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Grieving

In the weeks that followed the news of Zach's death, Will survived each day in a zombie-like daze. Outwardly he carried on as normal, helping Tom, and catching up with school work. Inwardly he felt too numb even to cry.

He avoided the Littles' cottage as much as possible and chose to walk to the school or shop by the church and cottages. At school, finding it painful to sit next to an empty chair, he would scatter papers untidily over the two desks in an effort to hide Zach's absence.

Miss Thorne asked him to be in the Christmas play and, although he agreed and took part in rehearsals, the whole procedure felt very unreal to him. Miss Thorne was pleased with him but he felt as if his body and voice were totally expressionless.

Even in drawing and painting classes he would sit and look blankly at the empty page in front of him, devoid of ideas. His private classes with Geoffrey Sanderton were just as bad.

'I ent got anythin' left inside me,' he would say repeatedly, for he felt that half of himself had been cut away, that life without Zach was only half a life and even that half was empty.

Most of the time Geoffrey set him still-life pictures to draw, so that for several hours Will could forget the dull pain that gnawed his insides and concentrate on the shapes in a bowl of fruit, the colour of a flower or the shades of light that fell on a bottle and boot. But always, when he left Spooky Cott, the same dead feeling sunk into him and all his activities seemed meaningless.

Four months passed. Christmas saw heavy rationing but Will didn't notice, for it still seemed a very rich one to him. He and Tom made toys with scraps of wood and paints and Ginnie and George came round to help.

Since September and the continual blitzing of London that followed, the number of evacuees that came flooding into the village grew weekly. Many had no homes in London to return to. At Christmas several parents came to Little Weirwold to share in the festivities, with their children. Tom and Will decided to make toys for those that had lost one or both of their parents and for the many that were so poor that they wouldn't have had presents anyway. Will welcomed the opportunity of doing anything that would take his mind off Zach. He still tended not to talk very much and, apart from when he was rehearsing, he would withdraw into his numb little shell. Tom carried on as normal, waiting for the moment when Will would finally accept and mourn his friend's death.

Carrie had completed her first term at the high school. She arrived home long after dark and after tea she would immediately begin her homework, go to bed, rising early in the morning to learn Latin declensions or French verbs, before leaving again for school. The weekends and Christmas holidays were the only times anyone saw very much of her. She missed Zach dreadfully for he was one of the few people with whom she didn't feel such an odd fish. She didn't dare let her parents know of the unpleasanter aspects of grammar-school life, as her mother still didn't approve of her going and her father had

worked so hard for her uniform and sports clothes. For that, she would be eternally grateful for it made some of her difficulties easier to bear. Her main embarrassment was her accent. Most of the girls in the school spoke a different kind of English, a posh B.B.C. English like Zach. Their parents paid fees whereas she was a poor scholarship girl, with an accent that many of the girls either ridiculed or could not understand. Ginnie had said that she was beginning to talk more la di da and her mother was constantly telling her not to let 'that school' go to her head. She didn't put on a different way of talking intentionally, it was just that all day she was mixing with teachers and girls who spoke differently to the people in Little Weirwold. She was beginning to feel that she neither fitted into Little Weirwold nor the Girls' High. She was grateful that there was so much school work for her to do and her loneliness acted as an incentive to work harder.

She called in on Will several times but as soon as she mentioned Zach he would always abruptly change the subject. This added to her loneliness, for she dearly wanted to talk about him to someone.

One chill afternoon in January however, an unforeseen event caused Will finally to accept Zach's death.

It was a bitter raw day and, although Will was wearing a heavy overcoat, scarf and balaclava, the frost penetrated into his very bones. He let the graveyard gate clang noisily behind him and set off towards Spooky Cott, taking as usual the route around the fields on the Grange side. He always avoided retracing the way he and Zach had taken on their last morning together.

It seemed as if the very ground had frozen. The hard furrows in the fields were as immobile as waves of corrugated iron, and the few surviving tufts of grass that remained crackled as his boots hit the hoar frost that coated them. Eventually he came to the gap in the hedge which served as Geoffrey Sanderton's gate. He crunched his way up the tangled garden and knocked on the door. He glanced round at the trees which were now quite naked and thin, and blew into his hands, stamping his feet into some semblance of life. He was just thinking how vulnerable the trees appeared when Geoffrey opened the door.

