

Introduction

by Michelle Magorian

Many years ago, I was daydreaming in a launderette when I saw an image in my head of a small boy standing in a graveyard. He was wearing a label and looked terrified. I knew instantly he was an evacuee and that I had to write about him.

Before my mother joined the QAs (Queen Alexandra's Royal Army Nursing Corps) she was a nurse in London during the Blitz and told me many stories about her experiences there. On the children's ward there was one little boy who had crawled under the bed, having never slept in one before, and while undressing another little boy so that she could attend to his badly grazed skin, she discovered that his vest had been sewn to his under shorts (which had a buttoned flap at the back). This meant she had to unpick the stitches. When the boy's mother came to visit him and discovered what she had done, she exclaimed, 'You would! I've just sewn him in for the winter!'

This was common for families who lived in the slums. The mothers would also line the inside of their children's

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underwear with newspapers to keep them warm. I instantly knew that the boy in my head (William Beech) came from that background. And then suddenly my mother died. When we reached the graveyard on the day of her funeral, I was surprised to see not only trees and squirrels but a small house. When I asked someone what a house was doing at the end of a graveyard I was told, 'That's where the man who looks after the graves lives.'

And I knew that the man who lived at the end of the graveyard where I had seen William standing would take him in. The man was Tom Oakley. In a sense, my mother gave both of them to me.

Since its publication, adaptations have resulted in wonderful performers, wonderful technicians, wonderful composers and wonderful illustrators sharing the story of how William and Tom, two people, hurt by life in very different ways, heal one another. And I am delighted that Puffin are celebrating its fortieth year. Or, as William's best friend Zach would say, 'Wizard!'

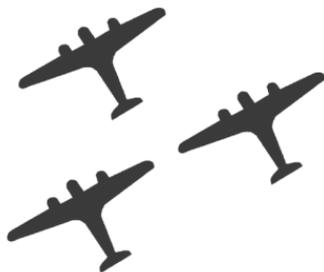
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*Answers to the Questions I Am Most
Often Asked*

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I. Meeting

‘YES,’ said Tom bluntly, on opening the front door. ‘What d’you want?’

A harassed middle-aged woman in a green coat and felt hat stood on his step. He glanced at the armband on her sleeve. She gave him an awkward smile.

‘I’m the billeting officer for this area,’ she began.

‘Oh yes, and what’s that got to do wi’ me?’

She flushed slightly. ‘Well, Mr, Mr . . .’

‘Oakley. Thomas Oakley.’

‘Ah, thank you, Mr Oakley.’ She paused and took a deep breath. ‘Mr Oakley, with the declaration of war imminent . . .’

Tom waved his hand. ‘I knows all that. Git to the point. What d’you want?’ He noticed a small boy at her side.

‘It’s him I’ve come about,’ she said. ‘I’m on my way to your village hall with the others.’

‘What others?’

She stepped to one side. Behind the large iron gate which stood at the end of the graveyard were a small group of

children. Many of them were filthy and very poorly clad. Only a handful had a blazer or coat. They all looked bewildered and exhausted. One tiny dark-haired girl in the front was hanging firmly on to a new teddy-bear.

The woman touched the boy at her side and pushed him forward.

‘There’s no need to tell me,’ said Tom. ‘It’s obligatory and it’s for the war effort.’

‘You are entitled to choose your child, I know,’ began the woman apologetically.

Tom gave a snort.

‘But,’ she continued, ‘his mother wants him to be with someone who’s religious or near a church. She was quite adamant. Said she would only let him be evacuated if he was.’

‘Was what?’ asked Tom impatiently.

‘Near a church.’

Tom took a second look at the child. The boy was thin and sickly-looking, pale with limp sandy hair and dull grey eyes.

‘His name’s Willie,’ said the woman.

Willie, who had been staring at the ground, looked up. Round his neck, hanging from a piece of string, was a cardboard label. It read ‘William Beech’.

Tom was well into his sixties, a healthy, robust, stockily-built man with a head of thick white hair. Although he was of average height, in Willie’s eyes he was a towering giant with skin like coarse, wrinkled brown paper and a voice like thunder.

He glared at Willie. ‘You’d best come in,’ he said abruptly.

The woman gave a relieved smile. 'Thank you so much,' she said, and she backed quickly away and hurried down the tiny path towards the other children. Willie watched her go.

'Come on in,' repeated Tom harshly. 'I ent got all day.'

