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Back to School

On Thursday morning Will rose earlier than usual. He met Zach outside the Littles and together they headed for the twins' cottage. Ginnie answered the door in her night-dress and dressing-gown. George was already in the kitchen looking very sleepy-eyed.

'Come on, Carrie,' called out Mrs Thatcher up the stairs. 'Or you'll be late.'

Zach stood at the foot of the narrow stairway.

'I say,' he exclaimed as she appeared on the tiny landing. 'You look magnificent.'

She glanced shyly at him and came down the stairs. She was wearing a navy gymslip, a cream-coloured blouse and a navy tie with a wide green and narrow red stripe. On her feet were fawn woollen socks and a pair of brown lace-up shoes.

'It feels ever so strange wearing a tie,' she remarked, tugging at it. 'Dad show'd me how to do it, like.'

Her father came out of the kitchen and gazed proudly at her. Mrs Thatcher however was still none too keen on Carrie going to the high school but Mr Thatcher was backing her all the way and had even done some extra labouring so that she could have a new uniform.

'She's worked hard for it,' he had said. 'She ent goin' to start with no handowns. She's goin' to start proper.'

They heard a car drawing up outside.

Carrie blushed with excitement.

'That'll be Mr Fergus,' she exclaimed.

Her mother handed her a wide brimmed felt hat to put on and a rather large navy blazer with narrow green braiding around it. Her ginger hair, which was still fought into two plaits, stood out starkly against the navy. She picked up a shiny leather satchel which was empty save for her lunch. The straps and buckles jangled in their newness.

'Don't expect too much on yer first day,' commented her father.

'Good luck,' said Zach warmly. 'I'll see you when you come back.'

'You look real fine,' added Will. 'Real fine.'

Carrie smiled nervously and ran outside to where the car was waiting. She opened the door and sat next to Mr Fergus, leaving the others standing outside the cottage where they waved to her until the car had driven out of sight.

Ginnie gave a shiver.

'You'd best get dressed,' said her Mother.

She turned to the boys.

'You wouldn't say no to tea and some bread and drippin', would you?'

They grinned and followed her into the kitchen. Mr Thatcher was closing his lunch tin and filling up a small tin jug with tea.

After they had eaten, Will and Zach left together and headed for the woods. There was still plenty of time before school started. The early morning air was clear and crisp

and all the fields and hedgerows were covered in a layer of sparkling dew. The sun filtered through the trees so that Will and Zach were constantly moving into patches of gloom and out into sudden patches of sunlight. They reached the small river and listened to it gently rippling past them.

Zach leaned on one leg, as was his habit, and with his hands deep in his pockets he stared anxiously into the water.

'I think war has started properly now,' he muttered.

'But the Nazis won't bomb here,' replied Will. 'Will they? Mister Tom says he doesn't think they'd bother.'

Zach gave a sigh.

'It's my parents I'm worried about. I know they're busy, but I wish they'd write or ring more often so I'd know they're all right. Last night, on the wireless, they said there was more heavy bombing.'

'Couldn't they stay here?'

Zach shook his head.

'Father says if he can't fight for England he wants to help entertain the fighters and help protect the families that are left. That's why he joined the A.F.S.'

'A.F.S.?'

'Auxiliary Fire Service. Mother feels the same.' He slammed a fist into the open palm of his hand. 'I wish I could visit them just to see if they're safe.'

'There might be a letter waiting fer you now,' said Will encouragingly.

'I doubt it.'

They stared up through the colourfully-clad branches. The sun spread through them like a warm X-ray lighting the thin skeletal lines in each leaf.

Will and Zach chatted quietly absorbing the peace of the river and then turned back to the village.

They dropped by at the Littles to see if there had been any post but there was none. Zach carried on towards the graveyard cottage with Will and they took Sammy out for a romp in the fields. By the time school had started it felt late enough to be the afternoon.

To their surprise and delight, sitting next to Miss Thorne at the front of the class was Geoffrey Sanderton.

'Mr Sanderton and I have decided to choose a nature project,' began Miss Thorne. 'This means that we shall be going on expeditions which you will plan. We would also like some of you to write and illustrate a nature diary.'

Zach looked a little disappointed.

'In addition to the project we shall be reading some of the nature poets, William Wordsworth, for example, some of Shakespeare's sonnets.'

At this Zach beamed.

'I thought it would be rather a good idea,' added Geoffrey, 'that, as we have to be careful with the amount of paint we use, we could create pictures using different-coloured leaves and bark and anything interesting that you can find, and it might be fun too if we made up short poems to go with them.'

'Perhaps an epic saga based on some expedition,' said Miss Thorne gazing directly at Zach. 'And George,' she remarked, looking up at him. 'You will be in charge of some of the nature trails we shall take. Now are there an...'

She was interrupted by a knock at the door. Geoffrey opened it. Zach looked towards the hallway and was surprised to see Aunt Nance. Miss Thorne disappeared into the hallway with her and returned shortly. She glanced at Zach.

'You're to go home,' she said gently.

Zach felt very hot and a little sick. He rose quietly from his desk and left the classroom. Will listened to his footsteps fade away down the hallway. He glanced up at Miss Thorne who caught his eye and quickly turned away.

