

Chapter 9 - Birthday Boy

Willie leaped out of bed. It was the beginning of his sixth day in Little Weirwold. He pulled back the blankets, peeled back the cotton and rubber sheets and struggled down the ladder with them in his arms. Sammy was yapping and jumping up and down, waiting for him at the bottom.

"Mornin'," said Tom, appearing at the back door. "Happy birthday!" He expected Willie to ask if there had been any post, but there was no response. Willie dressed and helped Tom wash his sheets and pyjama trousers. They had decided, the previous evening after "Cain and Abel" and "How the Camel Got His Hump," that every day Willie would get up a little earlier than usual to practice writing and reading before leaving for school. When he had finished his chores, he sat down at the table and copied out "I am William Beech" over and over again until Tom, after much effort, finally persuaded him to go for a run and exercise Sammy. He had only just disappeared down the graveyard path and out of sight when the postman arrived at the back gate.

"A birthdee boy, is it?" said young Matthew Parfitt.

"Anything from London?" asked Tom.

Matthew shook his head. "'Fraid not. I got parcels though, and cards and this." It was a basket with fresh eggs, a newly baked loaf of bread, a pat of butter and some rashers of bacon inside.

"Tis a birthdee breakfast from the Padfields."

Tom took the cards and parcels, together with the basket, indoors. It was a shame that there was nothing from the boy's mother, but then it was only Thursday and perhaps since war had been declared the post was being delayed. He hurried into the front room. Willie returned flushed and breathless, followed by Sammy. He flung open the door and was about to say something when he caught sight of the table. On top of a red-and-white-checkered tablecloth were two of the best plates, cups and saucers.

In the center stood a jam jar with flowers in it, and surrounding Willie's place were parcels and envelopes.

"Happy birthdee," said Tom.

"Are they fer me?" he asked in astonishment.

" 'Tis where you usually sit, ent it? Go on, open them. I'll read out who they're from."

Willie picked up a soft brown-paper package and with trembling fingers slowly untied the string. Inside lay a green woolen balaclava helmet, a green sleeveless pullover and a pair of navy-blue corduroy shorts.

"Like to try them on?" said Tom.

Willie climbed out of his thin gray ones and stepped into the navy pair. Tom fixed the braces onto them. The shorts were a little loose round the waist.

"Soon fill out, though," said Tom. He put the pullover on over Willie's shirt. "Stand back and let's have a look at you."

The top was also a little long, but not so that it looked foolish. The shorts hung comfortably down to the base of his knees. He beamed.

"Feel good, do they?"

"Yeh. They got pockets too," he said, plunging his hands deep into them. He glanced at the

balaclava. "Wot's that?"

" 'Tis a balaclava. Keeps yer head and ears warm when the wind's nippy."

"Can I put it on now?"

"If you want."

"Who give it me?" he asked as he pulled it over his head.

"I did, but Mrs. Fletcher made it."

"Ta," said Willie in thanks, and he gratefully touched the soft wool of the pullover.

"Ent you goin' to open the rest?"

The next parcel contained some Chiliprufe underwear from May Thorne, whom Willie had never even met. Emilia, her sister, had given him an illustrated copy of *The Wind in the Willows*. Inside she had written, "To William on his ninth birthday. For Mr. Oakley to read to you until you can read it yourself."

Willie held it tightly to his chest. "Is it fer me to keep?"

Tom nodded. His own book. His very own book. The only other book he owned was the Bible, and that was old and dusty and had previously belonged to someone else. This book was new. The pages were crisp and white and were filled with the most marvelous pictures of animals wearing clothes. He placed the book carefully to one side and continued to open the other parcels. There was a white china eggcup with a gold rim from Connie and Walter Bird, a boy's comic annual with lots of pictures and games in it from Dr. and Nancy Little, and a card game from the vicar and his wife. In addition to the parcels there were seven birthday cards.

Willie was completely overcome. He sat down and stared at the gifts quite speechless. Tom, meanwhile, took a large parcel out of the cupboard and placed it in front of him.

"That's me present from me to you."

"But you give me this," he said, indicating his pullover, "and these shorts."

"This is something different like."

Willie unwrapped the parcel and gave a start. There, before his eyes, lay one large and one small sketch pad. Pages and pages of untouched paper. There were two paintbrushes and three pots of paint. One brush was a medium-sized one, the other was thin and delicate. The paints were red, yellow and blue.

"If you mix them," said Tom, "you can also git orange, purple, green and brown."

Wrapped up in tissue paper were a pencil, an eraser and a sharpener. Something was carved at the end of the pencil. It looked familiar. He traced it slowly with his finger. "William Beech."

He looked lovingly at the paints and brushes and swallowed a pain that had risen at the back of his throat.

"I take it you like them," murmured Tom. "I chose them meself, like."

He glanced out at the window at the oak tree, where Rachel and his son were buried. She used to hug and kiss him when he gave her presents. She loved painting, wild flowers and pretty lace, sweet jams, freshly brewed beer. Since her death he had never wanted to touch anything that might remind him of her. Trust a strange boy to soften him up. The odd thing was that, after he had entered the paint shop, he had felt as if a heavy wave of sadness had suddenly been lifted from out of him. Memories of her didn't seem as painful as he had imagined.

"Thanks, Mister Tom," said Willie huskily. "I'll look after them real proper."

