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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'se 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 half-way 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 his clamped jaw. After much shuffling from the living room Tom opened the door. He had laid newspaper in front of the range and was putting up blackouts at the windows so that, but for the glow of embers in the fire, there was almost total darkness. He lit a gas lamp which hung from the ceiling, and an oil lamp on the table.

'Stay on them newspapers. You too,' he said to Sammy who was panting rapidly and sending out a constant spray of water with his tail.

He added some coke to the fire and left the room. Willie hopped on one leg and then on the other in front of it. Steam began to rise from his jersey and shorts. He heard the front door being closed and Tom returned with his brown paper bag. He placed it on the table and took out the contents.

There was one small towel, a piece of soap, a toothbrush, an old Bible, and an envelope with 'To whom it may concern' written on it. He looked under the towel for some night clothes but there were none. He opened the envelope. Willie heard the paper being torn and turned to watch him. He knew the letter was from his Mum. He checked again that his wet socks were pulled up and stood very still.

'Dear Sir or Madam,' it read, 'I asked if Willie could go and stay with God-fearing people so I hope he is. Like most boys he's full of sin but he's promised to be good. I can't visit him. I'm a widow and I haven't got the money. The war and that. I've put the belt in for when he's bad and I've sewn him in for the winter. I usually keep him in when I wash his clothes and I got them special for the cold weather so he should be all right. Tell him his Mum said he'd better be good. Mrs Beech.'

Tom folded the letter and put it into his pocket. He found the belt at the bottom of the bag. It was a brown leather one with a steel buckle. He put it back in the bag and took out the towel, soap and toothbrush. Willie stood with his back to the fire and stared uneasily up at him.

Tom was angry.

'While you're in my house,' he said in a choked voice, 'you'll live by my rules. I ent ever hit a child and if I ever do it'll be with the skin of me hand. You got that?'

Willie nodded.

'So we can forget that ole belt,' and he lifted the bag from the table and took it out of the room. Willie turned to face the fire, his head bowed over the range. His shoulders felt tense and the top of the range hissed as a tear escaped from his eyes. He heard the door close behind him and hurriedly wiped his cheeks.

Tom put a bundle on the armchair. 'Best get out of them wet things,' he said, kneeling down beside him, 'so's I can dry them for tomorrow.'

Willie sniffed. Tom peeled off his wet jersey and shorts.

'And them socks,' he said as Willie clung to the tops of them. He pulled them off. Tom said nothing. There was no need. Willie's arms and legs were covered in bruises, weals and sores. Tom went to pull off his vest. Willie flinched and touched the top of his arm.

'New one, eh?' he asked quietly.

Willie nodded and blushed.

'Best be careful then,' and he tugged gently at the vest.

'It won't come off, mister,' said Willie, and then Tom understood what his mother had written in the letter. His vest had been sewn to the waist of his undershorts.

'Soon settle that,' said Tom, picking up a pair of scissors from the bookcase. Willie shrunk backwards.

'I'll sew them back when you goes home. I promise.' Still Willie didn't move. 'I promise,' he repeated.

He stepped forward and allowed him to snip away at the stitching.

He dried Willie's thin, bruised body, wrapped him up in a towel and sat him in the armchair. Taking an old flannel nightshirt from the bundle he cut the body and sleeves in half. He stood Willie on the armchair, took the towel away and placed the nightshirt over his head, cutting more away from the hem until Willie's toes and

hands came into view. He handed him a thick pair of woollen socks. The heels almost reached the back of Willie's knees. He gave a small, tense smile and watched Tom hang his clothes over a horse near the fire.

'You can dry Sammy with that ole towel,' said Tom, indicating one lying on the armchair. Willie knelt down on the newspapers and began to dry him. Sammy stuck his nose in the air, delighted at such attention.

Tom unpacked the haversack and wandered round the room putting the groceries away on shelves and into small cupboards. He cracked some eggs into a saucepan, adding milk and butter. Slicing a few large pieces of bread, he put one on the end of a long fork.

'You toasted bread afore?' he asked. Willie looked up at him and shook his head. 'Ere, have a go,' said Tom handing him the fork.

Willie sat on the stool holding it in front of the fire, his long socks trailing across the floor. Tom placed a bowl beside his feet, which was filled with scraps of meat and biscuits for Sammy who had already started chewing the end of one of the socks.

Willie placed the toasted bread on plates while Tom spooned a large quantity of steaming scrambled eggs on them. A bowl of hot, buttered, boiled potatoes stood in the middle of the table.

'You can sit down now,' said Tom.

Willie picked up a potato in his hands, gasped and dropped it onto his plate. Feverishly he attacked the meal. His small elbows stuck out at the sides as he cut and ate

food in a frenzy. When the meal was eaten Tom unwrapped a small brown package which contained four pieces of dark, home-made ginger cake.

'One fer tonight; one fer tomorrow,' said Tom, handing him a piece.

Willie had never eaten cake before. When he had finished it, he leaned back in his chair and, resting his hands on his stomach, he watched Sammy who was making a series of strange noises in his food while his tail continued to wag from side to side.

Tom heated up some water on the range for the dirty dishes.

'You can look through them books if you like,' he said, indicating the shelves under the side window.

Willie got up from the table excitedly and moved towards them. Then he stopped and frowned. 'I got to read the Bible,' he said miserably.

Tom gave a grunt. 'I'll tell you a Bible story meself. In me own way. That do you?'