Nervously, Willie followed him into a dark hallway. It took a few seconds for his eyes to adjust from the brilliant sunshine he had left to the comparative darkness of the cottage. He could just make out the shapes of a few coats hanging on some wooden pegs and two pairs of boots standing below.

'S'pose you'd best know where to put yer things,' muttered Tom, looking up at the coat rack and then down at Willie. He scratched his head. 'Bit 'igh fer you. I'd best put in a low peg.'

He opened a door on his left and walked into the front room, leaving Willie in the hallway still clutching onto his brown carrier bag. Through the half-open door he could see a large black cooking range with a fire in it and an old threadbare armchair near by. He shivered. Presently Tom came out with a pencil.

'You can put that ole bag down,' he said gruffly. 'You ent goin' no place else.'

Willie did so and Tom handed him the pencil. He stared blankly up at him.

'Go on,' said Tom, 'I told you before, I ent got all day. Now make a mark so's I know where to put a peg, see.' Willie made a faint dot on the wall beside the hem of one of the large coats. 'Make a nice big 'un so's I can see it clear, like.' Willie drew a small circle and filled it in. Tom leaned

down and peered at it. 'Neat little chap, ent you? Gimme yer mackintosh and I'll put it on top o' mine fer now.'

With shaking fingers Willie undid his belt and buttons, peeled off the mackintosh and held it in his arms. Tom took it from him and hung it on top of his great-coat. He walked back into the front room. 'Come on,' he said. Willie followed him in.

It was a small, comfortable room with two windows. The front one looked out on to the graveyard, the other to a little garden at the side. The large black range stood solidly in an alcove in the back wall, a thick dark pipe curving its way upward through the ceiling. Stretched out beneath the side window were a few shelves filled with books, old newspapers and odds and ends and by the front window stood a heavy wooden table and two chairs. The flagstoned floor was covered in a faded crimson, green and brown rug. Willie glanced at the armchair by the range and the objects that lay on top of the small wooden table beside it: a pipe, a book and a baccy jar.

'Pull that stool up by the fire and I'll give you somethin' to eat.' Willie made no movement. 'Go on, sit down, boy,' he repeated. 'You got wax in your ears?'

Willie pulled a small wooden stool from a corner and sat down in front of the fire. He felt frightened and lonely.

Tom cooked two rashers of bacon and placed a slab of bread, with the fresh bacon dripping beside it, onto a plate. He put it on the table with a mug of hot tea. Willie watched him silently, his bony elbows and knees jutting out angularly beneath his thin grey jersey and shorts. He tugged

nervously at the tops of his woollen socks and a faint smell of warm rubber drifted upwards from his white plimsolls.

‘Eat that up,’ said Tom.

Willie dragged himself reluctantly from the warmth of the fire and sat at the table. ‘You can put yer own sugar in,’ Tom grunted.

Willie politely took a spoonful, dunked it into the large white mug of tea and stirred it. He bit into the bread but a large lump in his throat made swallowing difficult. He didn’t feel at all hungry, but remembered apprehensively what his mum had said about doing as he was told. He stared out at the graveyard. The sun shone brilliantly, yet he felt cold. He gazed at the few trees around the graves. Their leaves were all different colours, pale greens, amber, yellow . . .

‘Ent you ’ungry?’ asked Tom from his armchair.

Willie looked up, startled. ‘Yes, mister,’ he whispered.

‘Jest a slow chewer, that it?’

He nodded timidly and stared miserably at the plate. Bacon was a luxury. Only lodgers or visitors had bacon and here he was not eating it.

‘Mebbe you can chew it more easy later.’ Tom beckoned him over to the stool. ‘Put another spoon of that sugar in, boy, and bring that tea over ’ere.’

Willie did so and returned to the stool. He held the warm mug tightly in his icy hands and shivered. Tom leaned towards him.

‘What you got in yer bag, then?’

‘I dunno,’ mumbled Willie, ‘Mum packed it. She said I weren’t to look in.’ One of his socks slid halfway down his

leg, revealing a large multicoloured bruise on his shin and a swollen red sore beside.

‘That’s a nasty ole thing,’ Tom said, pointing to it. ‘What give you that?’ Willie paled and pulled the sock up quickly.

‘Best drink that afore it gits cold,’ said Tom, sensing that the subject needed to be changed. Willie looked intently at the changing shapes of the flames in the fire and slowly drank the tea. It thundered in his throat in his attempt to swallow it quietly. Tom left the room briefly and within a few minutes returned.

