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Saturday Morning

When Willie awoke it was still very dark. Straining his eyes, he could just make out the two boxes which were stacked in the far corner of the room and a picture frame which was propped up against them. He raised his arm and touched the sloping ceiling above his head. The pain that had brought him sharply back to consciousness seared violently through his stomach. He held his breath and pushed his hand down the bed to touch his night-gown. It was soaking. It was then that he became aware that he was lying in between sheets. That's what they did to people after they had died, they laid them out in a bed. He sat up quickly and hit his head on the eave. Crawling out of bed, doubled over with the pain in his gut he hobbled over to the window and let out a frightened cry. He was in a graveyard. He was going to be buried alive! The pain grew in intensity. He gave a loud moan and with a sudden retch, vomited all over the floor.

In the morning Tom found him huddled under the bed. The sheets were drenched in urine. He stripped them off the mattress and carried Willie down to the living room.

It was a hot, sultry day. The windows were wide open but no breeze entered the cottage. Willie stood in front of the range. Through the side window he could see his grey garments and underwear hanging on a small washing line outside. Tom pulled the voluminous nightshirt over his head and threw it into a copper tub with the sheets. He sluiced Willie's body tenderly with cold water and soap. The weals stuck out mauve against his protruding ribs and swollen stomach. He could hardly stand.

'Sorry, mister,' he kept repeating, fearfully, 'sorry, Mister Tom.'

Tom just grunted in his usual manner.

He pulled Willie's clothes from off the line and handed them to him. 'Too hot for socks,' he muttered. 'Leave them off.'

'I can't go aht wivout me socks,' cried Willie in alarm. 'Please, Mister Tom, I can't.'

'Why?' Tom snorted.

'Me legs,' he whispered. He didn't want everyone to see the marks of his sins. Tom sighed and threw the socks on the table. They had breakfast by the open window. Tom sat with his shirt-sleeves rolled up, the beads of sweat trickling down the sides of his ruddy face while Willie continued to shiver, managing only to drink half a cup of tea and eat a small piece of bread.

'Blimmin' blue,' muttered Tom to himself as he observed Willie's face. He cleared the breakfast things and left him with the small addressed postcard that he had been provided with to write a message on for his mother. Willie sat dejectedly at the table and watched Tom drag his small mattress past the window. He could hear him scrubbing away at it. He lowered his head. He was so ashamed. Everyone who came near the church would see it and realize how wicked he had been. They'd know what a baby he was. He hadn't meant to wet himself. He didn't even remember doing it.

He stared at the small postcard in front of him. Claspng a pencil impotently between his fingers he clenched his free hand into a fist and dug his knuckles into the table so that he wouldn't cry.

'How you gettin' on?' asked Tom leaning through the window.

Willie jumped and flushed hotly. 'Can't think of what to say, that it?' He took the pencil from Willie's hand and turned the postcard towards him. 'Not much room, eh?'

Willie tugged at his hair in embarrassment.

'Lost yer voice?'

'No, Mister Tom,' he answered quietly.

'What d'you want to say, then?'

He shrugged his shoulders and looked dumbly at the grain on the wooden table.

'Are you happy here?'

He looked up quickly and nodded. 'Yeh.'

'Arrived safely, is happy and...'

'Mister, Mister Tom,' said Willie, interrupting him. 'You goin' to tell her I was bad?'

'No,' he said, and carried on writing. 'Here, listen to this. "Dear Mrs Beech, William..."'

'She don't call me that. She calls me Willie.'

He altered the word. "'Willie,'" he continued, "'has arrived safely, is happy and good. Yours sincerely, Mr Thomas Oakley." There.' He handed the postcard and pencil back to him. 'Now write yer name.'

Willie paled. 'I can't.'

'Didn't they have school in London?'

'Yeh, but...' and he trailed off.

'How about readin'?' asked Tom. 'You can read, can't you?'

'No.'

'But you was lookin' at them books last night.'

'I was lookin' at the pichers.'

Tom scratched his head. The village children were reading at least some words by the time they were six. This boy was eight, so he said. He glanced down at the label on the table to check. 'William Beech. Born Sept. 7th 1930.'

'Nine on Thursdee,' he remarked. 'Your birthday's in five days' time.' Willie didn't understand what was so particularly special about that.

'You're nine on Thursdee,' Tom repeated but Willie couldn't think of anything to say. 'Anyways,' he continued. 'About this here schoolin', didn't yer teacher help you?'

'Yeh, but...' He hesitated. 'E didn't like me. The others all called me Sillie Sissie Willie.'

'What others?'

'At school.'

'What about yer friends?'

He whispered something.

'I can't hear you, boy.'

Willie cleared his throat. 'I ain't got no friends.'

Tom gave a snort and signed the postcard. He noticed Willie looking at the black box on the stool.