'Hello,' he said cheerily. 'I've just put the kettle on. Sling your coat on an armchair and make yourself warm.'

Will gladly divested himself of his heavy winter garments and curled himself up at the foot of an armchair by the hearth.

'Get those fingers loosened up first,' yelled Geoffrey from the kitchen. 'Don't go sticking them straight out in front of the fire.'

But Will didn't need telling. He remembered last winter when he had held his frozen hands above the range and how painful the sudden transition from cold to hot had been. Geoffrey came hobbling in, carrying a large pot of tea. Since having a wooden leg he had dispensed with his crutches completely and now used a magnificent ebony walking stick that Emilia Thorne had given him. It was silver-topped with strange ornate designs carved around the knob.

The cottage had changed radically since Will's first visit. Geoffrey and Emilia Thorne had taken an instant liking to each other and between the two of them they had cleaned and painted the walls, adding shelves, bits of furniture and potted plants on the way.

'What have you brought me to see?' asked Geoffrey, as they sat down by the fire.

Will glanced shamefacedly down at the rug. He undid a cardboard folder and produced a drawing of a chewed-up bone in one of Tom's slippers. Geoffrey examined it intently. Will avoided his eyes.

After they had drunk their tea Geoffrey put the teapot on the mantelpiece above the fire. Beside it, he placed a photograph of two young men with their arms around each other. They seemed to be laughing a great deal. In front of the teapot he laid his pipe.

'Those are your subjects for this afternoon.'

Will recognized one of the young men as Geoffrey.

'Who's the other man?' he asked. 'Is he your brother?'

'Best friend,' he replied. 'Killed in action. Very talented. A brilliant sculptor.'

'Oh,' said Will quietly.

'That's his pipe actually.'

'You use his pipe?'

'Yes. I know he would have wanted me to have it. It makes him still a little alive for me whenever I smoke it. Do you understand?'

Will didn't, nor did he wish to. It was bad enough possessing Zach's old Shakespeare. He had wrapped it up and given it to Tom to put away in his cupboard together with the cartoon picture that Zach had drawn of him.

He sat down immediately to work. Usually he could immerse himself totally in the objects he was drawing but every time he caught sight of the laughing young man in the photograph, and the pipe, it disturbed him. They no longer seemed inanimate objects. They were alive. He began to wonder if the two men had even drunk tea together out of the same teapot.

He attempted to draw steadily but found his hand trembling. Suddenly he saw Zach on his colourful bicycle, singing and lifting his arms high into the air yelling 'Look, no hands' and falling straight into a hedge, and he remembered his scratched face grinning up at him. He sat for three hours at the drawing and spent most of the time gazing morbidly through the window watching the sky grow darker. Geoffrey put the blacks up and lit the gas-lamp.

'Time to stop,' he said, and he peered over Will's shoulder.

'I'm sorry,' mumbled Will. 'I don't seem to be able to...'. His voice trailed into silence.

'Sit down by the fire and I'll toast us some muffins.'

Will cheered up a little at this. He curled up in the armchair.

While Will was gazing dreamily into the fire he heard a click. Geoffrey had opened the gramophone and was winding it up.

'What are you doing?'

'Putting on some music.'

The record made its swishing sound as the needle circled around its dark edge and then the music started. It was the same that he and Zach had listened to, when they had sat amongst the chaos and candles, the day they had first come to the cottage.

Will wanted Geoffrey to take it off. But he couldn't bear to speak or look at him in case he broke down, so he returned to staring at the fire. As he did so he suddenly felt that it was not just he who was gazing into the flames it was both he and Zach. He could feel Zach sitting beside him, bursting with excitement and desperately wanting to move with

the music, while he was happy just to listen. It was an unnerving feeling. He caught sight of the photograph on the mantelpiece and it reminded him of a snapshot that Mrs Clarence had taken of him and Zach in Salt-on-the-Mouth.