‘I gotta go out for a spell. Then I’ll fix your room, see. Up there,’ and he pointed to the ceiling. ‘You ent afraid of heights, are you?’ Willie shook his head. ‘That’s good or you’d have had to sleep under the table.’ He bent over the range and shovelled some fresh coke into the fire.

‘‘Ere’s an ole scarf of mine,’ he muttered, and he threw a khaki object over Willie’s knees. He noticed another bruise on the boy’s thigh, but said nothing. ‘‘Ave a wander round the graveyard. Don’t be scared of the dead. Least they can’t drop an ole bomb on yer head.’

‘No, mister,’ agreed Willie politely.

‘And close the front door behind you, else Sammy’ll be eatin’ yer bacon.’

‘Yes, mister.’

Willie heard him slam the front door and listened to the sound of his footsteps gradually fading. He hugged himself tightly and rocked backwards and forwards on the stool. ‘I must be good,’ he whispered urgently, ‘I must be good,’ and he rubbed a sore spot on his arm. He was such a bad boy, he knew that. Mum said she was kinder to him than most

mothers. She only gave him soft beatings. He shuddered. He was dreading the moment when Mr Oakley would discover how wicked he was. He was stronger-looking than Mum.

The flames in the range flickered and danced before his eyes, crackling in sudden bursts though not in a venomous way. He felt that it was a friendly crackle. He turned to look for something that was missing. He stood up and moved towards the shelves under the side window. There, he was being bad again, putting his nose in where it didn't belong. He looked up quickly to make sure Mr Oakley wasn't spying at him through the window.

Mum said war was a punishment from God for people's sins, so he'd better watch out. She didn't tell him what to watch out for, though. It could be in this room, he thought, or maybe the graveyard. He knelt on one of the chairs at the front window and peered out. Graves didn't look so scary as she had made out, even though he knew that he was surrounded by dead bodies. But what was it that was missing? A bird chirruped in the garden. Of course, that was it. He couldn't hear traffic and banging and shouting. He looked around at the room again. His eyes rested on the stool where the woollen scarf lay. He'd go outside. He picked it up, and wrapping it round his neck he went into the hall and closed the front door carefully behind him.

Between him and the graveyard lay a small flat garden. Along the edge of it were little clusters of flowers. Willie stepped forward to the edge where the garden ended and the graveyard began. He plunged his hands deep into his pockets and stood still for a moment.

The graveyard and cottage with its garden were surrounded by a rough stone wall, except for where the back of the church stood. Green moss and wild flowers sprang through the grey stonework. Between the graves lay a small, neat flagstoned pathway down the centre. It broke off in two directions: one towards a large gate on the left where the other children had waited and one leading to the back entrance of a small church to his right. A poplar tree stood in the far corner of the graveyard near the wall with the gate and another near Mr Oakley's cottage by the edge of the front garden. A third grew by the exit of the church; but the tree which caught Willie's attention was a large oak tree. It stood in the centre of the graveyard by the path, its large, well-clad branches curving and hanging over part of it.

He glanced down at a small stone angel near his feet and began to walk round the gravestones. Some were so faded that he could barely see the shapes of the letters. Each grave had a character of its own. Some were well tended with a little vase of flowers on top as if they were perched upon a tablecloth, some were covered with a large stone slab with neat, well-cut grass surrounding them, while others had weeds growing higgledy-piggledy over them. The ones Willie liked best were the gentle mounds covered in grass with the odd surviving summer flower peeping through the coloured leaves. As he walked around he noticed that some of the very old ones were tiny. Children's graves, probably.

He was sitting on one Elizabeth Thatcher when he heard voices. A young man and woman were passing by. They

were talking and laughing. They stopped and the young woman leaned over the wall. Her long fair hair hung in a single plait scraped back from a round, pink-cheeked face. Pretty, he thought.

‘You’re from London, ent you?’ she said.

He stood up and removed his hands from his pockets.

‘Yes, miss.’

‘You’re a regular wild bunch, so I’ve heard,’ and she smiled.

The young man was in uniform. He stood with his arm around her shoulder.

‘How old are you, then?’ she asked.

‘Eight, miss.’

‘Polite little lad, ent you? What’s your name?’

‘William Beech, miss.’

‘You can stop calling me miss. I’m Mrs, Mrs Hartridge.’

The young man beamed. ‘I’ll see you on Monday at school. I expect you’ll be in my class. Goodbye, William.’

