



## A is for Auschwitz

By Stephen Gauer

We lived in the south end of Scarborough, in a homely little gray brick house on a dead-end street near the lake. I was a cheeky kid, arrogant and curious, and too impatient to wait my turn. When the Browns moved in across the street I went over and introduced myself. It was August and LBJ was president and the first Beatles movie had just opened.

Mr. Brown wore khaki shorts and a shirt with too many pockets. He wasn't much bigger than I was. We shook hands. "Do you have a last name?" he asked.

"Yes," I said, and told him.

He looked serious for a moment, and then he introduced his wife. Mrs. Brown, tall and slender and lovely as a poplar, wore a shiny green dress with long sleeves and a big black hat. She looked around but said nothing.

"I am very pleased to meet you, Mrs. Brown," I said.

She shook my hand; her fingers were longer than her husband's. "My wife teaches piano," Mr. Brown said. "Do you play, Michael?"

"No," I said, "but I love the Beatles." He laughed.

Mom grilled me at dinner. She was a power smoker who did the books one day a week for a doctor at the local plaza. She lit up as soon as she'd wiped the last dribble of gravy from her chin. "Where are they from?"

"England," I said.

"I knew it!" She sucked hard and blew a cloud at the ceiling. "Can you imagine, Eric? Khaki shorts!"

Dad looked thoughtful. He was a quiet guy who spent weeknights building radios in the basement. We had twenty-four of them, and some actually worked. "Piano lessons," he said carefully.

"What?" My mother was puffing furiously.

"Piano lessons. For Michael."

I shrank in my seat and cursed God. I wanted a guitar. My sister smiled and whispered in my ear, "Say goodbye to the Beatles and hello to Beethoven."

Mom jammed her cigarette into the ashtray and lit another. "Why not? You flunked tap dancing last year. Let's give piano a shot."

A truck showed up a week later and disgorged the ugly brown monster. I was sitting on the front step, commiserating with Dash, my best friend. "It's a prison sentence," I said. "Twice a week after school. Forever. *Forever.*"

"I'll lend you *Goldfinger* if you want," Dash said. Then he pointed a nail-bitten finger at a girl standing on the front lawn of the Brown's house. She was staring at us. I waved and she came over. She was thin

as a rake, with long pigtails down her back. "I'm Anna Brown," she said. "You're Michael Richter." She made my last name sound like a curse.

I nodded. "Your mom's teaching me how to play the piano."

"She's not my mother. She's my father's wife."

Dash was blushing. "Who are you?" she said. Dash looked down at his fingers and then at me. "His name is Dash," I said. "He's kind of shy."

"I'm not. My mother died in childbirth."

I'd never met anyone whose mother died in childbirth, so I said, "Do you like James Bond?"

Anna shook her head. The pigtails followed, moving like ropey snakes behind her back. "I prefer serious literature. Jane Austen, the Brontes, Joyce, Kafka."

I looked at Dash for help. He started to bite a fingernail. "I can lend you *Goldfinger* if you want," he said and Anna laughed at him.

When school started, Anna joined us in the eighth grade. Our teacher, Mr. Standing, was a sad man who wore gray suits and stooped a little. On the second day, Anna put her hand up in geography and explained why Mercator projection made the rich countries look bigger and more important than the poor countries. Mr. Standing thanked her. When somebody at the back of the class started to titter, he glared at us. "There'll be none of that," he said. "Just remember who's next door." He meant the principal, a mysterious man we all feared because he never came out of his office.

The Brown's house smelled of tea and furniture polish. For our first lesson, Mrs. Brown sat beside me on the piano bench in a room full of books and old photos. She wore a green sweater, "to keep away the chill", she said; sometimes I brushed against it with my arm. She had a

heavy accent I didn't recognize; I had to listen carefully to understand what she was saying.

"You will hold your fingers precisely like this," she said.

I tried very hard. "Flat," she said. "Parallel to the keyboard. Do you understand the word parallel?"

"I'm not stupid," I said.

"I am sure you are not, Michael."

"Like this?" I said.

"Yes. That is perfect. Now we will play."

She played a chord and then I played a chord. I thought my chord sounded terrible. I was very nervous. My fingers felt stupid. I didn't want to play the piano but I didn't mind sitting there beside Mrs. Brown.

She explained what a scale was and why practising was so important. I asked her if I had to practise every single day and she said yes, that would be best. I sighed and she smiled for the first time. I wondered why she wore a sweater when it was so warm in the house.

When we finished, she gave me some piano books to take home. I wasn't sure if I should shake her hand at the door so I did. "Goodbye, Michael," she said. She pulled the sweater across her chest. She looked cold.

Dash didn't like Anna because she teased him for being shy. She was very sure of herself. "I've been to Paris, you know," she said. "Father met my mother there after the war. They were madly in love and had sex in the back of a car."

My knowledge of sex, gained mostly from a quick skim of the sex manual hidden in my parents' bedroom closet, was sketchy at best. "That must be uncomfortable," I said.

Mom worked hard to figure out Mrs. Brown's accent. One day I came in late for dinner and heard them talking. "She's a Jew, Eric. There's nothing wrong with stating a fact, is there?" My father said something I couldn't hear. "You should take a little more interest in *people*," she said. "We don't really need another radio, do we?"

Our big assignment for the fall was public speaking. Dash wanted to do his speech on Hitler or the Soviet space program. I was stuck for a topic until Dash gave me a thick paperback and told me to read the paragraphs he'd circled in black. "Four point six million Jews gassed to death," Dash said. "Cyclon B. Three to fifteen minutes and then you're dead. Like a rat. My father has books about it."

