

Chapter 15 - Home

Dobbs clopped on towards Weirwold, Tom and Willie sitting on the cart behind her. They hadn't exchanged many words on the journey. They had both felt too numb. Willie held Sammy tightly next to him and stared through blurred eyes down at the leather and brass harness, the moving flank of Dobbs and the rough road beneath them. Occasionally he lifted his head to gaze at the fields, only to look quickly downwards again. Tom kept his eyes on the road. The blacksmith's at the edge of the village could be seen faintly in the distance. He had tried persuading Willie's mother to come and stay in Little Weirwold, but to no avail. She had written that she only wanted Willie to stay with her for a while till she felt better. He spoke to the Billeting Officer, but there was nothing she could do. Mothers were always taking their children back and they had the legal right to do so. They left Dobbs and the cart at the blacksmith's. Tom helped Willie on with his old rucksack.

It was filled with books, clothes and presents he had acquired during his stay. In the carrier bag that he had carried on his first day were his few original possessions.

Willie trembled. A blast of wind swept into his face and he shivered. Tom squeezed his shoulder firmly and walked with him towards the railway station, holding Sammy on a makeshift leash. They sat on a bench on the platform and gazed at the hedgerows on the other side of the railway tracks.

"Don't forget to write, William," said Tom huskily, and with shaking hands he took his pipe out of his pocket and began to fill it.

"No, Mister Tom."

"If you changes yer mind about them paints, you jes' let on and I'll post them."

Willie shook his head. "They belongs at home, I mean at your place. Then they'll be there when I come back. I will come back," he added earnestly, touching Tom's hand. "I will, won't I?"

"You might feel different when yer home. I s'pect yer mother's missed you. Probably why she didn't write much—and William?"

"Yeh."

"Don't expect too much too soon. You ent seen each other for over six months, so things might be a little awkward like, for a while."

Willie nodded.

A cloud of smoke drifted upwards from a clump of trees in the distance. They watched it getting nearer and heard the sound of the approaching train growing louder. They stood up and Mister Tom picked Sammy up in his arms.

"Now you takes care of yerself, boy. You keeps up that ole drawrin'. You've a fine gift. If you runs out of pencils, you lets me know."

Willie nodded and his eyes became misty. He blinked. Tears fell down his cheeks. He gave a sniff and brushed them quickly away.

"Ta," he said.

Tom swallowed a lump in his throat.

"I'll miss you," said Willie.

Tom nodded. "Me too."

They watched the train drawing into the station. A crowd of soldiers and sailors were hanging out of the windows. Tom opened a door. One of the soldiers, a young lad of eighteen, caught sight of the anxious look in Tom's eyes, and he helped Willie on board.

"Dinna you fret, sir," he said. "We'll find 'im a seat all right."

Tom nodded his thanks and clasped Willie's shoulder as he hung dejectedly out of the door window. The whistle blew. They choked out their good-byes, waving to each other till the train and platform were out of each other's sight.

"Here you are," said the young soldier.

He had persuaded another soldier to let Willie squeeze into a place by the window.

"Will that do ye, lad?"

Willie nodded, relieved that he could stare out the window. He didn't want anyone to see his face. He placed his rucksack on his knees and hung on to it grimly.

At first the soldier left him alone, but later decided to try and cheer him up.

"What's yer name then?"

"William Beech."

"Where are ye goin'?"

"London."

"Ah thought you bairns were bein' moved oot," he said. "You miss home then, do ye?"

He shrugged.

"That old man yer granda?"

"No," Willie answered, looking up. "He's Mister Tom."

"Is he now?"

Willie's lips quivered.

The soldier paused, sensing that this was not the best subject to talk to the boy about.

"Who are ye stayin' with in London then?"

"Me mum."

"Och, ye'll be glad ta see her then. Your dad called up then, is he?"

"I ent got no dad."

"Sorry about that." He paused again. "Tell me about yer ma. What's she like?"

Willie was puzzled. What was she like? At the moment she was just a dim memory. She had dark hair. He remembered that much.

"She's got dark hair and"—he thought again—"she's medium size."

"Eyes?"

"Beg pardon."

"Eyes. What color eyes has she?"

