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Spooky Cott.

On August 31st, the last Saturday before returning to school, Zach, Will, George and the twins sat on an old dead branch beneath the beech trees behind Blake's field. They had all decided to go to Spooky Cott.

Will folded their map up and slid it into his pocket. Between them they carried torches, string, a penknife and an old rope. Will and Zach watched the others crawl along the field to the edge and then they followed suit in the opposite direction. Instead of hitting the road where they might be seen they crawled parallel to it on the other side of the hedge. After a while they hit the woods. They rose and ran quietly and swiftly from tree to tree but they needn't have bothered for there was no one human around, only the odd squirrel collecting nuts for its winter hibernation. Soon they heard the soft swishing sound of the river and they slid down its muddy bank. They stood still for a moment and drank in its peacefulness. Will was just about to start scribbling down the basic outline of a water vole on the back of the map, when Zach spoke.

'I say, we'd better get a move on. The others will be there ages before us. George will be hooting away and think we've been savaged to pieces.'

They climbed up the bank towards the trees. A scattering of clouds had blotted out the sun and a wind began to rattle through the branches. As they reached the high hedges which surrounded the cottaee the sky became grey.

'Hope it don't rain,' said Will, peering upwards. 'Be a shame to have to go back again. Still, we could always shelter in Spooky Cott.'

Zach gave a nervous shudder.

'You cold?' asked Will.

'Er... a little.'

Just then, three distant hoots came drifting across to them from the other side of the woods.

'I'll give the signal for "let's git nearer",' said Will and, before Zach could prevent him, Will had barked three times and followed it by two howls.

By now the sky had grown darker and the wind was rustling venomously through the leaves.

'What's that?' cried Zach in alarm.

'Only some twigs breakin',' answered Will.

Suddenly from beyond the high hedgerow came a sound that caused Zach's scalp to tingle to its very roots.

'Cor!' whispered Will excitedly.

The sound was high-pitched and seemed to come from the cottage. It soared and dipped sending an eery chill through the undergrowth surrounding it.

They froze, hardly daring to breathe and all Zach's joky images of ghosts rapidly came flooding to the surface. He began to feel a little sick.

'I think we'd better signal that we're all right,' suggested Will and he gave two long mournful howls. Zach felt even worse. It wasn't long before a rather shaky 'let's get out of here' signal came soaring back from the other side of the hedge.

'Doughbags,' said Will. 'Jes as it's gittin' excitin',' and without consulting Zach he signalled the 'we're all right' and the 'let's get closer' signal.

The high wail from the cottage floated through the air again and was followed immediately by a 'we're off' signal from George and a great crackling of twigs and shaking of bushes. Will was mesmerized by the sound.

'It's like what Mister Tom sometimes plays on the organ,' he whispered. He turned to Zach. 'Are you still game?'

Zach nodded, knowing well that each nod was a lie. He would dearly have loved to have run back to the village with others but he couldn't let Will down.

'Good,' said Will grinning and he edged his way through the dense hedge, followed at a safe distance by Zach.

The closer they came to the cottage, the louder the wail grew.

'I'm sure my hair will turn white,' thought Zach as they climbed out of the wild hedgerow and stood waist-high in grass and dandelions.

Will tugged at Zach's sleeve. 'Look,' he whispered. 'The door's open. The music's coming from inside.'

Pots of red geraniums stood starkly on the two window-sills. They looked odd against the neglected background of the cottage with its dusty windows and rain-washed wooden door. Will walked slowly forwards and stood in the middle of the tangled garden opposite it. It looked dark inside the cottage. Zach crouched in the grass.

'I think you ought to take cover,' he whispered urgently, but Will stood like one in a hypnotic trance. The music seemed to touch some painful and tender place inside him and it flooded his limbs with a strange buzzing sensation. Then it stopped and all he could hear was a repetitive swishing sound followed by a tapping and a click.

'You can come in if you like,' boomed a man's voice from the darkness.

Will jumped and Zach screamed and fell over backwards.

The tapping grew louder and a young man in his mid-twenties with brown wavy hair, blue eyes and a moustache appeared at the doorway. He wore a pale blue open-necked shirt and grey flannels and his face looked in need of a good shave. His left trouser leg was pinned up to his thigh and he supported himself on a crutch. They glanced down at the empty space beneath it and then looked quickly up at his face. One of his ears was missing. He observed them looking him over.

'Not a pretty sight, eh!' he said at last.

Will and Zach were too surprised to speak.