'Yeh, thanks, mister.'

'Pull out that pouffe to sit on.'

'Pouffe?' said Willie.

Tom pointed to a low round cushiony type of seat, next to the armchair.

Willie squatted down in front of the shelves and chose three books. He pulled out the pouffe and sat on it with them propped on his knees.

'Ent you goin' to open one then?' asked Tom.

'After me Bible.'

Tom sat down in the armchair, and lit his pipe. He leaned back puffing at it wondering which one to tell. Willie watched him and pulled his strange sack-like garment over his feet.

'*Noah's Ark*,' exclaimed Tom. 'That's a good 'un.' He looked at the books Willie had chosen and picked some others from the bookcase with animal pictures in them. 'Once, long ago,' began Tom, and Willie leaned forward to listen until finally he stood up and leaned on the arm of the armchair to get a closer look at the pictures. Tom mumbled on in his own way, a little flattered at the rapt attention he was receiving. The gas lamp hissed gently above them and the coke stirred softly in the range. Even the rain outside seemed to cease falling so heavily.

When Tom had finished, he found Willie gazing at him with adoration. Feeling a little embarrassed, he quickly cleared his throat and glanced up at the clock.

He made Willie cocoa and left him with Sammy to look at the 'straw roofs' while he went upstairs to put up more blackouts. Willie sat back on the pouffe and traced his finger over the pictures. He blew over his cocoa and gave Sammy some of the skin, feeling rather important at doing so. Tom appeared at the door with a lamp and Sammy began to crawl through his legs.

'Thought you was being too good for it to last,' Tom said as Sammy tugged at his trouser leg. 'Give me the cocoa, William, and you carry the book.'

Willie climbed up the ladder but the enormous socks kept making him slip. After much balancing and juggling with cocoa, book and dog they all three eventually reached the attic.

It was a tiny room, shaped rather like a ridge tent. The ceiling sloped downwards at both sides with a straight piece in the centre. The wooden floor was covered by two mats. A small bed lay under one eave and blackouts were pinned on the slanting

window beside it. Tom had swept the room clean and had fixed a lamp to a hook on the white plaster ceiling. It was hanging there alight.

Beside the bed was a low wooden table. 'For yer books and such,' said Tom. He pointed to a china chamber-pot on the floor at the end of the bed. 'That's so's you don't have to go outside if you wants to go to the toilet,' he explained.

The heat from the front room rose up through the floorboards so that the room, although bare, was warm. Willie crawled under the bed and curled up into a ball.

'What you doin'?' asked Tom. 'You gets into it, not under it.'

'Wot, right inside?' exclaimed Willie.

Tom drew back the sheets and Willie climbed in between them. He stroked the blankets with his hands.

Sammy, meanwhile, was standing impatiently at Tom's side, wagging his tail in lunatic fashion. 'Go on, you daft dog,' said Tom, and he leapt on to the bed between Willie's arms and licked his face. Slowly Willie put his arms around him, gave a small cry and burst into tears.

'Sorry, mister,' he blurted out and he buried his head into the dog's fur.

Tom sat on the edge of the bed until the crying had subsided a little.

'Ere,' he said, handing him a large white handkerchief. 'Ave a blow in that.'

Willie looked up shamefacedly. 'I ain't ungrateful, mister, honest. I'm happy,' and with that he gave another sob.

Tom nodded and Sammy licked one of the tears from his face.

'You can have the lamp lit fer ten minutes,' he said, patting the dog, 'but mind you behave yerself, Samuel.'

He made his way downstairs to the front room and turned Willie's damp clothes around. His pipe was on the table. He picked it up and tapped the old tobacco out onto the range.

'Best not get fond of the boy, Thomas,' he muttered to himself. He sat back in the armchair and watched the smoke drifting upwards from his pipe towards the gas lamp. He glanced at Willie's thin grey clothes. S'pose another pair of socks and one of them balaclava things wouldn't come amiss, he thought, sinking into a quiet reverie of jerseys and boots. It was interrupted by sounds of scrabbling from upstairs.

He climbed up the steps, pipe in mouth, grunted out a few words as he entered the attic and blew the lamp out, plunging them all into total darkness.

'Take them blacks down now,' he mumbled, removing them from the window. 'You warm enough?'

Willie raised his head. 'Yeh,' he answered, and he sank happily back into the soft white pillow. Tom stared out of the window and chewed the end of his pipe. He gave a little tap on the floor with his foot and then moved towards the bed and gently ruffled Willie's hair.

He was half-way down the hatch with Sammy in his arms when he remembered something. 'Don't forget them ole prayers.'

'No, mister,' said Willie.

He paused for an instant. 'And you'd best call me Tom. Good night and God bless,' and with that he descended from view closing the trap door behind him.

'Good night, Mister Tom,' Willie whispered. He listened to the door downstairs close and slipped out of bed to look through the window. A dark cloud floated across the moon. The sky thundered, followed quickly by a crack of lightning that lit up the whole sky.

'Not much use, these blackouts,' Tom had said earlier in the evening. Still, it was fine, thought Willie, standing in the moonlight. He could just make out the two rows of cottages and the fields beyond them. A dog howled in the distance.

Underneath the attic, Tom sat in his armchair with Sammy collapsed across his feet. He held a large black wooden paint-box on his lap. He raised the lid, gazed for an instant at the contents and quietly blew away the dust from the tops of the brightly coloured pots.