

*The Names We Take* by Trace Kerr (Ooligan Press, 2020):

Light Copyedit

The part in Iris's hair reminded Pip of combing the snarls out of her mom's curly hair while she grabbed for breath in a makeshift hospital bed. She'd called Pip by her old name. Her ~~dead-name~~. Of course she had. Her mom looked like she hadn't slept in years. Dark rings circled her eyes, puffed over sallow cheeks. A ropy cough brought a flush to her mom's cheeks as she reached out for Pip's hand. They didn't say much. Her mom was already dead. All she had left was the dying.

**Commented [OR1]:** M-W says this is more commonly closed.

Pip told her mom about life on the streets, about scavenging for a place to sleep in the shelters during the winter. They hadn't spoken in the year since Pip had run away from home. It was her mom ~~that~~who brought up her dad. That's how Pip learned he was already dead. One Mile Cough took that bastard like a thief in the night. She'd never get the chance to tell him he'd been wrong about her.

Iris sniffed, wiping her nose on her sleeve. Pip knew she was hard and sometimes cruel. She'd gotten that from her parents.

"You don't have to come with us if you don't want to. We'd leave you the bike-~~lock~~ keys for the front door. You could stay here and use the supplies. But I think we'd be safer together. And I'd like to hear you play that violin again. What do you say?"

"Everyone's dead," Iris cried, her mouth stretching with grief.

Her voice warbled, ~~gaining pent-up steam~~ and increasing in volume with every word.

**Commented [OR2]:** I've changed this because it doesn't quite make sense to gain something that's already pent up.

“Mom, Dad. Everyone I’m with dies.”

*Dies* ricocheted off the walls, buzzing in their ears.

Iris stood with her mouth hanging loose, like the words<sup>2</sup> had been knocked out of her.

Eerie silence filled the music store as Pip glanced at Whistler. He placed a callused hand on his rifle, curling his fingers around the barrel. Their heads turned as one to watch the doorway.

Plastic keys plinked in the front room and Kitty rushed over the music stands, her tail puffed to twice its size.

At the front of the store the metal gate rattled. Pip’s blood froze.

A cheerful male voice sang out, “Hellooooo?”

**Commented [T3]:** I know words’d looks weird, but try saying it outloud...

**Commented [OR4R3]:** Since this isn’t spoken dialogue, the contraction doesn’t quite work here. “Words’d” is such an unconventional and unfamiliar contraction that it will likely appear as an error and make readers stumble, bringing them out of the story—which is exactly what we don’t want!

## Chapter 8

The gate rattled again, this time with more urgency. Iris's face was a pale moon, her brown eyes dilating into pools of black. Dizziness washed over Pip. She couldn't remember how to breathe.

"Whistling Man, I know you're in there," the voice crooned.

Whistler quietly racked the slide on his rifle.

Pip gestured for Iris to come to her and be oh-so-quiet. They walked in single file to the storeroom. Pip began stuffing bottles of water into two packs.

"What are those?" Iris breathed as Pip topped off the bags.

"Bug-out bags. Always ready to go," she whispered, holding up a pack for Whistler.

Pip threw hers on and turned off the lantern, plunging them into complete darkness.

An engine whined, turning over roughly before catching. A loud voice swore, and the report of several backfires sounded like gunshots inside the music store. Something heavy crashed into the gate with a squealing crunch. They were using a car as a battering ram. As Pip's eyes adjusted to the dim light, she seized Iris and guided her to the roof ladder. She felt Whistler take Iris's hand and heard him whispering instructions.

"Wait here," Pip hissed.

She moved silently into the room, feeling around in the dark for her bat and the violin in its hard case. Snatching at Whistler's backpack, she deftly readjusted the straps and secured the violin to the outside. She tapped Whistler on the shoulder. He began to climb.

Pip tucked her bat into a holster on her own pack as the squeal of tires ended with another horrible slam into the building. Pip steadied herself on the ladder as dust rained down on their heads.

Iris whimpered.

Pip put Iris's hands on a rung. "You need to climb."

She pushed Iris the last few feet up the ladder, thrusting the terrified girl onto the roof and out of the way. Pip pulled herself onto the roof right after, sheltering behind a reeking pile of portable privy bags.

The car backfired before charging diagonally across the street, smashing against the music store gate. The building shook and concrete dust plumed into the air. The six locks they used on the door were still holding, but Pip wasn't sure for how long. She slammed the roof hatch closed.

