

'Once' by Morris Gleitzman: plot summary sequencing activity

A ten year old boy named Felix is living in an orphanage in Poland in 1942.

Felix finds a carrot in his soup and thinks it is a sign that his parents are coming back to get him.

Felix tries to convince Mother Minka to allow Dodie take a bath before the other children out of sympathy for the fact that both his parents died.

Felix prevents the 'torture squad' from putting Jankiel's head down the toilet by telling them that Jankiel's parents were both crushed to death by a horse.

The Nazis come to the orphanage to burn the books in the library.

Mother Minka tells Felix that Sister Elwira put the carrot in his soup out of sympathy for him and that his parents are not coming to get him.

Felix decides to leave the orphanage. He wants to hide the books in his parents' bookshop so that the Nazis don't burn them.

A few days after he begins his journey, Felix finds an empty house with plates of potato stew on the kitchen table. He imagines that the inhabitants of the house left to go hunting rabbits.

He leaves the house and as he continues his journey he spots a truck crammed with people. He imagines that they must be farm workers going on holiday.

He shouts to the soldiers on the truck if he can ride with them but they shoot at him. He assumes this was unintentional.

Felix reaches his home town. He discovers that the Radzyn family (who used to empty toilets in the town) now occupy the shop that once was his parents' book shop.

He meets an old neighbour, Mr. Kopek, who tells him he should leave the town. He gives him a piece of bread and some water.

Felix reaches a house. There are two dead bodies outside, surrounded by dead chickens.

At the house he meets a six year old girl named Zelda and she goes on the journey with him.

On their way to the city they meet a group of exhausted looking men, women and children wearing the Star of David.

The groups are accompanied by Nazi soldiers and the soldiers make Felix and Zelda join the group.

As Felix and Zelda walk with the group, Felix spends six hours telling Zelda stories, including one about a boy and a girl named William and Violet Elizabeth who have a cake shop in a zoo.

When they reach the city, the residents start shouting insults at the Jews. The children are separated from the adults and a man is shot dead by a Nazi soldier.

When Felix and Zelda arrive in the city they are taken into hiding by a dentist named Barney.

Felix is in a depressed mood while staying with Barney. Barney encourages him to read his stories from his notebook aloud to the other children but he refuses.

Felix still finds it hard to tell stories but he distracts the other children by asking them to think of the wishes they would like to be granted if they found a magic carrot in their soup.

Barney brings Felix with him to give dental treatment to Nazi soldiers. Felix tells stories to the soldiers in order to distract them from their pain.

One Nazi soldier particularly enjoys a story Felix tells about two German booksellers in Africa. He asks Felix to write down the story for his children but Barney does not allow Felix to do so.

Zelda suggests to Felix that they climb on top of a pile of beds and peer through a crack in the ceiling so that they might see their parents in the outside world.

Felix tells Zelda the truth of what he knows about what happened to her parents. However Felix continues to believe that his parents are still alive.

Barney buys boots for Felix at a cost of three turnips. He does so because 'everybody deserves to have something good in their life at least once'.

Barney and Felix go out looking for water. In a former dental surgery Felix discovers the dead, blood-covered body of a two year old child. Barney explains to Felix that sometimes parents can't always protect their children.

Zelda becomes sick with a fever and Barney sends Felix out to look for some aspirin for her in the nearby abandoned apartments.

Felix encounters a bedroom decorated and furnished just like his old one and even finds a copy of his favourite book, *Just William* by Richard Crompton.

While in the bedroom, a Nazi soldier enters the apartment. Felix holds on to *Just William* but trips while running to escape.

He is confronted by a Nazi soldier. Zelda's locket (worn by Felix) has been smashed. The Nazi spots that one of the photographs in the locket is of a Nazi soldier. While the soldier contemplates what to do, Felix manages to escape.

Felix returns to the cellar to find several Nazi trucks parked outside.

The Nazis take Barney, Felix and the other children from the cellar and bring them to a railway station.

Felix returns Zelda's locket to her at the railway station.

Barney and the children huddle together at the railway station. Barney grinds up two aspirin in water for Zelda to take.

Felix tells Barney about Zelda's locket. Barney reckons that Zelda's parents joined the Nazis when the Germans invaded Poland and were shot dead by the Polish resistance.

Felix spots the Nazi officer who liked his story about the German booksellers. He calls him over to give him a copy of the story that he has written out. He shows the officer Zelda and her locket. The officer allows Barney and Zelda to go free.

Felix and the other children are piled into the boxcar of the train. Barney refuses to leave and climbs on to the box car. Zelda is also in the boxcar as she bit one of the Nazi soldiers.

During the train journey, Felix offers the prisoners blank pages from his notebook to use as toilet paper.

Felix discovers a rotten wooden plank in the floor of the train. Barney and other meant rip out the plank, creating a hole.

People begin jumping through the hole, risking their lives as their are Nazi snipers on the roof of the train.

Felix wants to jump but the other children don't want to, even when Felix tries to calm them with a story.

Felix, Zelda and another child Chaya decide to jump. Chaya dies as a result of her fall.

Felix realises that Barney has syringes containing lethal chemicals which he found in the abandoned dental surgery. He thinks that Barney might use the syringes to put himself and the other children out of pain.

Felix wonders what the rest of his story will be and speculates that by 1983 he might be a famous author living in a cake shop with his friend Zelda.

Whatever happens, both he and Zelda realise that they are lucky and that something good has happened to him more than once.