As soon as the record had come to an end and the needle swung indolently and repeatedly in the centre of it, he pushed himself firmly to his feet and grabbed his balaclava and coat.

'I must leave, get back,' he choked out, hoarsely.

Geoffrey nodded and showed him to the door. He squeezed Will's shoulder gently.

'Better to accept, than pretend that he never existed,' he said quietly.

Will didn't want to hear. His eyes were blurred and his body hurt all over. He stumbled into the darkness and instead of leaving through the gap in the hedge he found himself free of it and headed blindly in the direction of the woods and river.

Tripping and falling over the roots of trees, he scratched his face against unseen branches. A disturbed owl screeched loudly and flew above his head but he hardly heard it. At last he finally reached the river. He stood by it staring at its glassy surface, his chest and shoulders pounding, his gut aching. He felt again Zach's presence next to him, felt him staring up at the starry night and coming out with some strange fragment of poetry.

'No, no,' he whispered, shaking his head wildly. 'No, no. You're not here. You'll *never* be here,' With one angry sob he picked up a dead branch and struck it against a tree trunk until it shattered. Wildly he picked up any other branches he could find and smashed them, hurling the broken bits into the river not caring if he hurt any animals that might be hibernating nearby for he felt so racked with pain that he no longer cared about anything else but the tight knot that seemed to pierce the very centre of him. He was angry that Zach had died. Angry with him for going away and leaving him.

With an almighty force of venom he tore one tiny rotting tree up by its roots and pushed it to the ground. Catching his breath for a moment he stood up stiffly and looked up through the branches of the trees.

'I hate you, God. I hate you. You hear me? I hate you. I hate you. I hate you.'

He stood, yelling and screaming at the sky until he sank exhausted and sobbing on to the ground.

He had no idea how long he had lain there asleep. It felt like a year. Slowly he crawled to his feet rigid and shivering. He hauled himself up the bank and stumbled through the woods.

Tom was waiting for him by the gate. He was about to give Will another five minutes before heading out towards Spooky Cott when he heard light footsteps coming along the road. He peered through the darkness and caught sight of a blond tuft of hair sticking out of Will's balaclava. His face was covered in earth and tearstains and his lips and eyelids were swollen and puffy.

'Come on in,' he said, breaking the silence, and he put an arm round Will's shoulders as they walked along the pathway to the cottage. Just as he was opening the front door Will turned quickly.

'I'm sorry, Dad,' he said. 'I didn't think you'd be worried, like. I had to be on me own, see. I had to. I forgot about you. I didn't think. Sorry.'

'You're home now,' said Tom. 'You look fair whacked. You'd best get washed and go to bed.'

It wasn't until Will was asleep and Tom was lying in his own bed that he allowed the full impact of Will's words to sink in.

'He called me Dad,' he whispered croakily into the darkness. 'He called me Dad.' And, although he felt overwhelmed with happiness, the tears ran silently down his face.

'Will!' cried Aunt Nance, opening the back door. She was speechless for a moment. 'Come in! Come in!'

Will stepped into the kitchen.

'Mulled wine?' she began and then stopped herself. Mulled wine was Zach's nickname for hot blackcurrant juice.

'Yeh. Please,' answered Will, and he sat down and watched her making it.

'We've missed you coming round,' she said, handing it to him and joining him at the table. She lit half a cigarette lovingly as if it was the last one left in Great Britain, took a deep drag and began coughing violently.

'I've left Zach's room as it was,' she said, recovering.

Will nodded and blew into his drink.

'Doctor Little and myself, we didn't want to touch anything until you'd been, until you wanted us to. All right?'

Will looked up and smiled.

'Yeh.'

'Good,' and she sat back, feeling relieved.

'Can I ride his bike?'

Mrs Little wasn't quite sure if she had heard correctly.

'What?' she queried. 'What did you say?'

'Can I ride his bike?'

'Zach's?'

'Yes.'

'If you want.' She stared at him for a moment. 'You'll probably have to lower the seat.'

'Yeh. I know.'

'I didn't know you could ride.'