Whistler pointed at Iris to stay and yanked a struggling Kitty out of his jacket. He set her on the roof and gave her a rough bump on the head with his knuckles. Fresh slashes covered his neck and disappeared into his shirt. Kitty hadn't liked being shoved into his coat.

Pip piled three bags of waste on the hatch and sliced them with the sharp knife she'd left on the roof for just that purpose. Cedar shavings and sludge oozed out. The stench of an overfull porta-potty on a hot day wafted over them. Iris gagged and clamped a hand over her mouth.

Rising to her knees and taking a firm grip on several poop bags with both hands, Pip tilted her head toward the rear of the building. They all stayed low to avoid being seen from the street. A few feet from the edge, she set the bags down and army crawled to look down below,

risking a fast peek. Two bald men stood at the corner of the building, watching the back door.

The car's engine stuttered, belts screeching from repeated crashes into the metal bars. Sand danced on the roof as the car collided again. The building shook once more. Another plume of dust. But this time, triumphant yelling carried over the engine.

She checked over the ledge. The men below punched the air in victory.

"They're in." Pip's words tasted like regret.

"This is on me," Whistler said.

Iris placed a shaky hand on her chest. "It's 'cause I played the violin."

Whistler tucked a strand of Iris's hair behind her ear. Pip couldn't believe how she calmed under his hand. "This is for the yarn store. Your loud music is a coincidence. *Not your fault.*"

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Pip connected the dots from the yarn store to the roof. Three dead men had pushed the Skins to retaliate. They'd finally gotten strong enough to fight back. Whistler was right: they *were* all anger and zigzags. Whist caught her devastated expression and nodded.

"My fault," he mouthed.

The car emitted a mighty backfire, belching a cloud of black smoke.

"Crappy gas," Whistler muttered.

The roof hatch jumped and slammed down, muffling an angry scream of disgust as feces spilled into the face of the idiot who'd climbed the ladder.

A wolf's smile crossed Whistler's face. "That was a great idea, Pip."

“It won’t stop them. It’ll just piss them off.”

He clicked off the safety on his rifle.

“What do we do?” Iris’s fear breathed hot in Pip’s ear.

Pip looked at Whistler. They didn’t have any choice: it was time to run. He nodded, grabbed Kitty by the scruff of the neck, and tossed her off the roof.

Pip caught Iris’s scream in her hand, clamping her fingers over her mouth.

“There’s a shipping container about three feet from the building. It’s a big jump.”

Iris scrambled under Pip’s tight grip, kicking up gravel as she fought the idea of jumping off the roof.

Pip held her tight, shushing her. When she let go, Pip held up a stern finger to remind Iris to stay quiet and wriggled as near to the edge as she dared to risk another look. This close, if one of the guys on the ground was facing her way, he’d see her pack move above the roof’s concrete lip. She popped her head over the little wall and huffed with relief. Both men had gone around the corner ~~towards~~toward the front of the building.

“We’re going to jump and run into the building next door. Whist made a path that takes us all the way through to the other side of the block. Just like when we ran over the bridge. Running. No stopping. Got it?”

Iris nodded woodenly. Pip tossed the toilet bags to the ground.

Whistler crouched, gripping his rifle, and raised his eyebrows at Iris. He knew she’d never jump on her own. Someone needed to push her.

Pip tugged Iris up and heaved her over the ledge. She was still pinwheeling in the air when Pip and Whistler jumped after. They all crashed onto the metal shipping container at almost the same time.

Pip landed at a run, sliding off the container as if pounding her way to home plate. Iris stumbled on the container's metal ridges. Her belt caught her up before she hit the ground. Pip made quick work of cutting Iris free and pushed her toward the next building.

Snatching up toilet bags that hadn't burst from the fall, Pip was about to follow Iris when two Skins came around the corner. Their acne-covered faces and gangly limbs revealed what she hadn't noticed from up on the roof. They weren't men. They were barely teens. Neither of them was any bigger than she was.

Her grin was triumphant as she slashed a shit-filled bag with her knife.

"Hey—!" one of them yelled as the bag exploded across his face. Fetid shavings splashed onto the other teen. He was still figuring out what had happened when a second bag smacked into him, knocking him off his feet with a wet squelch. The two guys collapsed under a rain of sewage.