‘Bye, miss, missis,’ he whispered.

He watched them walk away. When they were out of sight he sat back down on Elizabeth Thatcher, tugged at a handful of grass and pulled it from the earth. He’d forgotten all about school. He thought of Mr Barrett, his form master in London. He spent all day yelling and shouting at everyone and rapping knuckles. He dreaded school normally. Mrs Hartridge didn’t seem like him at all. He gave a sigh of relief and rubbed his chest. That was one ordeal he didn’t think would be too terrifying to face. He glanced at the oak tree. It seemed a sheltered, secluded sort of place. He’d go and sit beneath its branches.

As he walked towards it he tripped over a hard object. It was a tiny gravestone hidden by a clump of grass. He knelt down and pushed the grass to one side to look at it. He pulled away at it, plucking it out in great handfuls from the soil. He wanted to make it so that people could see the stone again. It looked forgotten and lost. It wasn't fair that it should be hidden. He became quite absorbed in this task until he heard a scrabbling noise. He turned. Sniffing and scratching among the leaves at the foot of the tree was a squirrel. He recognized its shape from pictures he had seen but he wasn't prepared for one that moved. He was terrified and remained frozen in a crouched position. The squirrel seemed quite unperturbed and carried on scuffling about in the leaves, picking up nuts and titbits in its tiny paws. Willie stayed motionless, hardly breathing. He felt like the stone angel. The squirrel's black eyes darted in a lively manner from place to place. It was tiny, light grey in colour with a bushy tail that stuck wildly in the air as it poked its paws and head into the russet and gold leaves.

After a while Willie's shoulders relaxed and the gripping sensation in his stomach subsided a little. He wriggled his toes gingerly inside his plimsolls. It seemed as though he had been crouching for hours although it couldn't have been more than ten minutes.

The little grey fellow didn't seem to scare him as much, and he began to enjoy watching him. A loud sharp barking suddenly disturbed the silence. The squirrel leapt and disappeared. Willie sprang to his feet, hopping on one leg and gasping at the mixture of numbness and pins and needles in the other. A small black-and-white collie ran

around the tree and into the leaves. It stopped in front of him and jumped up into the air. Willie was more petrified of the dog than he had been of the squirrel.

‘Them poisonous dogs,’ he heard his mother’s voice saying inside him. ‘One bite from them mutts and you’re dead. They got ’orrible diseases in ’em.’ He remembered the tiny children’s graves and quickly picked up a thick branch from the ground.

‘You go away,’ he said feebly, gripping it firmly in his hand. ‘You go away.’

The dog sprang into the air again and barked and yapped at him, tossing leaves by his legs. Willie let out a shriek and drew back. The dog came nearer.

‘I’ll kill you.’

‘I wouldn’t do that,’ said a deep voice behind him. He turned to find Tom standing by the outer branches. ‘He ent goin’ to do you no ’arm, so I should jest drop that if I was you.’

Willie froze with the branch still held high in his hand. Sweat broke out from under his armpits and across his forehead. Now he was for it. He was bound to get a beating now. Tom came towards him, took the branch firmly from his hand and lifted it up. Willie automatically flung his arm across his face and gave a cry but the blow he was expecting never came. Tom had merely thrown the branch to the other end of the graveyard and the dog had gone scampering after it.

‘You can take yer arm down now, boy,’ he said quietly. ‘I think you and I ’ad better go inside and sort a few things out. Come on,’ and with that he stepped aside for Willie to go in front of him along the path.

Willie walked shakily towards the cottage, his head lowered. Through blurred eyes he saw the tufts of grass spilling up between the small flat stones. The sweat trickled down the sides of his face and chest. His armpits stung savagely and a sharp pain stabbed at his stomach. He walked through the front door and stood in the hallway, feeling the perspiration turn cold and clammy. Tom walked into the front room and stood waiting for him to enter.

‘Don’t dither out there,’ he said, ‘come on in.’

Willie did so but his body felt as if it no longer belonged to him. It seemed to move of its own accord. Tom’s voice grew more distant. It reverberated as if it was being thrown back at him from the walls of a cave. He sat down on the stool feeling numb.

Tom picked up a poker and walked across to the fire. Now he was going to get it, he thought, and he clutched tightly onto the seat of the stool. Tom looked down at him.