Willie didn't ever remember clearly looking at her eyes, but he couldn't tell him that. He must think of something to say.

"Mixed, are they?"

He nodded.

"Does she sing a lot?"

Willie shook his head. The thought of his mother singing except in church was too shocking to contemplate. They looked at each other silently for a moment.

"What's in them bags then?"

"Clothes and presents, books."

"You like readin' then?"

Willie nodded.

"Ah've not got the patience meself."

"And drawrin'."

"What?" said the soldier.

"I draw, like."

"Oh," the soldier said, and he saw by the sudden brightness in Willie's eyes and his smile that this would be a good subject to talk about.

"You have any on you then?"

"Yeh."

"Ah'd like to see them if, that is, you're willin'."

Willie nodded shyly and opened his rucksack. He pulled out one of three sketch pads from the back and handed it to him. The soldier opened it.

"Och," he cried in surprise, "ye can really draw. Och, these are guid, these are really guid. Yer mother must be terrible proud of ye," he added, handing the pad back to him.

"She ent seen them yet."

"Well, when she does, she will be."

"D'you think so?"

"I know so."

Willie eased the sketch pad back into his rucksack. He caught sight of the acting book that Zach had given him and the jawbreakers that George had produced suddenly when he had said good-bye. He didn't want to look at them now. He flicked over the top of the rucksack and did the straps up. Would his mother be proud of him? he wondered. He began to fantasize around her, only her face was very vague. She became a mixture of Mrs. Fletcher and Mrs. Hartridge. He imagined her waiting on the platform for him. He would wave out the window and she would wave back smiling and laughing, and when he stepped out of the train he would run up to her and she to him and they would embrace. He stopped. He remembered that she was supposed to be ill. Perhaps she would be too ill to fetch him. She might even be dying and, instead of her, there would be a warden or a vicar to meet him and he would be taken to her bedside and she would touch him gently and say how much she loved him and how proud she was of him. He leaned back and closed his eyes. He felt tired. The strain of all the good-byes had exhausted him. He wondered what Zach was doing. He had written the first two verses of another epic poem specially for him. He had it in his pocket. Zach had said that he'd finish it and send it to him in the post or by pigeon.

The train chugged and crawled towards London and Willie soon fell into a sleep that was filled with a multitude of strange dreams. He felt someone shaking him to consciousness. "Hey, sleepyhead. Wake up! Wake up, lad! This is London. We're in London. Wake up!" He opened his eyes expecting to see the light from his bedroom window and Mister Tom looking through the trapdoor, but he saw only the young Scots boy leaning over him against a vague background of khaki and shouting. He swung the rucksack over his shoulder and lifted the carrier bag. His legs felt wobbly and his clothes smelled of tobacco. As he stepped outside, the cold night air hit him sharply. He buttoned up his overcoat, pulled his balaclava up over his head and put on his gloves. He looked around the platform, which was swarming with soldiers, but there was no sign of his mother anywhere.

A large sergeant stopped and looked down at him.

"Run away, has you?" he boomed in a bone-rattling voice. "You'd best see the ticket man, my lad."

"I ent run away, sir," he blurted out.

"You tell that to the ticket man."

The ticket man was a middle-aged man with a droopy mustache. He took one look at Willie and gave a weary sigh.

"Another one, eh? Don't you lads know it's safer in the country," and he tweaked Willie's ear through the balaclava. "I s'pose you've no ticket. Now let's take down yer address."

Willie pulled a ticket out of his pocket and showed it to him.

"Oh," he said, "oh."

"I'm visitin' me mum, like. She's ill."

"Ah," He said, "Ah, I see! Well. And where is she then? Is she pickin' you up or a warden pickin' you up or what?"

"I dunno."

The ticket man hummed significantly and looked at the sergeant. "I think I can handle this all right, sir. Thanks for your help."

The sergeant touched his beret and disappeared among the soldiers.

"I think we'd best find a warden, my boy."

Willie looked frantically round the station.

"Wait. There she is," he said, pointing to a thin gaunt woman, standing next to a pile of sandbags. He waved and yelled out to her but she started vacantly around neither seeing or hearing him.

"She don't seem to know you, do she? I think you'd best wait here for a while."

"I'll talk to her," Willie said.

