

Greg Barton

by

Jamie Louwrens

This is a work of fiction. None of the characters are real.

Greg is lost in grief, unaware of the world-changing events going on around him as he tries to come to terms with losing his wife and daughter to a freak accident.

Greg had never been much of a drinker. He stared morosely across the dimly lit bar and felt the bile rising in his throat. He pushed away the glass and swayed to his feet before making his way unsteadily through the bar and out onto the street. It was cold. Wet sleet fell lightly and he took a while to orientate himself.

“Fucking coward,” he muttered under his breath when he saw his reflection in a window. By the time he reached the apartment he was shivering uncontrollably. Force of habit kept him from falling onto the bed fully dressed. He even brushed his teeth. He lay on the bed, still shivering and thought about drinking a whole bottle of rum and going to sleep outside on the narrow balcony. “Fucking coward,” he muttered again. He lay awake, staring at the ceiling, trying not to remember, and wishing he could just stop his heart from beating and quietly slip away into the darkness, where he wouldn’t be able to remember, where he wouldn’t feel so utterly alone, useless and miserable.

He woke, hungover, when a siren rose above the sound of traffic outside. It was early morning, judging by the light. His phone was flat and he didn’t have a watch. Greg groaned and got up. He put his dirty clothes in the washing machine and cleaned and polished his boots, which had tracked mud into the apartment. He cleaned the apartment from top to bottom, getting down on his hands and knees to scrub the mud off the

entry hall carpet. Julia had teased him about his obsessive cleaning, he tried not to remember. The clothes were ready to go into the dryer by the time he had finished cleaning. He put the coffee on, then showered, then ironed a clean shirt and drank two mugs of coffee.

He decided he would do the Auschwitz tour. He had never wanted to visit the concentration camp. He remembered his Babcia, telling him about Auschwitz when he was a little boy. She had been born in Krakow, as had his father, her son. Greg struggled to remember Babcia's face. She had died only weeks before Barbara was born. Her namesake. Greg felt the bile rising in his throat thinking about his daughter. He got up and drank some water. He decided to go for a walk and let himself out of the apartment. Traffic was busy and everything seemed louder than usual. He walked through the market and bought a pretzel, which he ate as he made his way to the Barbican. He liked the red brick and the feel of the place. He tried to imagine his father seeing it as a boy, but instead found himself thinking about Julia and Barbara. He walked back to the apartment. The dryer had stopped and he carefully hung up his clothes so they would not get creased. He drank some cold coffee then cleaned the coffee pot, mug and sink, leaving everything immaculate. He went out and found the tour guide that had taken him to the salt mine and greeted him.

“Good morning Alex,” he said, “Can you take me to Auschwitz today?”

“Good morning Mr Barton, of course, it would be my pleasure!” said Alex, “You want to go now?”

Greg nodded and held out two hundred euros. Alex smiled and shook his head, “That is too much Mr Barton,” he said, “You have already paid me enough.”

“Just take it Alex, and please call me Greg?”

“You are very generous, I will give it to the Ukrainian fund,” said Alex.

“What Ukrainian fund?” asked Greg.

Alex looked at him strangely, “The fund for refugees, from the war... You know Putin has sent troops into Ukraine?”

“Oh, yes, sorry,” said Greg. He wondered what was going on, but didn’t say anything else as he followed Alex. Five minutes later he was in the back seat of a car. Alex sat in the front, talking to the driver in Polish. Greg stared out of the window remembering when he had visited the city with Julia. Their honeymoon. He had refused to visit Auschwitz then, telling her that he didn’t want to do anything depressing on their honeymoon. It seemed like such a long time ago, almost unreal; more like a half remembered dream than a memory.

There was some sort of demonstration on the road. The car stopped and Alex reached over and shook Greg’s knee.

“People are protesting the war – we will have to go around,” he said.

“War?” asked Greg, “What war?”

Even the driver turned to stare at him.

“Ukraine, Russia has invaded Ukraine,” said Alex, “Are you alright Mr Barton ... Greg?”

“Sorry,” said Greg, “No. Not really. Perhaps we should go another day. I’ll get out here.” He opened the door then struggled with unbuckling his seat belt.

“Wait!” called Alex, “Mr... Greg, wait, what...”

Greg was walking without thinking, back the way they had come. He heard running steps behind him. “Mr Barton!” called out Alex, he sounded concerned, “Where are you going... you have paid me to be your guide.”

