

HELEN HUMPHREYS

“Every sentence Humphreys
writes is a blow to the heart.”

— EMMA DONOGHUE

THE
Evening
Chorus

A NOVEL

The Evening Chorus

HELEN HUMPHREYS



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Redstart

JAMES HUNTER FALLS THROUGH MORNING.

He swings from his parachute harness as the plane drops below him, the broken shell of the bomber sinking into the Channel fog.

The water is as jarring as solid earth, and shockingly cold.

“Here! I’m over here!” yells Roberts, the pilot of the Wellington.

James fumbles to unclip himself from the parachute, then swims towards the pilot’s voice and the shadow of the rubber dinghy bobbing in the swell. His bomber jacket and life vest allow only a stuttering breaststroke, and when he flips over on his

back to rest for a moment, James notices that the vest has been ripped open above his heart. In the scramble from the cockpit, the canvas must have caught on a piece of sheared fuselage and torn.

He touches the edges of the incision gingerly, as though it were his own flesh that had been sliced open, and the white fluff inside the life preserver lifts into the air, a few strands of the kapok floss drifting slowly upwards, small brown seeds swinging from the fibres.

The shushing of the waves is suddenly interrupted by the whine of an engine.

James Hunter takes a deep breath, blows it out under the floss, and watches as the tiny parachutes rise up into the fog and disappear.

There's a moment when he's hopeful that it's a British ship, but after James blinks in the bright glare of the searchlight, he sees the shine of a black boot resting on the gunwale and above that a gloved hand holding a pistol.

"*Hier!*" yells the soldier at the bow of the boat to the soldiers in the stern. "*Es gibt einen hier!*"

The engine quits immediately, and the soldier with the pistol leans over the gunwale. He grins at his

captive, floating in the early morning chop, and says, clearly and in English:

“For you, the war is over.”

THE COMMUNAL shower in the delousing building reminds James of boarding school. He places his kit neatly in the cardboard box with his name on it, then walks into the showers cupping his genitals with the same protective modesty he displayed when he was twelve and forced to take swimming lessons in the brackish pond out back of the school library. The hot blast of water is a relief after the cold of the sea. His newly and hastily shaven head stings when the shower water hits it.

What started out as his six-man bomber crew has multiplied at the delousing facility into a hundred or so men, all of whom share the indignity of being captured within the same twenty-four-hour period.

Under the statutes of the Geneva Conventions, prisoners of war are allowed to wear their own uniforms. When the box with James's clothes is returned to him, his uniform is warm and smells like almonds.

“Cyanide,” says the soldier next to him when he sees James sniffing his jacket like a dog. “They think it kills the lice and stops the typhus.”

“The Jerries are more afraid of the louse than they are of us,” mutters a man farther down the bench.

But the louse will torment all of them in the prison camp. It will be worse than the boredom, the filth, and the food. The small insect, only the size of a sesame seed, will live in the clothing of the men, crawling onto their bodies to feed and then returning to the clothing to rest. In James’s bunkhouse, the frantic slapping and jerky movements of a prisoner trying to kill the lice while they’re sucking his blood become known as “dancing the jig.”

Once, James wakes up to the sounds of a man crying and sees Stevens sitting at the table in the centre of the room. He’s naked, his back covered in red sores from louse bites.

“I can’t do it,” he says when James climbs down from his bunk. “I can’t put it back on.”

Stevens’s uniform lies crumpled on the floor. It is so cold in the barracks that James can see his breath. He lights the candle inside the tin can on the table and picks up his bunkmate’s jacket. With

the same precision that would have been used to sew that jacket, he holds each seam over the flame, moving along the stitch just before the fabric catches fire. The swollen bodies of the lice make a small pop as they burst their cargo of blood above the candle.

THE OFLAG, set deep inside the newly drawn borders of Bavaria, was a barracks for Polish prisoners during the first war, and the large limestone buildings, already on the grounds, have been taken by the Germans for their quarters.

James can see the German quarters from the window that borders his top bunk. At first he monitors the activity around the buildings, watching the guards come and go, paying attention when the Kommandant steps out onto the wooden platform that has been constructed along the front of his office. But when it becomes clear that the war is going to continue for some time, and that James isn't getting out of the prison camp, he loses interest in observing the Germans and begins to monitor the buildings themselves.

When it rains, the limestone turns a darker grey. In a heavy rain, the outside of the buildings stays wet for ages and gives off the flat smell of clay, noticeable when the men are gathered on parade at the beginning and end of every day. James wonders if the damp of the stone extends all the way into the interior of the structure—if the stone is so porous as to conduct moisture through walls that appear to be over a foot thick.