"Oh no, you don't," said the ticket man, grabbing his arm, and then he changed his mind. "Oh, go on with you."

Willie ran over to her. "Mum!" he cried. "Mum!"

"Go away," she said sternly. "You won't get no money from me."

"Mum" he repeated, "it's me."

She glanced down and was about to tell him to clear off when she recognized him. Yes. It was Willie, but he had altered so much. She had been looking for a thin little boy dressed in gray. Here stood an upright, well-fleshed boy in sturdy ankle boots, thick woolen socks, a green rolled-top jersey and a navy-blue coat and balaclava. His hair stuck out in a shiny mass above his forehead and his cheeks were round and pink. It was a great shock to her.

"I'm awfully pleased to see you, Mum. I've such a lot to tell you and there's me pictures, like."

She was startled at his peculiar mixture of accents. She had expected him to be more subservient, but even his voice sounded louder.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I'm not very well, you see, and I'm a bit tired. I wasn't expectin' such a change in you." Willie was puzzled. He thought that it was his mother who had changed. He had learned new things, that was true, but he was still him.

He studied her face. She was very pale, almost yellow in color, and her lips were so blue that it seemed as if every ounce of blood had been drained from them. The lines by her thin mouth curved downwards. He glanced at her body. She was wearing a long black coat, fawn

stockings and smart lace-up heeled shoes. A small shopping bag was now leaning against her leg. He touched her arm gently. "I'll carry that for you, Mum," he said, picking it up. She spun round and gave his hand a sharp slap. "I'll tell you what I wants when I wants, and you know I don't approve of touching."

"Sorry," he muttered.

They stood silently and awkwardly as the large noisy station roared around them. Willie felt his heart sinking, and the spark of hope that he had held was fast dissolving. He remembered how kind and jolly Mrs. Fletcher was. He stopped. Mister Tom had said that they would feel awkward at first and that it would take time to get used to each other.

Mrs. Beech, meanwhile, surveyed her small son, her mind racing. She'd be lenient with him for the moment. After all, it was his first evening back and he had a lot to learn before accepting his manly responsibilities.

"Let's go for a cup of tea," she said at last. "You can take my bag."

"Thanks, Mum." And he smiled. She stepped sharply backwards, horrified. She couldn't remember ever having seen him smile before. She had hoped that he had remained a serious child. The smile frightened her. It threatened her authority. She swallowed her feelings and stepped forward again, handing him her bag. Everything was going to be fine, thought Willie. He followed her down a tiny back alley to a small cafe. They sat near the door.

"You look more filled out," said his mother. "Fed you well, did he, that Mr. Oakley?"

Willie sipped his tea. It wasn't as good as Mister Tom's, but it was hot and that was what mattered. "Yes, he did."

She pointed to his rucksack on the floor. "Where'd you get that from?"

"Mister Tom."

"Oh, and who's he?"

"Mr. Oakley. He gave it me to carry the presents."

One of her hands was outstretched across the table. He went to touch it but quickly changed his mind.

"There's a present for you too."

"I don't need charity, thank you," she said, pursing her lips. "You know that."

"It ent charity. It's for you gettin' well. Mrs. Thatcher made you some bed socks. Pink they are. Real soft. And Lucy's mum and dad put in eggs and butter."

"Butter?"

"Yeh. And Mrs. Fletcher made a fruit cake. She ses she knows you might not feel like eatin' it now but it'll keep for when you do." He was talking an awful lot, she thought. She'd never seen him like this before. Too cheeky by far. She'd soon discipline it out of him.

"And Aunt Nance, Mrs. Little, has sent a bottle of tonic wine."

Mrs. Beech turned puce. "Wine!" she said angrily. She checked herself and lowered her voice.

"Wine!" she repeated. "Haven't I told you about the evils of drink? Have you been drinkin' then? Who is this debauched woman?"

"It ent like what you buy in a pub, Mum. I asked. She ses it's got iron in it. It'll help you git your strength back. Mr. Little's a real doctor, Mum, and she's his wife."

"What kind of doctor?" she asked suspiciously.

He shrugged.

"One who helps people git better. I was scared of him at first but I ent now."

"Then he can't be a real doctor."

"He is, Mum."