'Blimmin' heat,' he grumbled, wiping his forehead with a handkerchief. 'Pick up that box, William, and bring it over here.'

Willie did so and placed it carefully on the table. 'Lift the lid, then.' Willie stared at it. 'Go on, cloth ears, open it.'

He raised the lid and gazed at the brightly coloured pots. 'Paints?' he inquired.

Tom grunted in the affirmative. 'Bit old but the pots'll do. You paint?' Willie's face fell. He longed to paint. 'Nah, 'cos I can't read...'

'The ones that can read and write gits the paint, that it?'

'Yeh.' He touched one of the pots gently with his hand and then hastily took it away. 'I done drawin' with bits of chalk and crayon, on me own.'

Tom straightened himself. 'We'd best post yer card. Mustn't worry yer Mum. Climb out,' and he helped Willie through the window. 'Where's that ole thing?' he mumbled. 'Sammy,' he shouted, 'Sammy.'

Willie shaded his eyes and looked around for him. He caught sight of a mound of black and white fur slumped under the oak tree.

'Mister Tom,' he said pointing to the dog, 'look.' Sammy lifted his head. Heaving his body up to his feet he left his cool sanctuary and ambled over towards them.

They walked round to the back garden of the cottage, past the little wooden outhouse that was the toilet. On top of its roof lay Willie's mattress.

'Don't worry, boy,' said Tom, 'it'll be dry by tonight.'

They carried on to the foot of the garden where there was a small neat wooden gate with a hedgerow on either side.

They turned left down a road and after a few paces Tom opened another gate into the field next to the graveyard. A large carthorse stood drowsily eating something in the grass. Willie hung back.

'Come on,' said Tom impatiently.

Sammy bounded on ahead and gave a loud bark at the nag. She lifted her eyes for an instant, shook her head and resumed eating.

'She won't 'urt you,' said Tom. 'You walk alongside of me,' and he gave him a gentle push into the field, and swung the gate behind him. Willie hung on to Tom's left trouser leg and peered gingerly round at the mare as they walked past it.

'She won't hurt you,' he repeated, but he could feel Willie trembling so he decided not to pursue the matter.

To Willie's relief, they eventually reached the safety of the gate at the other end of the field. Tom unhitched it and Willie darted through into a small lane.

'Sam,' called Tom, 'here, boy.' Sammy had been flopped over one of Dobbs' hooves, enjoying the shade of her large head. He rose obediently and lolloped towards them.

'Let's see you shut it now, William. You must always remember to shut every gate.' Willie hurriedly closed it with a crash. 'Put the bolt through.' He did so. 'Good.' Willie stood stunned for a moment for he had never been praised by anyone ever.

The lane they were standing in was bordered by two rows of trees. Their overhanging branches formed a tunnel and, although their leaves were already falling, there was still enough clothed archway to cool them. Willie had never walked through so many leaves. They clustered around his ankles, hiding his plimsolls entirely from view.

They walked by a large gate and an enormous, neatly-kept garden. A middle-aged man was bending over one of the beds, sadly digging up clusters of gold and russet dahlias.

Sammy had already bounded on ahead and was now sitting lazily by an old wooden gate, waiting for them.

'Blimmin' mind reader,' exclaimed Tom to himself.

He pushed at the gate and after a struggle it creaked and groaned open on its one rusty hinge. The tangled hedgerows that grew on either side had almost strangled it into being permanently closed. Willie closed it carefully behind them and they walked into a wild and unkempt garden. The grass reached Willie's knees.

Tom knocked at the front door but there was no reply. He could hear the sound of a wireless so he knew someone must be in. After several attempts at attracting attention with the knocker he walked round the side of the cottage to the back garden.

Leaning back in a wicker chair sat Doctor Oswald Little, a plump, red-faced man who was attempting vainly to wipe the steam from his spectacles. His wife, Nancy, a tall, thin, freckled woman with closely cropped iron-grey hair was digging a large trench in the garden. A cigarette dangled in her mouth. The wireless was blaring out light organ music through the kitchen window.

'Doctor Little!' repeated Tom loudly for the third time. The Doctor looked up and put on his spectacles which immediately slid down the perspiration on his nose.

'Hello, Tom. This is a surprise. You can't be ill.'

'No.'

He glanced briefly down at Willie who was now retreating rapidly on hearing the tubby man being called 'Doctor'. Nancy, noticing how scared he was, sat down at the side of the trench and took the cigarette out of her mouth.

'I'm Mrs Little,' she said hoarsely. 'I expect you'd like an orange juice while Mr Oakley and the Doctor have a chat. Yes?'

He nodded and followed her through the back door into the kitchen.

Tom sat down.

'What's the problem?' asked the Doctor. 'The boy, is it?'

'Bin sick twice already. He had a good tuck in last night but brung it up.'