The geologist in bunkhouse 2 has told him that limestone is formed from prehistoric marine life, from all the shells and dead sea creatures that collect at the bottom of the ocean and are compressed, over millions of years, into sedimentary rock. When James watches the barrack walls darken in the rain, he is reminded of the deep shade of the ocean, how it slopes off under the hull of a fishing boat. The darkness of the ocean always seemed empty to him, but now he thinks of the rock slowly forming along the seabed—a rock made of creatures that live in water. A rock essentially made from water.

With the exception of the squadron leader, whose rank still means something in the camp, most of the men have reverted to the identity they had before the

war. The geologist was a lecturer at Oxford. The writer worked in an advertising agency. The actor was fairly well known in the West End. James was a grammar school science teacher. But gradually, with the days and weeks that accumulate, these prisoners of war start to become known for their roles within the camp. The geologist becomes the Gardener. The writer, good at cards and winning a large portion of the other men's monthly cigarette ration, becomes the Gambler. The actor, however, stays the Actor, setting up camp theatricals; he is busier than he was in civilian life, not only performing in the productions but directing and writing them as well, and helping to sew the costumes.

James, shot down on his first mission as an RAF pilot in training, doesn't mind losing a rank he hadn't even earned yet. For a while he is called the Teacher, but he soon loses this title to the label that best describes his activity in the camp—the Birdman.

THE PRISONERS are housed in eighteen hastily constructed one-storey wooden bunkhouses, each holding fourteen rooms with eight men per room.

Each of these rooms has a coal-burning stove, a table, and four bunk beds, one on each wall. Right now James has a desk because he has constructed one using a few of the slats that hold his mattress, but during these cold winter months, all available wood will be consigned to the stove, and James knows his desk will be the first thing to go. In the bunkhouse room beside his, the chair and table legs have already been burned and the remaining furniture jokingly suspended from the ceiling with string taken from around the Red Cross parcels.

The bunkhouses are made of pine, a soft wood that burns quickly, the rougher planks sometimes hissing with resin inside the stove, a sound very much like summer rain falling on hot, dry ground. The soft wood is easy to manipulate when floorboards need to be pried up for tunnels or mattress slats snapped for kindling. Because the wood is so roughly milled, the pine boards on the walls of the bunkhouse have a multitude of knots, and the prisoners work these out and use the space behind them to store small items that they don't want the guards or their fellow bunkmates to find—wedding rings, letters, the German-issued identity tags, which

the prisoners don't wear but feel they can't lose or destroy. Some of the prisoners use their new identity tags as tools to cut bread and slice the canned meat rolls that arrive in the Red Cross parcels.

When James is bashing the circuit in the evening with Stevens and the Gardener, he doesn't look down at his feet as they walk around and around the perimeter of the camp. Instead he looks out, beyond the wire, to the sky and the forest. The pine trees grow closely together, barely any space between them. When a prisoner escapes he invariably heads into this dense forest, hoping to reach the other side, where there is a small town with a train station. If the escape has been a long time in the planning, the prisoner will have made a false identity with the help of the Artist, and he will hope to board the train as a passenger. If the escape is a sudden one, brought on by opportunity rather than plotting, then the prisoner will attempt to stow away on a freight train. After an escape, James can hear the barking of the Alsatian dogs as they are sent into the forest to find the prisoner; almost always, he is discovered crouching among the leaves or running towards town, and is back in camp within twenty-four hours.

At the edge of the forest is a fir tree surrounded by four birch trees, the white of the bark standing out among the green pines. The birches, encircling the fir, look like they have caught it, enclosing it in a sort of cage.

“It’s just like us,” said Stevens, when James first pointed it out to him.

Stevens circuit-bashes with James in the evenings, but otherwise he remains in his bunk, reading novels. In the air force he was a pilot. In civilian life he was a law student. In camp he is known as the Reader.

At first James looked at the fir tree trapped by the birches as Stevens did, but gradually he has come to see it differently. The fir has been forced to grow straight up as it looks for a way out of the trees that hold it captive. As a result, it is taller than the other pines, able to claim a larger quotient of sunlight. Also, the cage around it keeps it from being toppled by wind. And what if trees that grow so closely together have a relationship that is invisible to the human observer? What if they communicate through their root systems, through the exhalations from their leaves? James remembers his grandfather,

who was a fisherman, telling him that the tallest, straightest pines were chosen as masts for the old brigs and barques because pine, even when dead, still has flexibility in it, will still move a little with the weight of wind in sails, and yet will also stand firm.

“The wind in the pines sounds exactly like the sea, like waves on the shingle,” said a man who had escaped and been recaptured after spending the night lost in the forest.

As James moves around the camp at dusk, he also moves from thinking of the pine tree as a captive to thinking of it as the centre of a family, and in this way he recognizes that he himself has started to change, that he has begun to think of the prison camp not as home, but certainly as the place where he now lives.