Mrs. Beech was stunned. Her son had answered her back. He had actually disagreed with her.

"Are you arguing with me?"

"No, Mum, I wuz jes' . . ."

"Stop puttin' on that way of talking."

"What way, Mum?"

"And wipe that innocent look off yer face."

"I don't understand . . ." he started.

"You haven't changed, have you? I thought that man would frighten some goodness into you, but it seems he hasn't."

She suddenly grew anxious and a cold panic flooded her limbs.

"He was a church man, wasn't he?"

"Yes, Mum. He took care of it, and the graveyard. I told you in my letters."

"Oh, yes. Your letters. Now Willie, I thought you'd grown out of lying."

"But I ent lyin'!"

"Stop talking like that."

He felt bewildered. Like what? he thought.

"That writing was not yours. I know that. That's why I didn't bother to answer."

"But I learned at the school and Mister Tom and Miss Thorne helped me."

"My, you do seem to have taken up a lot of people's time. They must be glad to see the back of you."

"No, Mum, they ent. They . . ." He hesitated. "They . . ."

"They what?"

"They like me." It felt so good to say that.

"That's show, Willie. You're an evacuee and they were just being polite."

"No, Mum!"

"You are committing the sin of pride, Willie, and you know what happens to people who commit the sin of pride."

Willie was growing more and more confused. It was as if he was drifting into some bad dream. Mrs. Beech tapped the table gently.

"That's enough for now, Willie. We don't want to quarrel on our first night, do we?"

He shook his head. Willie? That was the other thing that felt strange to him. Nobody had called him that for six months. "Will" felt comfortable and his full name, William, sounded fine, although he had always felt like a Willie inside. Suddenly, now, when his mother referred to him as Willie it was as though she was talking to someone else. He felt like two people. He knew she wouldn't accept the Will side of him, only the Willie, and he didn't feel real when she called him that. She leaned towards him.

"There's something I've been meaning to tell you, Willie," and she forced a smile which, for some reason, alarmed him, seeing the shape of it under those dead, colorless eyes.

"It's a little surprise, only," she added, "we have to creep into the house. No one must see you."

It's—" She hesitated. "It's like a game," and she immediately felt relieved at having thought of the idea.

"No one must see me?"

"No."

"Why?"

She frowned and then put on the smile again. "You'll see. It's a surprise. It'll be spoiled if I tell you."

He nodded. He didn't really feel sick in his stomach. He was just imagining it, wasn't he? It was her that was ill, not him.

"And then you can show me your cake and presents."

"Yeh," he said, visibly brightening. "I can show you me pictures."

She waved him to stop. She didn't want him talking again.

"Yes, of course, but right now I've got a headache. It can wait, can't it?"

They left the cafe and caught a bus. The windows of the bus were covered with what looked like chicken netting.

"Why is that there?" he asked.

"It's rude to ask questions and it's rude to point. Behave yourself," his mother whispered.

"Missed London tahn, did you, luv?" said the bus conductress as she took their fares. It was the first woman Willie had ever seen working on a bus.

"Borin' in the country, so I hear. All of them cows. Still you know it is safer there," and she winked at his mother. "You miss them, though, don't you, luv."

She nodded, put her arm stiffly round Willie's shoulder and switched on the smile.

"Yes, and he's all I've got."

"Don't tell me. I've five of me own. I've given up sendin' them off. It don't seem worth it, do it really? Nothin' much happenin'. Hardly seems as if there's a war on at all, do it?"

"No," replied his mother politely.

Willie shivered at the iciness of his mother's rigid body. Having her arm round him made him feel nauseous. His own mother made him feel ill. Perhaps he really was wicked after all.

The bus crawled along slowly in the blackout until at last they reached Deptford. They stepped off and the conductress yelled "Good night" to them. Mrs. Beech led Willie round the back of their street. She told him to hide in an alleyway and watch their front door. As soon as she had opened it and coughed, he was to run in. It was a strange game, thought Willie. He slid his hand into his shorts pocket and felt Zach's poem. It helped him feel less unreal. He had not been standing long when he heard the cough. Picking up the rucksack and bags, he dragged them across the pavement. His mother whispered angrily to him to hurry up. She was frightened. She didn't want anyone in the street to know that he was back. He stumbled into the front room, which was still in darkness. There was a strong dank smell coming from somewhere. It was as if an animal had opened its bowels or peed somewhere.