'I can't. Not yet. But I will.'

'It's in the Anderson. It'll probably need oiling and pumping up.'

'Has you got any oil?'

'Yes. And there's a pump attached to it.'

She rose from the table and opened a door leading to a pantry. In a large box below the bottom shelf was a collection of tools and string. She bent over it, moving the bits and pieces from one side to another.

'Ah,' she cried, waving a spanner in the air. 'I'll lower the seat for you.'

'No,' said Will, rising to his feet. 'I want to do it meself.'

'Are you sure?'

'Yeh.'

'I tell you what, you do the dirty work and I'll hold the bike steady for you.'

He was about to refuse but changed his mind.

'Right-ho,' he said and then blushed, for that was one of Zach's expressions.

They dragged the bicycle out of the shelter and wiped the moistness off with an old dry rag, oiled it and reset the back wheel, as it was leaning heavily against the frame. The chain, which was loose, hung impotently against the pedals. Will took hold of it and placed it firmly and gently back into place. One of the inner tyres had a hole in it. With the help of Aunt Nance and Zach's puncture kit, he patched it up. He wiped the mudguards and scraped the rust away from around the handlebars. It was a strange feeling working on the bicycle, like touching a part of Zach.

He wheeled it round the cottage and through the long, overgrown grass. He was just struggling with the gate when Mrs Little came running after him, carrying a small canvas shoulder-bag of Zach's.

'I've made you a few jelly sandwiches,' she gasped breathlessly, her thin chest heaving, 'and there's a bottle of ginger beer inside.' He gazed at the bag uncertainly.

'Thanks,' he said at last.

Taking the bag, he put it over his head so that it hung loosely and securely across his back. Mrs Little pulled at the gate to let him out and watched him wheel the bicycle down the lane.

As Will approached the cottages he could feel his ears burning. He turned left and avoided looking around in case anyone noticed him. He was playing truant from school, a thing he had never done in his life. Unnoticed by him, Emilia Thorne was standing by the school window and she observed him, saying nothing.

Will carried on until he was well out of sight of the cottages and when he had found a reasonably smooth stretch of road he swung his leg over the saddle and sat still for a moment. He placed the toe of his boot on one of the pedals. Gritting his teeth and taking a deep breath, he pushed it down and wobbled forward. The bicycle curved and swooped into a near-by hedge. He picked himself up and climbed back on to the seat. Again the bicycle skidded over to one side so that he grazed his knees on the rough road. Undaunted, he clambered back on again and each time he swerved and fell, he only grew more determined.

In spite of the hoar frost that covered the hedgerows and surrounding fields, learning to ride was hot work and soon his overcoat was left dangling from the branch of a near-by tree.

At times he managed to keep the bicycle balanced for a few yards only to swerve into another clump of brambles or icy nettles. He could hear his Dad's words over and over again inside his head. 'Takes yer time, everythin' 'as its own time.' But whether it was because it was Zach's bicycle or because the colours were so intense, he felt frustrated and impatient. He wanted to learn now. When, at last, he managed to ride it for a reasonable distance he rewarded himself with Aunt Nance's blackcurrant jelly sandwiches and the ginger beer. Perspiration trickled down his face and into his shirt and jersey. Soon the crisp January air was freezing it into a cold clammy sweat. He hung the bag on a branch and pushed the bicycle forward. The break had been a good idea for when he set off again it seemed easier, far less of a struggle.

Soon he began to grow confident. He put his coat back on, leaving it undone and slung the bag over his head and shoulder. He understood now why Zach loved riding so much. There was a marvellous feeling of freedom once you'd got the hang of it.

As he rode, his coat flapping behind him, the crisp wind cooling his face, he suddenly felt that Zach was no longer beside him, he was inside him and very much alive. The numbness in his body had dissolved into exhilaration.

'Yipee. Calloo Callay,' he yelled.

The bicycle shuddered over the small rough road jangling his bones in such a way that he wanted to laugh.

