the ground in tears and in a panic because he felt that no adult in the world could protect children from the Nazis that were everywhere. The trauma of what he has seen on the march to the city and what happened in the city has made him lose his faith in the goodness of the world and his sense of safety and security and hope in the world. Felix thought that Zelda was about to be shot by the Nazi that grabbed her from him but then just when all hope seems lost he sees that he is “wrong” and that an adult does try and protect Zelda from harm.

He sees a man in a scuffed leather jacket talking to a Nazi officer in a foreign language that isn’t Polish. The Nazi officer points his gun at the man instead but the man does not back away and stays facing him showing bravery and courage. Just like Felix he risks his own safety and interests to help others. He holds up a leather bag and shows it to the Nazi and Felix doesn’t understand why he does this. The Nazi officer still looks bored. The suffering and misery he is causing has no impact on him , he is indifferent to the pain that the Jews are feeling and he has no sympathy for them. He then twists the man’s beard cruelly and the local townspeople laugh at him just as they laughed at the Jews who had been forced to clean the cobblestones with brushes in chapter 8. The Nazi officer then lets the man take Zelda and walks over to a crowd of Jews who are crying and shouting because their children have been taken away from them and then he puts his gun to the back of a woman’s head and shoots her. The man tries to turn Zelda away from this awful sight and shield her from such brutality just as Felix had been doing as well. As the man is taking Zelda away she starts screaming and shouting that she won’t leave without Felix. She points at him and we see the love and loyalty that has grown between these two characters. We see that people can be selfless and caring and courageously compassionate in extreme and difficult times. The man looks at Felix in a tired way before Felix starts vomiting and passes out. Felix wakes up later in a cellar somewhere else in the city.

At first Felix thinks he wakes up in the orphanage and he is in a panic as he wants to find his parents. He is terrified for them now that he has seen the way that the Nazis treat Jews and how they are everywhere throughout Poland. He is very ill and his throat is hurting and his skin is burning. The man is watching over him wiping his face with a damp cloth. He tells Felix to rest and then Zelda appears and tells Felix that the man is called Barney. Then Felix passes out again.

When Felix wakes up again he is in a panic because he thinks he has lost his notebook. His notebook represents the connection he has in his mind through his memories, his hopes and his imagination with his parents. Zelda stands in front of Felix with a heart necklace and this represents how it is not an entirely heartless world. Barney reassures Felix that his notebook is safe and that letters have been put away safely as well. Felix is so sick that Zelda asks Barney if he is going to die. Felix thinks that he needs to find his parents so that he they can get him better and then he remembers that the Nazis have them and he is swamped with panic again. He is angry that he was put in the orphanage and believes that he might have been able to protect them. He tries to whisper to Barney to help him look for his parents but he can barely croak anything. Then he manages to say that

“They’re in danger, the stories in the notebook aren’t true”.

Felix has lost his hope in a better world and the darkness of the world seems overwhelming to him now.

When he wakes up again he sees that there are other straw beds in the cellar and that there is a five year old boy beside him who is crying. Barney gives the boy a hug and tries to cheer him up and make him feel better. The boy says that he misses his mother and father and Barney tells him that he will see them again one day and until that day that he promises to look after him. Then a girl called Ruth

hugs the boy as well. She is about the same age as Felix. Barney tells Felix that he is getting better and feels his forehead and is happy that his fever is easing and then he gives him some soup. Felix is suddenly very angry with Barney and thinks that he is an idiot, he is angry that he does not let the other boy go looking for his parents. He thinks it is wrong to just wait for them to turn up "some day." Felix is desperate to find and see his parents again. When he tries to think of a story to cheer himself up he isn't able to do it anymore, all he can think about are the Nazi soldiers shooting people. He is afraid that his parents might have been shot and hopes that they didn't try to wave down an army truck as he did on his journey to their home town.

The next time Felix wakes up his bed is surrounded by lots of children and Barney. He asks Felix if he will read some of his stories to the children. As well as Ruth and the boy who was crying there is also a slightly older girl with a bandaged arm, a toddler with missing hair, a boy about the same age as Felix who is always blinking and hugging a dirty teddy bear and a slightly younger boy who is always chewing a piece of wood. Even though all the children say they would like to hear a story Felix refuses to tell any. He has lost faith and hope in the future and doesn't believe in happy endings any more. He thinks to himself that

"The stories in my notebook are stupid."

Barney tells Felix that he understands and says that everyone is happy to have Zelda and himself staying with them. He tries to put him at ease and make him feel welcome. Even though Felix can see that all the children are disappointed that he will not tell a story he does not care and thinks to himself

"Too bad".

This is unusual for Felix as he normally wants to help others in any way that he can and he worries and cares about the feelings of others. Right now though, however, he is feeling very down and depressed and is exhausted and overwhelmed by everything that he has seen and is in a panic that he will never see his parents again.

- 1) Who saves Zelda, how does he save her and what do we learn about him in this chapter?
- 2) Where is Felix taken and why is Zelda so worried about him?
- 3) How is Felix feeling in this chapter? (Hopeless / weak / lost/ afraid / no longer believes in his stories – why? Angry with Barney – why?)
- 4) When Felix tries to think of a story to cheer himself up he cannot think of a story, why is he unable to think of any more stories? Why will he not allow Barney read one of his stories to the children? How is Felix different in this chapter?
- 5) Who else is in the cellar along with Barney, Zelda and Felix