"Is it a dog?" he asked.

"Is what a dog?"

"The surprise."

"What surprise? Oh that. No, it's not a dog."

She turned the light on. The room was darker than Willie had remembered. He stared up at the gray walls. There were two prayer books on the mantelpiece, and one on the small sideboard, still in the same position. In addition to the newspaper over the windows, it was also crisscrossed with brown tape.

"What's that for?" he asked.

"What have I said about asking questions!" She shouted, slamming her hand angrily on the table.

"Don't," said Willie, startled.

"Are you telling me not to . . ."

"No," interrupted Willie. "I meant, don't ask questions. That's what you say. You say I mustn't

ask questions."

"And don't interrupt me when I'm speakin'."

They stood, yet again, another awkward silence between them.

Willie turned away from her and then he saw it. A wooden box on a chair in the corner. He was about to ask what it was but changed his mind, walked over to it and looked inside.

"That's the surprise," she said.

He put his hand inside.

"A baby," he whispered. "But why?" He stopped and turned. "It's got tape on its mouth."

"I know that. I didn't want her to make a noise while I was out. It's a secret, you see."

"Is it?" he hesitated. "Is it yours?"

"Ours."

"A present?"

"Yes."

"Who from?"

"Jesus."

He glanced down at the baby. She was very smelly. She opened her eyes and began to cry.

"I'll pick her up," he said, leaning towards her.

"Don't you dare."

"But she's cryin'."

"She's just trying to get attention. She must learn a little discipline."

"But, but," he stammered, "she's only a baby."

"Sit down!" she yelled. "Immediately."

Willie sat at the table.

"Has she a name?"

She brought her fist down hard on the table.

"No! And that's enough questions from you or you'll feel the belt round you."

Willie flushed. The belt! It was still at Mister Tom's. He'd keep his mouth shut. Maybe she'd forget.

"Now, let's see what you've got in those bags. And take that coat off."

He hung it on the back of the chair, stuffing his balaclava and gloves into the pockets. He emptied the carrier bag first. He took out his old sneakers with the tops cut off.

"They got too small," he explained and placed his thin gray jersey, shorts, cap, mackintosh and Bible on the table beside them.

"I see you've still got your Bible," she said. "You've been keeping up with it, I hope, and learning it."

"Yes, Mum."

She leaned back in her chair.

"Recite Exodus, chapter one, verses one to six."

Willie stared at her blankly.

"I don't learn them by rote, Mum. I learns the stories like. I can tell you lots of stories. Old and New Testament."

"I'm not interested in stories. You learned by rote before you left here."

"That's because I listened to the others say it in Sundee School," he explained. "We didn't . . ."

"Undo that other bag."

He unfastened the straps of the rucksack and slowly began to pull everything out. It felt as though he was stripping naked in front of her. All the things that were precious and important to him were now being placed under her scrutiny. She sat ashen faced and watched him unpack. When he had finished she spoke in a quiet and controlled manner.

"Now I'll ask the questions and you'll give me the answers and no back chat. Where did you get them clothes and boots you're wearin'?"

"Mr. Oakley and Mrs. Fletcher."

"You steal them?"

"No. They were presents."

"You begged."

"No, I never."

"Don't argue. I said you begged."

He took hold of the eggs, fruitcake, wine and bedsocks and slid them across to her.

"Those are your presents," he said.

"You begged those too, I suppose."

"No. I've got a present of me own for you," he added. It seemed spoiled now. His surprise. It had been Mister Tom's idea. He picked up two pieces of cardboard that were strung neatly together and untied them. Inside was a drawing. It was of the graveyard and the church with fields and trees in the background. He passed it to her.

"It's where I lived."

She looked at it. "You steal this?"

"No."

Now she would be pleased with him, he thought.

"No. I drew it meself."

She looked at him coldly. "Don't lie to me."

"I'm not. I did it meself. Look!" And he grabbed a sketchpad that was full of drawings.

"These are mine, too," he said, flicking over the first page.

"I haven't time to look at pictures, Willie."

"But I did them meself!" he cried. "Please look at them."