‘About Sammy,’ he heard him say. He watched him poke the fire and then he didn’t hear any more. He knew that Tom was speaking to him but he couldn’t take his eyes off the poker. It sent the hot coke tumbling in all directions. He saw Tom’s brown wrinkled hand lift it out of the fire. The tip was red, almost white in places. He was certain that he was going to be branded with it. The room seemed to swim and he heard both his and Tom’s voice echoing. He watched the tip of the poker spin and come closer to him and then the floor came towards him and it went dark. He felt two large hands grip him from behind and push his head in between his knees until the carpet came into focus and he heard himself gasping.

Tom opened the front window and lifted him out through it.

‘Breathe in deep,’ Willie heard him say. ‘Take in a good sniff.’

He took in a gulp of air. ‘I’ll be sick,’ he mumbled.

‘That’s right, go on, I’m ’olding you. Take in a good sniff. Let yer throat open.’

Willie drank in some more air. A wave of nausea swept through him and he vomited.

‘Go on,’ he heard Tom say, ‘breathe in some more,’ and he was sick again and again until there was no more left inside him and he hung limply in Tom’s arms.

Tom wiped his mouth and face with the scarf. The pain in Willie’s stomach had gone but he felt drained like a rag doll. Tom lifted him back into the cottage and placed him in his armchair. His small body sank comfortably into the old soft expanse of chair. His feet barely reached the edge of the seat. Tom tucked a blanket round him, drew up a chair by the fire and watched Willie fall asleep.

The tales he had heard about evacuees didn’t seem to fit Willie. ‘Ungrateful’ and ‘wild’ were the adjectives he had heard used or just plain ‘homesick’. He was quite unprepared for this timid, sickly little specimen. He looked at the poker leaning against the range.

‘E never thought . . . No . . . Surely not!’ he murmured. ‘Oh, Thomas Oakley, where ’ave you landed yerself?’ There was a sound of scratching at the front door. ‘More trouble,’ he muttered. He crept quietly out through the hallway and opened the door. Sammy bounded in and jumped around his legs, panting and yelping.

‘Now you jest shut that ole mouth,’ he whispered firmly, ‘there’s someone asleep.’ He knelt down and Sammy leapt into his arms, lathering his face with his tongue. ‘I don’t need to ’ave a bath when you’re around, do I?’ Sammy continued to lick him until he was satisfied just to pant and allow his tail to flop from side to side. Tom lifted him up and carried him into the front room. As soon as he saw Willie asleep in the chair he began barking again. Tom put his finger firmly on his nose and looked directly into his eyes.

‘Now you jest take a rest and stop that.’ He picked up his pipe and baccy jar from the little table and sat by the range again. Sammy flopped down beside him and rested his head on one of Tom’s feet.

‘Well, Sam,’ Tom whispered, ‘I don’t know nothin’ about children, but I do know enuff not to beat ’em and make ’em that scared.’ Sammy looked up at him for a moment and flopped back onto his foot. ‘I don’t know,’ he said anxiously, ‘I ent ’ad much experience at this ’ere motherin’ lark,’ and he grunted and puffed at his pipe. Sammy stood up, wriggled in between Tom’s legs and placed his paws on his stomach.

‘You understand every blimmin’ word I say, don’t you? Least he ent goin’ to bury bones in my sweet peas,’ he remarked, ruffling Sammy’s fur. ‘That’s one thing to be thankful about.’ He sighed. ‘S’pose I’d best see what’s what.’ He rose and went into the hallway with Sammy padding after him. ‘Now you jest stay there,’ he said sternly and Sammy sat obediently on his haunches, though Tom knew it would not be for long. He took some steps that were leaning on the wall beside the coats and placed them

under a small square trapdoor above him. He climbed up, pushed the trapdoor open and pulled down a long wooden ladder which fixed firmly into place on two strong clips along the opening.

The ladder was of thick pine wood. It was a little over forty years old, but since his young wife Rachel had died soon after it was made, it had hardly been used. He moved the steps to allow room for the ladder to reach the hall floor. A thick cloud of dust enveloped his head as he blew on one of the wide wooden rungs. He coughed and sneezed.

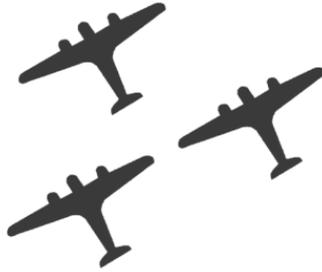
‘Like taking snuff,’ he muttered. ‘S’pose we’d best keep that ole ladder down fer a bit, eh, Sammy?’