“I just need to walk,” said Greg, “It’s OK, you can keep the money.”

“I will walk with you,” said Alex, “Are you unwell?”

“Not as such,” said Greg, “I was here before you know... in Krakow, I mean. A little over eight years ago, I came with my wife, Julia. For our honeymoon,” he laughed bitterly, “Julia was horrified, she thought Poland would be all grey concrete and Soviet era buildings, but she loved Krakow; we both did.”

“It is a beautiful city,” said Alex.

“I am Polish, on my father’s side, Bartok, from Krakow. My father was a pilot during the war with Germany. Julia and I wanted to bring Barbara here, today would have been her eighth birthday...” Greg felt the hollowness in his chest as he said the words. He saw the concern on Alex’s face.

“I’m sorry Alex,” he said, “Perhaps it would be better if you let me walk alone. I’ll find you tomorrow if I want to go to Auschwitz.”

Alex nodded and dropped back. Greg carried on walking, not really caring where he was going. He was thinking about Barbara again when someone ran into him and took his hand. It was a child. She looked up at him with piercingly blue eyes and spoke to him, clearly wanting an answer. Greg didn’t understand a word she said.

“I’m sorry, I don’t speak Polish,” he said to the girl.

A woman took the girl's hand and bent down to speak to her, before gently prising the child's grip off Greg's hand. The child started to wail.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to upset her," said Greg.

The woman looked at him just as Alex spoke from behind him, "She spoke Ukrainian, she asked if you were her daddy," he said in English.

"It is the beard," said the woman, "Viktor has a beard like yours, I am sorry for the inconvenience." She stood, holding the child in her arms. The little girl reached out for Gregg, still crying.

"You are from Ukraine?" asked Gregg, he felt as if his voice was coming from far away.

The woman nodded while trying to soothe the child, adjusting her to sit on her hip. "From Kyiv," she said.

"Where is her father?" asked Greg.

The woman shrugged, "He drove us to Lviv," she said, "I don't know if he has returned to Kyiv by now."

Greg felt as if he had stepped through a door. Everything seemed more clear to him.

"I am so sorry," he said, "What are you going to do now?"

The woman looked at Greg and then at Alex, she said something that Greg did not understand.

"He is British, a tourist," said Alex in English, then added something in Polish or Ukrainian that Greg did not understand.

"Can you help us to get to Britain?" asked the woman, looking at Greg.

“I don’t know,” said Greg, “I suppose I can try. Where are you staying?”

Alina and her daughter, Sara, moved into Greg’s apartment. Alex came with them, helping with their possessions.

“There are two bedrooms,” said Greg, feeling awkward, “It won’t take me long to move into the smaller room, I’ll wash the sheets...” he started to strip the double bed.

Alina spoke with Alex in what Greg had learned during their walk from the station, was Russian, a language they both spoke. It sounded as if Alex was reassuring her.

“It really is alright,” said Greg, “I don’t need such a big room to myself.”

“You are very ... tidy,” said Alex, “Perhaps you are a military man?”

Greg nodded, “Ex-military,” he said, “Retired now. I’ll get this in the machine and then move my things out.”

Sara followed him and watched him silently as he loaded the washing machine. Alina and Alex were in the sitting room when Greg emerged from the kitchen.

“I haven’t really ... well, there is coffee and some rum, but there is a market nearby,” he said, “If you give me a list I’ll do some shopping?”

Alex went with Alina and Sara to the market while Greg moved his things into the smaller bedroom. It didn’t have its own shower and toilet like the main bedroom. He was ironing the last shirt when they returned from the market carrying bags of shopping. Sara had chocolate smeared across her mouth.

“I must go now Greg,” said Alex, “I have given the money you gave me to Alina.” He handed Greg a card, “This is my private number, you can call me anytime. I will ask about visa for Britain for Alina and Sara.”

Greg nodded and thanked him, following him to the door. After Alex had gone he found the charger for his phone and plugged it into a socket in the kitchen. Alina was busy in the kitchen. Greg wasn't sure what to do. He offered to make coffee.

“Thank you, that would be nice,” said Alina, “It is OK if Sara watch TV?”

“Yes, that is OK...I don't... well let me try to turn it on. I haven't actually... I don't usually watch TV,” said Greg. He found a long remote but it did not seem to work. He opened the battery cover and there were no batteries in it. After ten minutes he finally managed to get the TV on using the buttons under a small flap on the side of the screen. It was war coverage from Ukraine. Greg hurriedly switched off the TV and glanced at Sara. She had fallen asleep on the couch. Greg wanted to clean the chocolate off her mouth but didn't dare touch her. She looked so small and vulnerable.

