

The Life of a Thief - Leonie, Year 4, NSW

Up in the tower, I could see everything, from the blades of grass to the steeple of the church. I could even see, clearer than day, the robbers and pickpockets in the dark corners of the city.

The Executor's Square was crowded today - someone was obviously being executed. I squinted, trying to see who it was. Then I saw it, the face of my poor father, yelling in pain. The swish and thud of an axe hitting stone told me it was over.

Tears welled up in my eyes and I could keep it in no longer. I turned and ran. Where I was running to, I did not know, and did not care. All I wanted was to get away from this awful place of misery and theft.

I moved here when I was two because a terrible plague had broken out in our hometown and my father had been a wanted criminal. My mother died when I was young, and we wanted to restart our life here. If we had known what horrors awaited us here... The moment my father stole that gem; his life was at stake. But why did it have to happen so suddenly and in such an awful way? I never even got to say goodbye.

The thought made me run faster. I was out of the city by this point, away from the smells and squalor of the city gates. The countryside stretched out in front of me - rolling hills and grass swaying in the breeze, the sky so blue that it hurt to look at.

I stopped when I heard laughter. It was so weird to hear it when you were so full of tears. Then, I smelt food and realised that it had been months since I had eaten properly. I loved my dad - and he had done his best to provide for us, but our life wasn't stable, and warm food wasn't really a feature of everyday life. This did mean, though, that I had developed some skills in the art of swiping food while merchants weren't looking. This did not mean that I liked stealing and pick-pocketing every day. I only stole when I needed to and when I did, I stole away with guilt clear on my face.

“Okay,” I thought, “time to put my skills to work.”

Being the son of a thief taught me some things, but I learned most from seeing the city criminals in action. I opened my backpack and found the perfect thing for a diversion. I lit one of my matches and threw the firecracker into the sky, waiting for it to explode. The moment it did, everyone turned to look at the cracker, so I snatched a few chips and a chicken drumstick for the run. I was out before anyone could see or arrest me.

When I got back over the wall, I watched all the people wowing at the cracker I had thrown and tried to remember the last time in my life when I had actually had a day of laughter and fun. Though I tried as hard as I could, I could not remember one day that had not been grey and miserable.

I started running again and tried to forget about everything that had just happened. I needed to clear my mind.

Up ahead, I could see a shabby old inn and decided to lodge there for the night. I had a little bit of money stashed in the bottom of my bag - too little to matter, but enough to pay for a night's sleep. Once I was in the room I had rented for the night, I had a good look around and saw a broken bed, a cracked mirror, a foggy window and disgustingly yellow/beige flooring. It was unpleasant, but it was better than nothing!

I open my backpack again, paying attention to it properly for the first time that afternoon - immediately, something caught my eye. A brown leather pack, with a letter wrapped around it. I unwrap the letter and see a date and a name written on it. As I squint towards it, the name reveals itself: Edward Smith, 23/3/1933 -15/4/1960.

Dad.

Tears start to come to my eyes, but I wipe them away, folding open the piece of paper, seeing his writing, imagining him bent over the paper, scribbling his thoughts down.

Michael,

I don't know how much time I have – I think someone might have seen me run. I overheard a conversation; two guards were talking while on guard and one of them said this: 'You know that rascal in there – he's got the gem. Apparently, he always carries it on him.'

Son, they'll be looking for you. Run away and never come back to this horrible place. I'll do what I can for you, but I don't know if I'll be able to protect you, or myself.

It had been ripped off there, and I was not sure I even wanted to keep reading. He must have shoved it into my bag as they took him. I slowly opened the leather and felt something hard inside of it. I closed my eyes and let it drop out onto the bed.

The moment I opened them, I immediately regretted doing so. A rainbow opal with colours bursting out of every side, that had also been carved and polished to perfection, was lying on the broken bed.

It was true. Every word of what my father had overheard.

Glancing up, out of the window, I saw palace guards marching towards the inn. Safety, it seemed, had been an illusion. I palmed the opal, and grabbed my bag, knowing that it was time to run again.

Outside, I find some grubby bins, and, hiding behind them, I look out towards the guards once more and see they are busy talking to the people at the inn. Looking for me.

Sooner or later, they would come to me, and one fact that you should know is that I am terrible at lying, and would be found out straight away.

I looked left and right, searching for a place I could hide and stay, obviously not the inn. *What a waste of money*, I thought. It must have triggered an idea, because I saw a gigantic heap of sticks lying on a pile just next to a row of bushes and shrubs. I made a scamper to get to all the stuff. I was trying to be quiet – trying my hardest to hide, but as I tried to dart out from behind the bins, a rock ricocheted, and before I had a chance to turn around, a palace guard was looming over me.

Thoughts streamed around in my head, and I started yelling, hoping it would distract the guard as I worked to hide the opal in the rubbish heap.

With no ceremony, he grabbed me and put me in a dark, deep sack. He slung me over his shoulder and called to the others.

‘He’s here – I’ve got the thief!’

As the guard shouted that, I felt a burst of anger. What right did he have to call me a thief? They didn’t even have evidence yet! As I looked around the sack, I saw nothing but knew there wasn’t anything at all to help me to escape or do anything except wriggle about like a helpless worm about to be squashed.

I knew then that I would die the same death as my father, but I would put it out of my mind for now. I only had so much life left, it seemed, and I didn’t need to spend it thinking about death.

I tried to smile as the guard threw me out of the bag and pushed me into a prison cell to rot. I had a reason to smile – while it might have seemed that I was about to die a thief’s death. I knew I was innocent, and they’d never find that opal either. Without it, they’d never be able to keep me here. I wasn’t sure how I was going to get out, but I knew that this wouldn’t be where the adventure ended for me.