He climbed down and opened the door opposite the front room. It led into his bedroom. Inside, a small chest of drawers with a mirror stood by the corner of the front window. Leaning up against the back wall was a four-poster bed covered in a thick quilt. At the foot of the bed, on the floor, lay a round basket with an old blanket inside. It was Sammy’s bed, when he used it, which was seldom. A blue threadbare carpet was spread across the floor with bits of matting added by the window and bed.

Beside the bed was a fitted cupboard with several shelves. Tom opened it. On the top two shelves, neatly stacked, were blankets and sheets and on the third, various belongings of Rachel’s that he had decided to keep. He glanced swiftly at them. A black wooden paint-box, brushes, a christening robe she had embroidered, some old photographs, letters and recipes. The christening robe had never been worn by his baby son, for he had died soon after his mother.

Goodnight Mister Tom

He picked up some blankets and sheets and carried them into the hall. 'I'll be down for you in a minute, Sammy,' he said as he climbed up the ladder. 'You jest hang on there a bit,' and with that Sammy was left to watch his master slowly disappear through the strange new hole in the ceiling.



2. Little Weirwold

WILLIE gave a short start and opened his eyes. In a chair opposite sat Tom, who was drinking tea and looking at a book. Sammy, who had been watching the slight twitching movements that Willie had made in his sleep, now stood at his feet.

Tom looked up. ‘You feelin’ better?’ he asked. ‘You’re lookin’ better.’ He poured him out a mug of hot, sweet tea and handed it to him. ‘’Ere, you git that down you.’

Willie looked apprehensively at his feet which were now being sniffed by Sammy.

‘’E won’t harm you,’ said Tom. ‘’E’s a spry ole thing, but he’s as soft as butter, ent you, ole boy?’ and he knelt down and ruffled his fur. Sammy snuggled up between his knees and licked his face. ‘See,’ said Tom, ‘’e’s very friendly.’ Willie tried to smile. ‘You want to learn somethin’ wot’ll make him happy?’ He nodded. ‘Hold one of yer hands out, palm up, like that,’ and he showed the inside of his rough brown hand. Willie copied him. ‘That’s so he knows you ent going to harm him, see. Now, hold it out towards him

and tickle his chest.’ Willie leaned nervously forward and touched Sammy’s fur. ‘That’s the idea. You jest keep doin’ that.’

Willie stroked him. His fur felt silky and soft. Sammy gave his fingers a long lick.

‘E likes you, see. When he licks you that’s his way of sayin’ “I likes you and you makes me happy”.’

Willie held his hand out stiffly while Sammy lathered it with his tongue.

‘Why does he sniff?’ he asked, as Sammy crawled under the blanket to get to his legs.

‘E likes to know what everythin’ smells like so’s he knows who to say hello to and who not.’

‘Stop it!’ said Willie as Sammy put his nose into his crutch. ‘Naughty dog.’ Immediately Tom dragged him from under the blanket and he began barking and chasing his tail. ‘You’m gettin’ over-excited, Sam. ’E needs a good romp in the fields,’ and he looked at Willie, and I reckon you do an’ all, he thought.

Willie pushed the blanket to one side, wormed his way to the end of the armchair and slid onto the floor.

‘Smells like rain,’ said Tom, leaning out of the front window. ‘You got gumboots?’

Willie shook his head. ‘No, mister.’

‘Best put yer mackintosh on, anyways.’

The three of them trooped out into the hallway. Willie stared at the ladder.

‘That’s your room up there. Sort of attic.’

‘Mine?’ He didn’t understand. Did Mr Oakley mean he was going to have a room to himself? Tom handed him his mackintosh and nodded. Sammy leapt up excitedly.

‘Hang on a minute, Sam. We’se jest goin’?’

Tom looked at Willie’s mac on the way out and noticed how thin it was.

They walked down the pathway and out of the gate, Sammy leading, Tom striding after him and Willie running to keep up with them. It was late afternoon now. The sun hung in a fiery ball above the trees. A mild breeze shook the leaves and a few dark clouds scudded across the sky. Sammy ran backwards and forwards, barking ecstatically.

‘That dog’s half mad,’ Tom said to Willie but found that he was talking to the air for Willie was several yards behind, still trying to keep up, his cheeks flushed with the effort.

‘You’re a quiet ’un. Why didn’t you tell me I was goin’ too fast?’ But Willie could not answer and only gasped incoherently.