'Malnutrition,' the Doctor remarked. 'Probably used to chips. All that good food might have been too much of an assault on his stomach. Clear broth, rest, exercise and milk to begin with and maybe a tonic. Try some Virol and Cod Liver Oil. I expect he's bed-wetting too,' he added.

Tom looked surprised.

'It's quite common,' he continued. 'Especially if they're small. Give him a month or two to settle. How old is he? Five, six?'

'Eight, goin' on nine.'

It was the Doctor's turn to look surprised.

'Like a frightened rabbit he is,' said Tom.

'Yes,' said Doctor Little thoughtfully. 'He's obviously been brought up to look on the doctor as the bogey man.'

'There's somethin' else. The boy's had a bit of a whip-pin', like. He got bruises and sores all over him. Done with a belt buckle mostly. He's too ashamed to let folks see. If you could manage to have a look.'

'This,' croaked a refined voice from behind, 'and warm salt water.' It was Mrs Little. She was standing with a tray of cool drinks. She placed a bottle of witch-hazel by his feet.

'We exchanged battle-scars,' she explained. 'I noticed his before we went indoors. I've given him a couple of garters for his socks. You'd think I'd given him the moon.'

'The children in Little Weirwold have been quite spoilt, it seems,' commented the Doctor. 'I was up at the Grange last night treating ingrowing toenails. There are two large families up there, nineteen children in all. Nancy and the maid had to de-louse half of them. Bag of bones, aren't they, dear?' Nancy nodded.

'Thank you for yer advice,' said Tom, standing up. 'I won't keep you from yer work any longer.'

Mrs Little gave a loud laugh which deteriorated into a spasm of coughing. She took another drag of her cigarette.

'I'm the one that's doing the work!' she exclaimed.

'Well, I am supposed to be semi-retired,' protested the Doctor lightly. 'Anyway, it's too damned hot to be digging.'

Nancy shrugged helplessly at Tom.

'Is it fer an air-raid shelter?' he inquired.

'Yes. And when those bombs start falling he'll be the first to dive into it.'

'If there are any, I shall remain in bed,' retorted the Doctor, wiping the sweat through the only two remaining tufts of white hair above his ears. 'I might as well die in comfort. Don't you agree, Tom?'

Tom had until now pooh-poohed the whole idea of building a shelter. After all, they were in the country, but with the extra responsibilities of Willie living with him...

'There's the boy to think of,' he said. He picked up the witch-hazel. 'How much do I owe you?'

'On the house,' said Nancy.

Tom called Willie and Sam. After another battle with the gate they carried on to the end of the lane and walked on to the road and into the sunlight.

Willie was perspiring heavily. Tom touched his cheek and found it was cold. They passed a small, red-brick house with a tiled roof. It had a playground and was backed by a field.

'That's your school, William.'

Willie glanced at the row of pot plants on the window sills. The school was quite unlike the dark grey building he had attended in London.

The road brought them to the centre of the two rows of thatched cottages. Mrs Fletcher and a neighbour were standing outside one with a huge sunflower growing in front of it. It was one of the few cottages which housed a wireless. A small crowd were gathered in and around the garden listening to it.

'You go and post yer card,' said Tom. 'The Post Office is near the shop. I'll meet you there,' and he left Willie and headed towards the group of listeners with Sammy at his heels.

Willie walked slowly past the cottages. All the windows had been flung open.

'Mornin', William,' chorused two voices behind him. An elderly couple were leaning over their garden gate. Their cottage stood immediately opposite where Willie was standing.

'We knows yer name from Mrs Fletcher,' said the old man. He wore a crisp white collarless shirt with the sleeves well rolled up and his baggy grey trousers were held up with a piece of string. His wife was in a flowery cotton dress with a lilac-coloured apron over it. Their skin was as wrinkled and brown as an old football and on their heads were perched steel air-raid helmets. Both carried gas-mask boxes over their shoulders.

'Lookin' fer the Post Office, dear?' said the old lady. 'You be standin' right at it.'

'You go in, boy. Be all right,' added the old man.

'We hope you'll be very happy here,' chimed in the old lady, 'don't we, Walter?'

'Yes,' he agreed. 'We do.'

'We're the Birds,' she said.

'You go on in,' he said. 'Go on.'

Willie knocked on the door.

'Go on in, dear,' they chorused.

Willie opened the door and stepped in. He found himself in a room, at the end of which was a small counter with a piece of netting above it. To his right were stacked stationery and pens, jigsaws, and wool, needles, scissors and assorted oddments and to his left sweets and bottles of pop.

Standing next to the netted window was a young boy. He was leaning on a wooden sill, writing intently. A young man in his twenties, with short cropped hair and glasses was sitting behind the netting talking to him.

'They'll never read that,' he said.

'Yes, they will,' the boy replied.