“She is four years and two months,” said Alina, “She is very good girl.”

Greg nodded and stood up. He returned to making coffee. The food smelled good.

“I'm going to see if I can get batteries for the remote,” he said, “Is there anything else you want from the shops?”

Alina shook her head, “We have little money, thank you for kindness.”

Gregg found a colouring book and some crayons. He tried several ATM's before he found one that allowed him to draw

cash using his UK Mastercard. He drew out the maximum he could, which was only the equivalent of a few hundred pounds. He took his time before returning to the apartment. There was a plate of food on the kitchen counter, covered with an upturned bowl. The kitchen was spotless and there was no sign of Alina or Sara. The main bedroom door was closed.

Greg managed to get the TV remote working and found what he assumed was a Polish Children's channel. He left it on and turned the sound down low then went and checked his phone. It had charged sufficiently to work. Greg checked the credit balance and spent a few minutes adding more credit to it. He cleared his mailboxes and messages and removed his PIN and Password protection from the phone. Greg left the cellphone and charger on the kitchen counter with the Zlotys and the colouring kit and spent ten minutes searching for a piece of paper he could leave a note for Alina on. Eventually he wrote on the back on the colouring book with a crayon that the phone and the money were for Alina.

Greg spent the afternoon walking around Krakow, thinking. When it started sleeting in the late afternoon he went into a café bar and ordered some borscht and coffee. There was a big screen TV. Mostly it seemed to be about Ukraine. There were enough English excerpts for him to get the gist of what was being said, Russian troops had taken control of the Ukrainians' biggest nuclear power station. It was eight PM before Gregg headed back to the apartment. The TV was on and Alina must have have been watching it. She was wearing a baggy tracksuit and had washed her hair. She looked very small and vulnerable when she got up and came to greet him.

"You did not eat the food," she said, "Can I make something else for you?"

Greg shook his head, "Thank you, but no. I have eaten." He said. The phone and money had not been moved.

Greg pointed, "The phone works, it is for you. There is credit. You can phone your husband...friends. The money too, is yours."

"Thank you," said Alina, "This is very kind. Why are you helping me?"

Greg lifted his hands, then shrugged, "It is the right thing to do," he said.

"How shall I repay?" asked Alina quietly, her eyes downcast.

"There is no need to repay me," said Gregg, "Maybe one day you can help someone else?"

"Do you want coffee?" asked Alina.

Gregg shook his head, "No, nothing for me, thank you. How are you feeling?"

Alina looked up at him, "I am much grateful, thank you."

Greg nodded, "I mean, how are you feeling about the situation, about what is happening?"

Alina shrugged, "So many things; fear of course, for Viktor, for my sister and her children, our friends..." she shook her head, "Much fear and much anger."

"I am sorry," said Gregg, "I hope this ends soon."

"You are soldier," said Alina, "Have you been in war?"

Gregg nodded, "Yes, in the Balkans and in Afghanistan and Iraq," he said.

"Do you think Russia will stop war in Ukraine?" she asked.

Greg shook his head, “I don’t know, I don’t understand why Russia has attacked Ukraine... I have not been following the news for a while. I am sorry.”

“What are you doing here in Krakow?” asked Alina, “This is nice apartment, but not your home I don’t think.”

“No, it is not my home,” said Greg, “It is an Air BNB, Julia booked it for two weeks...” Greg sat, he wanted to tell someone, “Today is our daughter’s birthday, her eighth birthday. My father was from Poland, Krakow, he came to Britain during the Second World War, he was a pilot. I brought Julia here to Krakow on our honeymoon, Barbara was conceived here. We wanted to show her the city... but,” Greg took a deep breath, “They are gone; Julia and Barbara, drowned in the car, swept away in a storm. Dead. Julia and Barbara are dead.” He could hear his heart beating and the air moving in and out of his lungs. He shook his head and got to his feet, “I’m sorry; you have enough problems of your own... it’s just that I haven’t been able to say it. I think I needed to say it. I’m so sorry.”

He felt a hand on his wrist, “Please sit,” said Alina, “I can make coffee. You want coffee with rum?”

