

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 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 stove.

"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 gray clothes. S'pose another pair of socks and one of them balaclava hat things wouldn't come amiss, he thought. There were 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 halfway down the hatch with Sammy in his arms when he remembered something. "Don't forget them ole prayers."

"No, mister," said Willie.

Tom 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 trapdoor 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 crack of lightning 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 colored pots.

Saturday Morning

When Willie awoke it was still very dark. The pain that had brought him sharply back to consciousness seared through his stomach. He held his breath and pushed his hand down the bed to touch his nightgown. 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 rafter. 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 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 stove. Through the side window he could see his gray 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 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 to drink only 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. 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 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.

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 himself. "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," Tom said, and went 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 pitchers."

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. 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 colored 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." Willie 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 letter. Mustn't worry yer mum. Climb out. 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 went on to the end 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 a gate into the field next to the graveyard. A large cart horse stood drowsily eating 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 hurt 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 her.

"She won't hurt you," Tom 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 on one of Dobbs's 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 sneakers 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 Dr. 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-gray hair, was digging a trench in the garden. A cigarette dangled in her mouth. The wireless was blaring out light organ music through the kitchen window.

"Dr. Little!" said Tom. The doctor looked up and put on his spectacles, which immediately slid down 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?"

Willie 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?"

"Been 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," the doctor 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 Dr. 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 whippin', 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 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 spoiled, 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 delouse half of them. Bags 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 semiretired," 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. "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 walked to the end of the lane and on to the road 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 potted plants on the windowsills. The school was quite unlike the dark-gray building he had attended in London.

The road brought them to the center of the two rows of thatched cottages. Mrs. Fletcher and a neighbor were standing outside one with a huge sunflower growing in front of it. It was one of the few cottages that housed a wireless. A small crowd was 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 gray trousers were held up with a piece of string. His wife was in a flowery cotton dress with a lilac-colored apron over it. Their skin was as wrinkled and brown as an old football, and on their heads were perched steel 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 candy and bottles of pop.

Standing next to the netting 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.

"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 that attracted Willie's attention. He was taller than Willie 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 colored patches were sewn neatly round the seat of his pants. 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 p's and q's 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," the boy moaned.

"Shoulda 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 gray shorts and jersey. Willie turned quickly away and walked out 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 said. "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, sacks and colored packets were piled along the right side of the store. On the left was a long wooden counter with 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 colored tins on them. Willie peered outside to see if he could catch a glimpse of the strange boy from the post office.

"Thanks, Mrs. M," said Tom, talking to a middle-aged couple behind the counter. "I'll drop in that tobacco for you tonight, Mr. Miller. Tea, sugar, flashlight 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, all sorts 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-colored 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," said Tom.

"Thank you," he whispered.

They left the shop and headed back along the road, Sammy 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 mustache was running towards them. He was wearing an Air-Raid Precautions uniform.

"That's Charlie Ruddles," muttered Tom. "He's in the A.R.P. 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 yer-self 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's got to go into town."

Equipped