"Willie. You have got a lot to learn. I shall either burn these or give them to charity. I only hope that no one ever finds out what you've done." Willie stared at her in dismay.

"I didn't steal them, honest, Mum. I did them. I can show you."

"That's enough!" she said, banging her fist on the table again.

The situation was worse than she had ever imagined. It would take a lot of hard work to silence him into obedience.

"And these?" she asked, indicating the books and candy, colored pencils and clothes.

"Presents," he mumbled.

"More presents, Willie? Do you expect me to believe that? Do you expect me to believe that

strangers would give you presents?"

"They ent strangers, Mum. They're friends."

"Friends! I'd like to know who these so-called friends are."

"George and Zach and the twins and . . ."

"Are they churchgoers?"

"Oh yes. George is in the choir. So am I." His face fell. "Was. But Ginnie and Carrie . . ."

"Girls?"

"Yes. The twins are girls. Carrie's working for . . ."

"You play with girls. After all I've said about that, and you mix with girls."

"But they're fine and they goes to church. They all does, all except Zach."

"Jack? Who's he?"

"Zach," he said. "Short for ... He bit his lip. Some instinct told him that he was approaching dangerous ground. His ears buzzed and his mother's voice began to sound distant.

"Why doesn't he go to church?" he heard her say.

He tried to evade the question.

"He believes in God, Mum, and he knows his Bible real good."

"Why doesn't he go to church?"

"They ent got one of his sort in the village, see, and anyway"—he faltered for a second—"he thinks that there's more God in the fields and sky and in loving people than in churches and synagogues."

"In what?" she asked.

"In fields and"—he hesitated—"and . . . and ... the sky."

"No. You said than in churches or what? What did you say?"

"Synagogues," said Willie. "That's what they call their churches."

"Who?"

"Jews. Zach's Jewish."

His mother let out a frightened scream.

"You've been poisoned by the devil! Don't you know that?" And she rose and hit him savagely across the face. He put up his hands to defend himself, which only increased her anger. He reeled backwards in the chair and crashed onto the floor.

"But," he stammered, "Zach ses Jesus was a Jew."

"You blasphemer!" she screamed. "You blasphemer!"

Something heavy hit him across the head and he sank into a cold darkness. He could still hear her screaming and he knew that she was hitting him, but he felt numb and separated from himself. He had become two people and one of his selves was hovering above him watching what was happening to his body. He woke up with a jerk, shivering with the cold. He began to stretch his cramped legs but they hurt. Opening his eyes, he looked around in the darkness. He knew immediately where he was. He had been locked under the stairs. He peered through the crack at the side of the small door. It was pitch black. His mother must have gone to bed. He shivered. His boots were gone, so were his jersey and shorts. He tugged at his waist and winced as he contacted a bruise. His undershirt had been sewn to his underpants. He took hold of the thin piece of material that lay under his body and wrapped it round himself. He could smell blood. He touched his head and discovered several painful lumps. His legs were sore and covered with something wet and congealed.

The night before, he had been lying in his first and only bed, in his first and only room. He was glad that he had left his paints and brushes there. Mister Tom would take care of them. Mister Tom! He had given him some stamped, addressed envelopes so that he could send him letters. He had also sewn two half-crowns into his overcoat. Would they still be there? Or would his mother sell the coat together with his clothes? He thought of the baby with the tape over its mouth. Maybe if she did sell them it would help the baby. He remembered the books and Zach's poem. She would certainly burn that, since it had Zach's name on it. He felt as though he was a different person lying there in the dark. He was no longer Willie. It was as if he had said good-bye to an old part of himself. Neither was he two separate people. He was Will inside and out.

For an instant he wished he had never gone to Little Weirwold. Then he would have thought his mum was kind and loving. He wouldn't have known any different. A wave of despair swept through him and he cursed his new awareness. He hadn't been used to this pain for a long time. He had softened.

"Mister Tom," he whispered in the darkness. "Mister Tom. I want you, Mister Tom," and he gave a quiet sob. His ankle hurt. He must have twisted it when he fell. He placed his hand round it. It was swollen and painful to touch. He let go of it and curled himself tightly into a frozen ball, praying that soon he would fall asleep.