Greg sat and nodded his head. He didn’t want coffee with rum, but it felt easier to agree. He stared at his hands and repeated in his mind, “Julia and Barbara are gone, they are dead.” He repeated it several times. The sound of his heart and breathing felt calmer to him.

Alina sat down next to him, “This is my husband Viktor,” she said, “He is architect, he is handsome man yes?” She handed him a photograph album.

Greg stared at the smiling man in the photo, holding Sara. He nodded, “Yes, he is a handsome man. Is that your home?”

“He has beard now, like yours. You are handsome like Viktor. This is our home in Kyiv.”

Greg worked his way through the Album, while Alina pointed out the people. She got up to fetch the coffee and returned to sit next to Greg. He was looking at a picture of the three of them, the sea behind them. Sara had her mother’s complexion and blue eyes.

“Odessa,” said Alina, “A short holiday to visit my sister,” She handed him a mug of coffee. Greg could smell the rum.

“Do you have photos of your family?” asked Alina, “Of Julia and Barbara?”

Greg nodded, “On the phone...” he made to get up, but Alina told him to sit as she got up to fetch the phone. She handed it to him and sat close to him. Greg used his thumb to open the photo app. He scrolled through the photos, and felt Alina’s hand on his back, soothing him as he started to cry.

Greg lay, wide awake in the bed, wondering what the time was. It was still dark out. He felt calm and at peace with himself. He thought about Julia and Barbara, and how much he missed them and of all the things he would never be able to do with them. He was sad, but no longer paralysed by grief. He got up and fetched the phone from the sitting room. He drank the half cup of cold coffee and rum and washed the cup, then returned to his bed and scrolled through the photos on the phone again. He got up, showered and dressed when he heard Sara’s voice. He made coffee and drank two cups himself before putting the phone back on charge and letting himself out of the apartment.

He returned an hour later with fresh bread and pretzels, and a notepad and ballpoint pen. Alina and Sara were up. Sara was drawing on the glass of one of the doors to the balcony, Alina was watching the TV; she looked tired and had dark circles

under her eyes. She jumped up and began to gather up the plates and glasses on the coffee table when Greg entered.

“Good morning, I thought you were still sleeping,” said Alina, “I will clean immediately.”

Greg smiled, “There is no need to clean up yet, just sit and relax?” he said, “I have brought fresh bread, would you like more coffee and a Pretzel?”

He made a fresh pot of coffee while Alina washed up their breakfast things.

“Thank you, for listening to me last night,” said Greg, going very red, “You helped me a lot.”

“You are very welcome,” said Alina, “You have suffered much. I am sorry.”

“I asked Alex to come later, he can explain to you about getting a Visa for UK,” said Greg. “I will sponsor you, and give you a written invitation to stay in my home in UK? I will need your details for that.”

Alina nodded, “I have papers,” she said, “Viktor said we should bring all our papers.”

Greg used the notepad to draft a letter of invitation to Alina and her family to visit and stay with him in his home in Berkshire. Alex arrived with some forms. He witnessed Greg’s letter and went off to get everything photocopied and notarised. Greg took Alina and Sara to the square for lunch, and told Alina what little he knew of the history of the place. She told him that she had tried to call Viktor, but had not managed. She had managed to speak to her sister’s husband in Odessa, who told her that her sister was trying to get to Lviv with their children. Greg saw that she had bitten her fingernails so short that some were bleeding.

Sara was less suspicious of him when they walked back to the apartment, and asked a lot of questions which Alina translated.

Greg spent the afternoon at the kitchen counter writing while Sara slept and Alina watched the news. He felt guilty about deceiving her, but happy that he now had a purpose. When she asked if he would eat supper with them, he agreed readily and asked if he could help.

He peeled potatoes and chopped carrots and beetroot and learned that Alina was an accountant. She told him that Viktor had done military service during the Russian annexation of Crimea. His family had fled Crimea. She said Viktor was determined to resist the Russians, although he was a Russian speaking Ukrainian. She seemed very matter of fact about it.

Greg enjoyed the meal, a simple and very tasty lamb stew. Sara was a messy and noisy eater, reminding him of Barbara at that age. Greg washed up and cleaned the kitchen while Sara was bathed and made ready for bed. Greg felt the weight of grief pressing down on him when he heard Alina singing to Sara. He didn't know or understand the words, but the emotion stayed with him for a while. He shook it off as he prepared his things in readiness for his departure.