Tom slowed down and Willie walked more easily beside him. He stared up at the gruff old man who was so kind to him. It was all very bewildering. He looked down at Tom’s heavy brown ankle boots, his thick navy overcoat and the green corduroy cap with the tufts of white hair sticking out at either side. A small empty haversack dangled over his shoulder.

‘Mister,’ he panted. ‘Mister!’ Tom looked down. ‘Can I carry your bag, mister?’

Tom mumbled something to himself and handed it to him. Willie hung on to it tightly with both hands.

The narrow road sloped gently upwards. Willie could just make out, in all the speed of their walking, the wild hedgerows flashing in low green lines beside him. It felt

very unreal, like a muddled dream. When they reached the top of the hill Willie saw a row of small thatched cottages standing on either side of the road ahead. He tugged at Tom's sleeve.

'Mister,' he gasped, 'they got straw roofs.'

'That's thatch,' said Tom.

'Wot's . . .' but he bit his lip and kept silent.

Tom glanced down. 'I got some pictures of them at home. We'll have a look at them tonight.'

Willie squeezed the bag more tightly.

Across the road a plump, middle-aged woman with greying auburn hair was peering out of a window. She disappeared for an instant and opened her front door.

'Ello, Tom,' she said, looking with curiosity at Willie.

He grunted. 'Evening, Mrs Fletcher. How are the boys, then?'

'Boys are doin' nicely.'

'William,' said Tom, 'go and keep an eye on Sam. I'll be with you in a minute.'

Willie nodded shyly and went after Sammy, who was eyeing the flowers in someone's window box.

'Skinny ole scrap, ent he?' said the woman, sticking a loose grip firmly into her bun.

Tom gave another grunt.

'I didn't believe it was true when I heard,' she continued. 'I ent got room meself but Mrs Butcher got two to contend with. Girls, mind you, but they're regular tearaways and Mrs Henley, she had three last week and they keep runnin' away. Homesick, like,' and she sighed and patted her chest.

‘How’s the knittin’ coming on?’ said Tom, changing the subject.

‘What you on about?’ she said, leaning back and looking at him. ‘Since when have you been interested in my knittin’?’

‘Since now,’ he replied shortly. He pushed his hands into his pockets and scraped one of his boots against a piece of stone. ‘Busy, are you?’ he asked.

‘No more ’n usual.’

‘Could do with a thick jersey. Not fer me, mind,’ and he looked at Willie trundling on ahead.

‘You ent gotta clothe ’em, you know. They shoulda brought that with them.’

‘Well, he haven’t,’ said Tom gruffly. ‘Can you knit me a jersey or can you not? That’s what I’m askin’.’

‘If that’s what you want.’

‘And,’ he continued, ‘you don’t know where I can get some good stout boots, small-like, and I don’t want no commentary, jest want to know.’

‘I’ll ask around.’

He mumbled his thanks and strode on up the road.

Mrs Fletcher stood quite motionless and stared after him, until she was sure he was out of earshot. ‘Madge,’ she cried, running into the next cottage, ‘Madge, you’ll die when I tell you . . .’

The road leading through the row of cottages extended into a long stretch of open country with lanes leading off it. A small shop inside the last cottage stood at the corner.

‘Won’t be long,’ said Tom, and he took the haversack from Willie and left him and Sammy sitting on the stone steps. Willie stared in amazement at the fields, his thin

woollen socks heaped around his ankles. As Tom came out he became conscious of them again and quickly pulled them up. Sammy sniffed at the food in the bag and Tom tapped him tenderly on the nose and slung it on his back.

‘If I start gettin’ me stride up agin,’ he said to Willie, ‘you jest call out.’

It was a long, quiet road, the silence broken only by the whirring of a tractor in the distance. They turned to the right and walked down a tiny lane.

Willie’s attention was drawn to a small brown bird in one of the hedgerows. Tom stopped and put his finger to his lips and they stood and watched it hopping in and out among the changing leaves.

‘That’s a hedge-sparrow,’ he whispered. ‘See its beak. Very dainty.’ The bird looked up and flew away. ‘And shy.’

They carried on down the lane towards a farm. Sammy was already sitting waiting for them, his tail thumping the ground impatiently from side to side. They pushed open the long wooden gate where he sat. It squeaked and jingled on its hinges as they swung it behind them. Tom led Willie round the back of a large, cream-coloured stone house towards a wooden shed. A middle-aged man with corn-coloured hair and the bluest eyes Willie had ever seen was sitting on a stool milking one of a handful of cows. Willie gazed at the gentle way he fingered the udders and at the warm white liquid spurting down into a bucket underneath.