'Sorry if I scared you,' said the man. 'I thought you must have seen me through the window.' He smiled. 'On second thoughts I don't suppose anyone could see anything through those windows. Must be at least ten years' dust on them.'

Zach still sat immobile with only his brown face visible above the grass. The man looked at Will.

'You like music?'

Will nodded.

'Mister Tom plays some on the organ, like,' he said quietly. 'I lives with him.'

'You local then?'

'No.'

'Evacuee?'

'Yeh.'

'Where from?'

'Deptford.'

'If there's any left of it. I used to live in London, till nine months ago. No reason to go back now,' he added grimly.

'Is you from the Grange?'

The man nodded and held out his hand.

'Geoffrey Sanderton's my name.'

Will stepped forward and shook it.

'I'm Will.'

'And I'm Zacharias Wrench,' said Zach, stumbling to his feet.

'Ah, he has a voice,' said Geoffrey.

A strong blast of wind shook the trees. He stared up at them.

'Too light to put the blackouts up, too dark inside to paint. Damned nuisance really.'

'Paint?' asked Will, wide-eyed.

'Yes,' he said, hopping up the two stone steps to the door. 'I can offer you tea, bread and jam. That suit you? You can either sit out here or come inside.'

'I'd like to come in,' blurted out Will. 'I mean, if that's all right, like.'

'I'll sit on the step,' said Zach.

Will followed Geoffrey into the front room. At one end was a long, raised fireplace with a fire already laid but unlit in the grate. He glanced briefly around. Apart from some bits and pieces from the Grange, the room was almost devoid of any furniture. Will's attention, however, was caught by the piles of paper and bits of canvas scattered about the floor and a tall wooden easel. A picture of half a landscape, painted in oils, was resting on it.

'Are you a painter, mister?' he asked, following him into the kitchen. The kitchen was empty but for one shelf of food, a few cups and several pots of paint.

'An artist, you mean? Yes. I had my first exhibition in London just before I was called up.'

'Were you at Dunkirk?'

'Yes.'

'Cor. Good job you didn't lose your arms, eh, mister. Lucky, eh?'

'Lucky?' he repeated with bitterness. He didn't think so. His fiancée had been blown out of his arms by a bomb. He had lost two of his closest friends and his parents had been found dead under a pile of rubble. His leg and ear had been blown off and he had had a nervous breakdown. Hardly lucky.

'Yeh,' said Will. 'You can still draw, like.'

'You draw?' asked Geoffrey.

'Yeh.'

'What, at school?'

'And in me free time.'

'Do you?' said Geoffrey in surprise. He was about to change the subject from habit, for in the past amateur artists would invariably ask him to give his opinions on their work, and he found it all very embarrassing. He hesitated for a moment and then picked up a piece of paper and a stubby pencil. He handed them to Will.

'Show me.'

'Show you?' said Will in alarm. 'But... but you're so good.'

'And you're not?'

'He's marvellous,' said Zach who had by now plucked up enough courage to leave the doorway and enter. Will blushed.

'I'll draw outside,' and with that he pushed Zach aside and went and sat on the steps.

Zach and Geoffrey talked intermittently in the kitchen while they put some jam on pieces of dry bread. Zach carried a tray with the bread, a pot of tea and cups on it towards the steps. Geoffrey followed and stood at the doorway. Will could feel his ears burning as he approached and his hand began to tremble. He had drawn a rough sketch of Sammy by the oak tree. Geoffrey peered down at it.

'How old are you?'

'I'm ten next week.'

He gazed quietly down at Will's sketch and after a short silence said, 'You have a gift, Will.'

Will's heart soared. He felt excited and frightened all in one moment.

'Who teaches you art?'

'I used to have Mrs Hartridge but she's left. She's got a baby, see. There's only Mrs Black now but sometimes Miss Thorne helps out.'

'And now there's a load more evacuees,' joined in Zach, 'and if they don't bring teachers with them I don't know who we'll have.'

'Short of teachers, are they?' said Geoffrey and he slowly manoeuvred himself down to the steps and sat between them. It felt strange to Will to have someone sit next to him with a space where a leg should be.

'Yes,' replied Zach.

They picked up the slices of bread and jam and began eating.

'I'll see if I can teach at your school,' said Geoffrey at last and as he spoke he felt happier than he had felt for a long time. 'I don't know how one goes about it but once I decide to do a thing I usually end up doing it.' He placed a hand on Will's. 'Would you like extra lessons of your own?'