Willie edged forward to see what was happening. The boy was holding a magnifying glass over a postcard and writing on it in the tiniest hand.

'Mother's got one of these, too,' he said, waving the glass vaguely in the direction of the postmaster. It was the boy's appearance more than anything which attracted Willie's attention. He was taller than him but at a guess about nine years old. His body was wiry and tanned and he had a thick crop of black curly hair which looked badly in need of cutting. All he wore was a baggy pair of red corduroy shorts held up by braces, and a pair of battered leather sandals. Several coloured patches were sewn neatly round the seat of his pants. Apart from these, his back and legs were completely bare. Willie could not take his eyes off him.

'Can I help you, son?' said the postmaster.

Willie blushed and slid his card across the counter. The man glanced down at it.

'Stayin' with Mr Oakley, eh? You'll have to watch yer Ps and Qs there.'

Did everyone know that he couldn't read? He glanced across at the strange boy again. His nose was practically touching the card, he was so close to it. He smacked his lips. With a flourish he drew a line at the bottom, screwed on the top of his fountain pen and hooked it into a buckle on his braces.

'Have you a blotter, sir?'

The postmaster slid a piece over to him. 'Anything else?' he remarked wryly.

The boy gave a small frown.

'No, I don't think so, thank you.' He blotted the card and slid them both under the counter. 'When will it arrive, do you think?'

'Tuesdee, mebbe.'

'That's ages,' he moaned.

'Should a' sent it sooner, then,' said the postmaster.

The boy looked aside at Willie. His white teeth and brown oval eyes stood out in stark contrast against his dark tanned skin. He smiled, taking in Willie's crumpled grey shorts and jersey. Willie turned quickly away and walked out of the door, his ears smarting. Tom was standing on the stone steps of the shop at the corner, waiting for him.

'There you are,' he muttered. 'Comin' in or not?'

He nodded and walked towards the shop past three women who were talking outside.

He looked inside the door and stepped in. Boxes, bags, sacks and coloured packets were piled along the right side of the store. On the left was a long wooden counter with weighing scales at one end and a large wicker basket filled with loaves of bread. Crates of fruit and vegetables were stacked at the other end. Above the boxes and sacks on the right were shelves with cups, plates, saucepans, bowls, nails, and an assortment of coloured tins on them. Willie peered gingerly outside to see if he could catch a glimpse of the strange boy from the Post Office.

'Thanks, Mrs M,' said Tom to a middle-aged couple behind the counter. 'I'll drop in that baccy for you tonight, Mr Miller. Tea, sugar, torch batteries and elastic, you reckon?'

'Sure as eggs is eggs,' said the man. He caught sight of Willie standing by a sack of flour. 'Ere, wot you want?' he cried angrily. 'Eh?'

'Don't be too 'arsh,' said his wife.

'Be soft with this London lot and they take you for a ride. I had cigarettes, chocolate, fruit, allsorts stolen when that last batch of kids come in.'

Willie blushed and backed into the sack.

'Boy's with me,' said Tom.

'Oh,' said Mr Miller, taken aback. 'Oh, sorry, Mr Oakley. That's different then.'

'William, come over here and meet Mr and Mrs Miller.'

'Pleased to meet you, dear,' said Mrs Miller, who was endowed with so many rolls of fat that her stomach almost prevented her from reaching the counter. She leaned over. Taking hold of Willie's hand in her soft pudgy one she shook it.

Mr Miller, a short, stocky man with thinning mouse-coloured hair, leaned over and did the same. As Tom and Willie were leaving Mrs Miller lumbered towards them, polishing a large apple in her apron.

'Ere you are, me dear,' she said to Willie. 'This is fer you.' Willie gazed at it, dumbfounded.

'Go on, take it, boy, and say thank you to Mrs M.'

'Thank you,' he whispered.

They left the shop and headed back along the road, Sammy crawling miserably along behind them. They were outside Mrs Fletcher's cottage when someone began shouting at them.

'Mr Oakley! Mr Oakley!'

A short ancient gentleman with a droopy moustache was running towards them. He was wearing an A.R.P. uniform.

'That's Charlie Ruddles,' muttered Tom. 'He thinks he's goin' to win the war.' The old man came puffing up to them.

'Where's yer gas-masks then? Yous'll be in trouble if you don't carry one. Don't you know war's goin' to be declared any second,' and he waved at Willie. 'He should have one, too.'

'All right, all right,' said Tom, and continued to walk up the road with Charlie still shouting after them.

'Yous'll wake up one of these mornin's and find yerself gassed to death,' he yelled.

'All right,' shouted back Tom over his shoulder. 'I said I'll get one.'

They walked past the cottage with the sunflower. People were still standing outside talking intently. Willie stared at them puzzled. Why did they appear so anxious?

'Come on, William,' called Tom sharply. 'Don't dither! We'se got to go into town.'