'Right,' she said briskly, facing the class. 'Let's see how your spelling has deteriorated over the summer holidays.'

The remainder of the morning was taken up with sums, sharing out books and planning the first 'expedition', but Will's heart was elsewhere. As soon as it was lunch he ran to the Littles and knocked on the back door.

'Come in, Will,' said Mrs Little, opening it. 'Zach will be pleased to see you. He's upstairs packing.'

'Packing?' gasped Will. 'Why? What's wrong?'

'His father has been badly injured. One of the large warehouses by the docks caught fire and he was buried under fallen timber for several hours. He's in a hospital in London.'

Will ran upstairs and found Zach kneeling over a small, battered case. He was holding a photograph of his father. He looked up at Will. His eyes were pink and swollen.

'I'm catching the Friday train to London,' he said, his voice quivering. 'Mother doesn't want me to, but I begged her to let me. I have to see him in case...' and he became hoarse and stifled a sob. 'In case I never see him again.'

Will squatted down beside him.

'I want you to take care of this,' he said, handing him his old tattered copy of Shakespeare's works. 'It was my great-grandfather's.'

'Oh, Zach,' protested Will, but Zach's pained expression prevented him from refusing. He took the book and smoothed the leather covers with his hand.

'I'll look after it real fine.'

They spent a miserable afternoon together. Ginnie and George called round after lunch and Carrie rushed in later, for a few brief moments before having to fly home to do her homework. It was a wretched time for Zach as he wanted to leave immediately. All the waiting only increased his feelings of frustration and helplessness.

The Littles drove him to the station in Weirwold the following morning. His mother had said that whatever happened he was only to stay in London for the weekend. She didn't want him to be injured as well and she knew that his father would have felt the same way.

The day after Zach's sudden departure was Will's tenth birthday, Saturday September 7th, 1940.

Will spent the morning at the Hartridges' and Padfields' cottage. In the afternoon he and Tom decorated the living room. Mrs Fletcher and Mrs Thatcher arrived armed with home-baked cakes and biscuits while Aunt Nance brought home-made ginger beer and

a parcel that Zach had left for him. By late afternoon, the cottage was filled with children, with Tom, Ginnie and George leading the games. The high spot of the party, however, was when everyone swarmed round the cottage screaming hysterically and hiding from Tom who was chasing them and pretending to be a monster at the same time. They played musical chairs and pass the parcel, ate doughnuts with their hands tied behind their backs, passed oranges to each other under their chins and, of course, ate.

Will left Zach's parcel unopened until the last person had gone home and he and Tom had sat down to relax with a cup of tea. The table was already littered with books, sweets and pots of paint. He picked up Zach's parcel and began to unwrap it.

Inside was part one of an epic adventure called 'The Villainous Doctor Horror'. At the bottom was a little postscript. It read 'P.S. Part two will be written on my return.'

In addition to the poem were two new paint-brushes, a second-hand book on painters, and a lopsided sketch of Will in an artist's beret and smock. It showed him standing at an easel. The canvas on the easel was empty but Will himself was covered in paint.

'I shall put that on my wall,' said Will half to himself and half to Tom.

At eight o'clock they listened intently to the news on the wireless.

It was reported that flares had been dropped all over London and hundreds of German planes had been spotted. Spitfires and Hurricanes had soared up into the skies to fight them. It was one of the longest massed raids that London was experiencing. While the news was being read, heavy bombing was still continuing.

'Hope Zach's all right,' said Will, frowning. Tom puffed at his pipe.

'He's so skinny, a bomb would probably skip past him.'

'I hope so.'

The next day, for the first time in weeks, it rained. Will woke to the sound of it scuttling down the roof and bouncing off his open window. He washed and dressed quickly. Tom was already in the church organizing extra seating arrangements, for it was to be a national day of prayer.

At 10.00 a.m. the villagers were shocked by a Special News Bulletin on the wireless.

'It is estimated,' said the announcer, 'that four hundred people at least were killed in the first few hours of air attacks. 1,400 are believed to be seriously injured. London's Dockland is on fire and many homes in the East End have been blitzed to the ground.'

The Littles still hadn't heard from Zach or his mother, and Will grew steadily more anxious. He woke in the early hours of Monday morning from a nightmare of amputation units, people with their heads blown off, vans with 'Dead Only' written on them, and disfigured bloodstained people wandering and screaming through dense rubble.

He and Tom switched on the wireless for any early morning news flashes. According to recent reports there had been continual bombing throughout the night and fires were burning all over London. Becton gas-works had been hit. Moorgate lay in smoky ruins. Balham had been badly smashed. Bombs had fallen on one of the platforms on Victoria Station and on the outskirts of Windsor Castle. The news was devastating.

Will hurried on to school and spent the morning outside, gardening. He joined George, Ginnie, Lucy and Grace on a blackberrying expedition in the afternoon, and returned at dusk, flushed and happily tired only to hear that Dover was being bombed.

The following morning he awoke to the sounds of voices downstairs. It was odd to have visitors so early unless, of course, he had overslept. He rose quickly and 'Hope Zach's all right,' said Will, frowning. Tom puffed at his pipe.

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