Will thought his heart would explode through his chest. He nodded and was quite unable to stop himself from smiling broadly.

'Wizzo,' yelled Zach. 'I told you one day you'd be famous. We can both be famous together.'

'Oh yes,' said Geoffrey wryly. 'And what are you going to be famous at?'

'I'm going to entertain the world,' he announced grandly and then he blushed at his own arrogance.

'You'll have to work very hard and make a great deal of sacrifices to achieve that.'

'I don't want to be famous,' said Will. 'I jest wants to draw and paint. But I want to draw real good, like.'

'Are you willing to work at it?'

'Oh yes,' said Will quite simply.

Geoffrey glanced up at the sky.

'I'll put the blackouts up and light the fire.'

'I'll help,' offered Will.

'Me, too,' said Zach.

Between them, the fire was soon licking its way up the chimney, sending a warm glow around the candle-lit cluttered room. Geoffrey handed Will a record in a cardboard cover. There was a picture of a dog in the middle with 'His Master's Voice' written on it. In the corner near the fire was a gramophone. Geoffrey wound the handle, slid a little round metal tray to one side, took out a needle and changed it for one which was fixed to the end of the curved arm. He took the record out of its sleeve, held it by the edges, put it on to the turntable and pushed a small metal disc to one side. After the record had begun to rotate he lifted the arm and gently lowered the needle on to the edge of the record. It gave a few crackles and then burst into music.

'That was the Brahms violin concerto you heard in the garden,' said Geoffrey.

Zach stood at Will's side.

'And to think I was scared out of my wits by that!'

It was then that they told Geoffrey the cottage's nickname and how the other three had run away.

'I wondered why no one ever disturbed me here,' he said. 'I was really quite relieved. I needed to be alone for a while. I've even been having my food delivered to me from the Grange so that I didn't have to go into the village.'

'Oh,' said Will a little perturbed.

'Would you rather we left?' added Zach.

'No. I think it's about time I came out of hermitage.'

He placed the needle back on the beginning of the record so that they could listen to it again, without talking. They sat cross-legged by the fire, watching tiny pieces of wood being sucked up the chimney while the flames crackled and spat in the grate. When the music had ended Zach and Will stood up to leave. They said their good-byes, and after scrambling back through the hedgerow they headed towards the woods. They ran down the road and hung outside the front gate of the graveyard talking.

'I say,' said Zach, turning round. 'There's a car outside the church. Wonder whose that is.'

Will shrugged.

'Someone lookin' for Mr Peters mebbe,' and he swung open the gate.

Zach cut across the graveyard and climbed over the wall.

'See you tomorrow,' he yelled.

Will ran up the path, pushed open the front door and slammed it behind him. He couldn't wait to tell Mister Tom about Geoffrey and the art lessons. He flung open the door, his cheeks burning, his heart soaring, only to be brought to a sudden halt.

Sitting in the room with Mister Tom were a policeman from Weirwold, the warden from Deptford, a middle-aged man in a pullover and corduroys, and a woman in a green hat and coat.

'This the boy?' asked the policeman.

The warden stared at Will's brown freckled face and thick shiny bleached hair. The boy he was looking at stood straight and had muscles on his legs. He wasn't the thin weedy Willie he knew.

Tom stood by the range, holding Sammy in check.

'You're Mr Oakley, ain't you?'

Tom nodded.

'I know you look a bit different wiv a beard but I recognize you all right.' He turned back to Will. 'But this ain't Willie Beech, is it?'

'William,' corrected Will.

'Oh, cheeky now, is he?'

The woman touched the warden's arm. She was in her thirties, a fresh-complexioned lady with light brown hair and soft hazel eyes.

'I'm afraid we've brought you some rather bad news, William,' she said. 'It concerns your mother.'

He looked at her startled.

'She wants me back?'

'No.'

He smiled with relief. She paused.

'William,' she hesitated. 'I'm afraid your mother is dead. She committed suicide.'

He looked blankly at her.

'I don't get you.'

'She killed herself.'

Will gazed at her in stunned disbelief.

'Killed herself? But... but why?'

'I don't know. I suppose she just didn't want to live any more.'

How could anyone not want to live, thought Will, when there were so many things to live for. There were rainy nights and wind and the slap of the sea and the moon. There were books to read and pictures to paint and music.

'I'm from a Children's Home in Sussex,' she explained. 'It's an orphanage and it's right out in the country. There are lots of children there and we usually find foster parents to take them into their homes, young parents with children of their own.' And she smiled.