I didn't know any Jews, but if Mrs. Brown was a Jew she might know something about it. I thought it would be a good topic for public speaking. I told my mother. "Don't you dare," she said. "Let sleeping dogs lie. Do something Canadian—beavers or hockey or Norman Bethune."

I read the books Dash gave me. I copied out the paragraphs about the concentration camps and read them over and over. There were twenty so I thought I had enough for a speech. When I asked Mrs. Brown if she was a Jew, she said, "Yes." I asked her what kind, and she looked at me. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, what country?"

She looked down at her hands. I thought she was going to cry. "I come from two countries," she said, rolling up her sleeve. "Czechoslovakia, where I was born." She held up her wrist. The crude tattoo, ugly as a scar, traced the letter A followed by five digits. "And Auschwitz, where I died."

I didn't know what to say. I stared at the number on her wrist. Then she rolled her sleeve down again. "I never thought I would show you that," she said. "Especially you."

I felt nervous and a little sick, like I might throw up. I wanted to ask her a million questions about Auschwitz and put the answers in my speech. Why didn't the Jews fight back or run away? My father taught me to run away from bullies and that always worked because I was fast. Dash wasn't and sometimes got sat on or punched in the stomach. Were the old Jews too polite? People said they were pushy now. Why was that?

"I would like you to play the scale in C major," Mrs. Brown said, as though nothing had happened. Adults did that all the time; something terrible would happen and they would pretend everything was still the same when it wasn't. I tried to play the scale but my fingers wouldn't do what I wanted them to do. I felt stupid again. I hated the piano. I wanted to play Beatle songs on a guitar. I wanted to sing *She Loves You* at the top of my voice so everybody on the street would hear.

"Again," Mrs. Brown said.

"This is stupid," I said.

"Michael, it takes a positive attitude to master a musical instrument."

I played the scale again, and this time it sounded better, the notes smoother and more confident. When I finished I looked over at Mrs. Brown. She was supposed to say something now, but she just sat there looking down at the wrist inscribed with the number from Auschwitz.

Mom kept asking about my speech. I lied and said I'd switched topics to NASA and the Apollo moon program. "That's much better,

“Mikey,” she said. “And you already know so much about it, don’t you?” I nodded but with my fingers crossed in my pocket so it wouldn’t really count as a lie.

It was early December by the time Mr. Standing set aside an afternoon to hear our speeches. We went alphabetically by last name, which meant I had to wait a long time for my turn.

I was very nervous when I walked to the front of the class. I turned around and looked. Dash was at the back, and so was Anna. They smiled and I felt a little bit better. Mr. Standing held a stopwatch and told me to begin.

“The title of my speech,” I said, “is A is for Auschwitz.”

For three minutes I talked about the Jews and what it was like to die in a concentration camp as the Cyclon B flooded the shower room and the poison went into your lungs and you couldn’t breathe and then you fell on the floor and died. I was extremely nervous while I was talking and I knew I was talking too fast, but that was OK because it meant I would be finished faster and then I could sit down and not be nervous anymore.

At the end of my speech, I rolled up my sleeve and showed the class the fake tattoo I’d drawn with a ball-point pen, repeating Mrs. Brown’s number. I read out the digits. “Thank you, Michael,” Mr. Standing said, “that was a powerful and impressive effort. I’m sure everyone in the class learned something.”

Afterwards, when we went out into the yard for recess, Anna would not talk to me. I didn’t understand why. Dash kept telling me how much he liked the tattoo. When I showed it to him up close, he touched it and the ink smudged. We went into the bathroom and I rubbed it all off so Mom wouldn’t see it.

A few days later, I had a piano lesson with Mrs. Brown after school. When I knocked on the back door, no one answered. I opened the door and went into the kitchen. Usually Anna was there, studying a cookbook or reading the newspaper at the table but not that day.

I called out to Mrs. Brown. Nobody answered. I felt nervous. I wanted to leave.

The door to the basement was open. I looked down the stairs. The basement lights were on. I heard a sound, or something, so I went down the stairs. Unlike our basement, the Brown's wasn't finished; you could see exposed two by fours and rough concrete walls. The ceiling joists had cross supports and it was from one of these supports that Mrs. Brown was trying to hang herself.

She was swinging very slowly. Her feet were just inches from the floor. I couldn't see her face. I screamed or shouted, I'm not sure which.

I ran back upstairs and pulled all the kitchen drawers onto the floor in a huge clatter of sound. I found a big knife and ran back downstairs. I moved a chair beside Mrs. Brown and stood on it, and cut the white cord running from her neck to the floor supports. Mrs. Brown fell to the floor and I lost my balance and fell on top of her. The knife cut my arm as I fell. The pain was terrible.

I ran across the street to my house. I fell in the yard and got back up again. My mother was in the kitchen. I screamed at her. She grabbed me by the shoulders. She was very strong. "You're bleeding, Mikey," she said. "Sit down and tell me what happened, please tell me what happened."

When the ambulance came to take Mrs. Brown away, I went out into the street to watch. It was dark already, almost dinner time. Anna was there in the driveway and yelled "Kraut" at me and that's when I

began to understand what I had done and what it felt like to be an enemy.

Mrs. Brown didn't die. I wanted to go and see her in the hospital and explain about the speech and why I put the number on my arm, but Dad said I should wait until she came home again. When I knocked on the front door, Mr. Brown said his wife didn't want to talk me. He said I would have to find another piano teacher.

I showed the cut on my arm to Dash. He wasn't that interested even though there were six stitches in it. He said he didn't like to see blood. I said I didn't mind.

I still have the scar. It's just below the elbow, where the muscle is big. You have to look closely to see it, but it's there.

*A is for Auschwitz won second prize in the 2005 Toronto Star Short Story Contest.*