He slept well, and was up, dressed and gone just as the sky was beginning to lighten. He walked to the station and saw that it was not yet six AM when he got there, but it was already crowded. Ukrainians escaping the war, he realised.

It took longer to get out of the station at Lviv, than to get to Lviv from Krakow. Gregg was questioned by so many people that he lost count. He stuck to his story that he was going to Kyiv to find his friends Viktor and Alina Vyodorov, to help them get out of Ukraine. He had the photo of Viktor, Alina and Sara outside their home in Kyiv and their address and phone number. He explained that he had not brought his phone with him, believing it would be useless in Ukraine. His backpack contained spare

clothing and food, things he could eat without cooking, and lots of cigarettes. After two days he was allowed to proceed, and told he would be escorted to Kyiv by a volunteer going back to help more civilians to leave. He was given a piece of paper and told not to lose it; it was a pass allowing him to travel to Kyiv.

His escort, Dmitri, spoke good English. He thanked Greg for the brick of cigarettes and told him he was crazy for trying to get to Kyiv.

“Stay near door, if Russians attack train, you must stay down,” he said.

They weren't attacked, but Gregg saw a great deal of smoke and could hear what sounded like the constant rumble of thunder as they approached Kyiv. There were many people walking along the tracks, away from Kyiv. Scenes that Greg had seen before in Bosnia, Croatia, and Iraq.

Dmitri handed Greg over to an elderly man with a military cap, shouting in his ear to be heard over the din of people shouting and fighting to get on the train. It was a relief to get away from it all. The old man spoke very little English. He took Greg down into a basement where he was left with two younger men in uniform. They both spoke English. They examined Gregg's papers and asked him to empty his back pack. The search was quick and thorough. One of the men spent some time on the radio speaking in Ukrainian before telling Greg he was free to go and warning him to be careful.

“Stay underground at night, there is curfew. Good luck English!”

It took Greg two days to find Viktor and Alina's house. There was nobody there. The house was not damaged, but several houses had been damaged less than two hundred metres away, one was still burning. It was early afternoon. There were dogs roaming the streets and Greg improvised a sling to fling stones at any that got too close to him. A trick he had first

learned in Bosnia. After approaching several women, Gregg eventually found a militia post. A grim looking soldier listened to him and looked at the photo Greg showed him. He shook his head and called out in Ukrainian. A man roused himself from where he had been resting in a corner and looked at the photo.

“I know this man, Viktor,” he said, “He has taken his family to Lviv. From there he said he would go to Dnipro, to fight.”

“Is there any way to find out if he is there?” asked Greg.

After much discussion in Ukrainian, in which several other men joined, Greg was told that he could write a note, which they would try and get sent up the line, for Viktor. Greg spent twenty minutes drafting a short note, giving Viktor his mobile phone number, saying it was the number on which he could contact Alina. He handed it to the militia commander who read it before nodding and putting it in his pocket. Greg then told him he was ex military, and wanted to help.

“I was in the British Army, Royal Engineers, for twenty years,” he said, “I was good with explosives, and a marksman.”

The attitude towards him changed; twenty minutes later Greg was in a military vehicle heading towards the outskirts of the city. The driver, a young woman, and a young soldier who spoke good English asked him why he wanted to fight for Ukraine.

“I never liked bullies,” said Greg, “And Putin is a bully. If he is not stopped here, nobody will be safe.”

“Ukraine cannot defeat Russia,” said the woman, “But we can make them suffer. This will be dirty war.”

“Aren’t they all?” murmured Greg, he was not looking forward to it at all. He shook his head when she offered him a cigarette

from the pack he had given her. “Those things will kill you,” he said. They all laughed.

Alina had cried herself to sleep while looking through the photos on Greg’s phone. She woke with a start when the phone rang, and dropped the phone, which fell to the floor. She fumbled for it and answered cautiously in English.

“Hello?” she braced herself, fearing the caller would be a friend or relative of Greg’s. For a moment there was silence.

“Alina?” asked a familiar voice.

“Viktor?” cried Alina, “Viktor, is that really you? How did you get this number?”

Sara woke up, and cried when she saw Alina crying, but laughed when she heard her father’s voice. Viktor told them he was fine, and happy that they were safe. He told them an Englishman had sent a message from Kyiv, with the phone number before volunteering to help defend the city. He told her the Englishman was a retired soldier, going by the name of Gregor Bartok. The line cut just then. Alina saw that Greg’s cellphone had died, and plugged it in to charge.

Greg Barton