'What the lady is saying,' said the policeman, 'is that she's willin' to have you at the Home.'

Will thrust his hands deep into his pockets and looked her straight in the eye.

'No,' he said, somewhat shakily, 'I'm not willin'. This is my home and I'm stayin' here.'

'Now now, son,' said the warden. 'That ain't the way to talk. You don't have much choice in the matter. Your Mr Oakley has not bin keepin' to the lor. Kidnappin's a serious offence.'

Will took a deep breath.

'When you kidnap someone you usually want a ransom. There ent no one in the world who'd pay a ransom for me,' and he glanced at Tom, 'except Mister Tom perhaps and he's the one that's supposed to have kidnapped me. Well, I reckon I weren't kidnapped. I reckon I was rescued.'

'Oh you do, do you?' said the warden.

'Yes,' reiterated Will, 'I do.'

And then, as if he was no longer in the room, the policeman, the warden and the woman began to discuss him. Will and Tom just looked at each other and all the while the middle-aged man in the big jersey and corduroys sat by the range smoking a pipe and silently observed them.

'Will,' said the policeman, 'we'd like you to go up to your room for a while until we make up our minds.'

Will glanced at Tom. Tom nodded and handed Sammy over to him.

'Here, boy,' he said gently. 'Let him keep you company, like.'

Will trailed mournfully to the door and whirled round in a great surge of anger.

'I won't go with you,' he stated firmly. 'Even if you tie me up and put me in prison, I'll run away and come back here.' With that he slammed the door behind him and stood in the hallway trembling. Clutching Sammy in his arms he clambered up the ladder to his room. He sat on his bed in the dark feeling both furious and helpless.

'I won't go,' he whispered to Sammy. 'I won't go. I'll run away. Yeh! That's what I'll do. I can't go to Zach's, though,' he muttered. 'That's the first place they'd think of lookin', nor the twins, nor George. I've got to find someone else who'd hide me. Someone they won't think of.' He racked his brain frantically, going methodically through the people in the village.

'Of course!' he cried. 'That's who! Lucy! She'd hide me. She'd hide me fer blimmin' years. She thinks the sunlight shines out me bootlaces.'

He could visualize her, all adoring, smuggling cups of tea and bread and dripping, to the hay loft in the Padfields' barn.

'Sammy,' he said urgently. 'I'll have to leave you here, boy.'

Slowly he eased open the trap-door only to catch sight of the policeman and the warden in the hall.

'Dash it!' he muttered, closing the trap. 'Too late!'

He clenched his fists angrily and braced himself for their approach. He was ready to fight them now. He needn't have bothered for he could hear them at the front door chatting quite amicably. He pressed his ear to the floor but all he could make out was something about them coming back with the papers.

The front door slammed and he heard Tom coming up the ladder.

'They'se gone,' he said, lifting up the trap-door. 'You can come down now.'

He climbed down the steps with Sammy who leapt immediately out of his arms and ran into the front room to bark at the strangers. Will scowled and perched himself on the stool by the range.

'I ent goin' to apologize, like,' he muttered.

Tom sat in the armchair.

'I'm sorry about yer mother.'

Will forgot his anger for a moment and caught Tom's eye.

'I dunno why she did it,' he said, feeling totally bewildered. 'Was it because of me and Trudy?'

'Partly,' said Tom, picking up his pipe and stuffing it with tobacco. 'But it weren't your fault. She was ill. She couldn't cope, see.'

'What's goin' to happen to me, then?'

Tom looked up at him quickly.

'I'm adoptin' you.'

'Wot!' exclaimed Will.

'You ent got no other relations, boy. The authorities have checked up on that so I'm adoptin' you. That man in the jersey and cordeeroys, he were one of them psychiatrists. He were a bit different from that other one. Had a sense of humour. Anyway, he said that this were obviously the best place for you and any fool could see that and the others agreed. They'se bringin' official forms and the like and are writin' reports on me. If all goes well, and I don't see how it can't you'll be my son.'

'Your son!' cried Will jumping off the stool. 'You mean, you'll be my father, like?'

Tom nodded.

'I s'pose I will.'

In an instant it suddenly dawned on him that Will would be growing up with him. With a great yell of joy he leapt up from the armchair.

Will threw his arms around him and together they danced and cavorted across the room shouting and yelling while Sammy whirled around their ankles chasing his tail and barking in lunatic fashion.