‘Mister,’ he said, tugging at Tom’s coat sleeve. ‘Mister, what’s that?’

Tom was astounded. ‘Ent you never seen a cow?’ but Willie didn’t answer. He was too absorbed in watching the swollen udders decrease in size.

‘I’ll be wantin’ extra milk from now on, Ivor,’ he said. Ivor nodded and glanced at Willie.

‘One of them London lot?’ he asked. Tom grunted. ‘You’d best take a jug with you. Roe’s inside.’

Tom tramped across the yard to the back of the house and up the steps. He carried Sammy in his arms as he had a habit of yapping at cows. Willie stayed to watch the milking.

A fresh-faced brunette woman in her thirties, wearing a flowery apron, opened the back door.

‘Come in,’ she said. ‘You’ll be wantin’ extra milk.’

‘How d’you know?’ said Tom.

‘Lucy saw you comin’ up the yard with him.’

A chubby six-year-old with brown curly hair, earth smudged over two enormous pink cheeks, was standing at her side, holding on to her skirt.

‘Don’t be so daft, gel,’ she said. ‘Go on, say hello to him. I got things to do.’

She clomped down the steps in her ankle boots and blue woollen dress, and stood shyly beside Willie, twisting the hem of her dress in her hand till her knickers came into view.

‘There ent much difference in size between them two,’ said Tom, observing them together. ‘I dunno what they do with little ’uns in that ole city,’ and he disappeared into the warmth of the kitchen.

*

After calling Willie several times and getting no response, he eventually gave up and tapped him on the shoulder.

‘‘Ere, dreamer, you carry that,’’ he said, handing him a tin jug. ‘‘You can take a look if you’ve a mind.’’

Willie lifted the lid and peered in. Fresh milk. Lucy stared at him. She’d never seen a boy so thin and pale-looking. She still hadn’t spoken and had only just, so she thought, heard his name.

‘Bye, dreema,’’ she said suddenly and turned and fled into the house.

‘Where’s that ole thing?’ said Tom, looking round for Sammy. He caught sight of his black-and-white fur at the gate. He was sitting waiting for them with a bone in his mouth.

Willie looked at the front of the house. The woman called Roe was putting up some black material at the front window.

‘What’s she doin’?’ Willie asked.

‘Puttin’ her blackouts up, boy. We all got to do it from tonight.’

Willie was about to ask why, but he knew that was rude, so he kept silent.

‘It’s so planes don’t see where to bomb,’’ continued Tom, as if he had read his thoughts. ‘Waste of time if you asks me. Reckon it’ll all be over be Christmas, and anyways who’d want to bomb lil’ Weirwold? That’s the name of this village,’’ he added, ‘Little Weirwold.’ He looked up at the sky. It had suddenly become darker. ‘Best be movin’,’ he said and they swung open the gate and set off at a jaunty pace back up the lane towards the main road. They had

walked past the cottages and were halfway down the hill when the first drop of rain fell. As they neared the foot of the hill the sky opened and a heavy torrent fell mercilessly down. It blinded Willie and trickled down inside the collar of his mackintosh. Tom buttoned his overcoat up to his neck and raised his collar. He looked down at the drenched figures of the boy and dog. Willie had to run to keep up with them. His plimsolls were now caked in heavy clods of wet earth and his jersey was already wet from his soaked mackintosh.

The sky rumbled loudly above them and the rain continued to pour down, bouncing on the lane and running into little streams. Tom swung the graveyard gate to one side and Sammy shot through, jumping and barking in the puddles. He shut the gate behind Willie and the wetness from the top splashed into his face.

Willie ran up the pathway towards the cottage, through the graves and under the oak tree, his shoes squelching. They ran into the hall, Tom's boots clattering on the tiles. He shook the rain from his overcoat and cap and proceeded to undo his boots. Sammy stood on the mat shaking his fur by the open door and looking out at the sheets of rain that were now whipping across the graveyard. Willie struggled with his mackintosh. His fingers were mauve with the cold.

'You're soaked through,' said Tom. He pointed to his bespattered plimsolls. 'Take them ole canvas things off. Stay here while I put some newspapers down.'

Willie pulled off the weighted shoes and stood in the dark hallway shivering helplessly, his teeth rattling inside