'Wizzo,' he cried, steering the bright machine with a new dexterity round a corner. He stopped abruptly. A steep hill had conquered his unused bicycle legs. He wheeled it up to the brow. It was wonderful to stand at the top with the bicycle leaning gently against his body. He looked down at the wide stretch of fields and woods and tiny icy streams. The sky was pale and cloudless. A small patch of sunlight was eking its way through the woodland's dark branches. He breathed in deeply. 'Zach isn't dead,' he murmured. 'Not really. Not the inside of Zach,' and he gazed happily down at the fields. 'No one can take memories away and I can talk to him whenever I want.'

He watched the sun gradually sinking into the roots of the trees.

'Now, Zach,' he said out loud. 'What shall I do now?'

'I should return slowly and leisurely back,' he replied to himself, 'and pop in to see Annie Hartridge.'

'What a good idea,' said Will.

'And oh, I say,' continued the imaginary Zach. 'Jolly well done. Learning to ride my bike,' and Will patted himself on the back.

He turned the bicycle and cycled back down the hill, controlling the fast decline with his brakes. It was even more pleasurable to ride after his little sojourn on the hill. He was more relaxed, more at peace with himself.

He was winding his way round a corner when he caught sight of Annie Hartridge's cottage. He wheeled the bicycle to her front door and leaned it against the wall.

'I'll knock,' said 'Zach' and he took hold of the brass knocker and banged it vigorously against the door.

Annie opened it, holding a telegram in her hands. She was crying.

'Oh hello, Will,' she said, half-laughing.

'Come in, do come in.' She closed the door behind him. 'I've just had the most wonderful news. Mr Hartridge is alive. He's in a Prisoner of War camp in Germany. We can write to each other and I can send him Red Cross Parcels, food parcels. Oh Will!' she cried. 'I'm so happy. I can't believe it. I want to write to him right now.'

She looked at Will's grubby face and followed his body down to his feet.

'What have you been doing? You're covered in grazes and scratches.'

'I've been learning to ride Zach's bike,' he said absently. Annie was speechless for a moment.

'Did you manage to stay on it?' she said at last.

'Eventually,' he answered, plunging his hands into his shorts pocket and leaning on one leg.

'Why you...' but she stopped. She was about to say that he looked and sounded a little like Zach. He had an extrovert air about him, that was unusual in Will.

During the weeks that followed the bicycle-riding incident everyone noticed a dramatic change in Will, especially Emilia Thorne. She had decided to do her own version of Peter Pan. She cast Will to play Peter Pan but to her surprise he stood up in the hall, and in front of everyone said, 'I'd like to play Captain Hook, may I?'

Miss Thorne had been a little taken aback. Captain Hook was a comic flamboyant role. 'Let's try you out,' she said, after recovering her breath.

Will surprised her and everyone in rehearsals. Unbeknown to the others, while working on his lines up in his room, he would place a cushion in front of himself and say 'Zach, how do you think I should say this line?' or 'How do you think Hook's feelin' in this bit, when the crocodile appears for the third time?'

Then he would sit on the cushion and not only answer his questions as Zach but even deliver the lines as him.

The play was a great success. Will had people laughing helplessly at his angry Hook outbursts of temper and his cowardly flights from the crocodile. It was so obvious that the audience loved Will, that when several of the children pushed him forward to take a separate bow the hall erupted into cheers.

Tom was terribly proud of him but then he had been for a long time. He met him outside the tiny back door which led to the communal dressing-room behind the stage, and they walked home chatting in animated tones all the way back to their graveyard cottage.

As Will lay back in his bed that night he felt a little sad, in spite of all the applause. He was sad that Zach hadn't been there to share it. He realized now that the Zach he had been talking to for the last few weeks was a person created from his own imagination and a handful of memories. It was just that the Zach part of himself, the outgoing, cheeky part of himself, had been buried inside him and it was his friendship with Zach that had brought those qualities to the surface.

He snuggled down deep into the blankets and was just about to fall asleep when he gave a sudden start.

I'm not half a person any more, he thought. I'm a whole one. I *can* live without Zach even though I still miss him.

He turned over and listened to the wind howling through the graveyard. He was warm and happy. He sighed. It was good to be alive.