After a birthday egg-and-bacon fry up, Willie ran off to school. Tom met him outside at lunchtime, as there were no classes for him in the afternoon. They visited the people who had given him presents so that he could thank them personally. It would save the agony of trying to write letters, and Tom thought it would be a good opportunity for Willie to meet them. As for Tom, everyone was very surprised to see him, for he rarely visited anyone. They strolled back home down the tunneled lane and called in at the Littles' cottage and the vicarage on the way. Willie had looked around for the twins and George, but they were nowhere to be seen. Even at the Littles' there was no sight of Zach. P'raps they've gone blackberryin', he thought and for a fleeting moment he wished that he was with them.

"How about stayin' outside this afternoon?" suggested Tom suddenly. "It's a fine day." His words were immediately contradicted by the appearance of a dark shadow across the sky. "Drat them blimmin' clouds," he muttered. Sam raced on ahead of them and waited at Dobbs's field. Willie couldn't wait to begin drawing. He'd start with the gnarled old oak tree in the graveyard. That would be fine. But before they had reached the back gate a few drops of rain had already plopped warn-ingly on their heads.

"I'll have to draw inside," said Willie to himself.

Tom grunted and then suddenly hit on an idea. "How about the church?" he exclaimed. "Of course, you could draw in there."

"Yeh," agreed Willie. "Yeh, I could."

He wrapped his mackintosh carefully round the small sketch pad and fled down the pathway to the church, arriving in the nick of time, for as he closed the heavy arched door behind him, a slow drizzle of rain swept across the village and surrounding fields.

He stood quite still for a moment. It felt odd to be alone in a church. He would have felt nervous if it hadn't been raining. The sound it made rustling outside in the trees made him feel comfortable and protected. He stared up at the windows and then caught sight of the pulpit. Slinging his mac over the back of a pew, he sat down and rested his feet on the one in front. He placed the sketch pad on his knees, flicked open the first page and began to draw. He didn't hear the rain suddenly stop. He was conscious only of the pulpit and his sketch pad. The rest of the church had ceased to exist for him. Neither did he hear Zach repeatedly calling him from outside, or the sound of his footsteps running up the tiny pathway to the back door.

The door opened slowly and Zach peeped in. He had never seen the interior of a church before. He slipped quietly in and glanced up at the windows and walls until his attention was drawn to a mop of fair hair sticking out from behind one of the back pews. He was just about to speak when he became aware that Willie was absorbed in some task. He took a few paces forward and leaned over Willie's small thin shoulders. His shadow fell across the pad. Willie jumped and turned round, hurriedly placing his arm over the picture, but it was too late. Zach had already seen it.

"I say," he gasped, full of admiration, "that's magnificent."

Willie shyly flapped the cover of the pad over the drawing.

"You must show the . . ." but he checked himself. "Didn't you hear me call you? I practically tore my throat out yelling for you."

Willie shook his head.

"Er . . ." said Zach thoughtfully, feeling a little stumped for words. "Er, Mr. Oakley says that

he'd like to er . . . converse with you. Er . . . talk about the time of day. That sort of thing. He's waiting for you now."

"Is he?" said Willie in surprise, and he picked up his mackintosh. "Is it still rainin'?"

"It finished an age ago," groaned Zach. "Hurry up or the ..." He stopped. "Er . . . or . . . it might start again."

They stepped outside. Pink clouds with white-tipped edges were gliding across the sky. Willie stopped and gazed up at them.

"Come on!" said Zach impatiently.

They walked down the path towards the front door. Blacks are up early, thought Willie, as he approached the cottage. He heard Sammy give an excited bark from the front room and then it immediately sounded muffled. Odd, thought Willie, but he shrugged it off and hung his mackintosh on his peg.

"Oh, do hurry," said Zach, who was standing waiting at the door. Willie looked at him.

"Wot you waitin' for?" he asked.

"You go in first," and with that Zach pushed open the door and immediately the whole room erupted into:

*"Happy birthday to you,
Happy birthday to you,
Happy birthday, dear William,
Happy birthday to you. "*

The twins, George, their mothers, Lucy and her mother and Tom were all standing in the front room singing, while Sammy sat in the middle and howled. A large banner with "Happy Birthday William" on it hung above and across the stove. On the table stood two jellies, one red and one green. There was a plate of chocolate wafers, a plate of potted meat and fishpaste sandwiches and a plate of fairy cakes. In the center of the table was an iced cake with nine lighted candles on it. So that was why the blacks were up, thought Willie.

Zach was the first to break the ensuing silence.

"Was it a surprise?" he burst out. "Was it a real surprise? Did you guess?"

It was obvious from Willie's astounded expression that he had had no idea at all. So this was what a birthday party was like. He had heard people at school talking about them.

He looked towards Tom for help.

"You gotta blow the candles out, boy."

"And if you manages to blow them all out at once you can make a wish," said Carrie.

Willie leaned over, took a deep breath and blew. Six candles went out the first time, the remaining three the second time. Everyone applauded.

"You can still have a wish," said Zach, "when you cut the cake, only you mustn't talk till after you've made it and it must remain a secret else it won't come true and . . ."

"We'll be 'ere till doomsday if you go bletherin' on," said Tom.

Willie held the knife above the cake, screwed up his face till he had thought of a wish and then plunged the knife into the icing. Mrs. Fletcher, Roe Padfield and Mrs. Thatcher sat on the low cupboard by the door, and Tom pulled the table out so that everyone could squeeze round on three chairs, a stool and the arm of the armchair. They had just sat down when Zach suddenly let out a cry.

"I nearly forgot. You haven't seen Will's picture."

Willie was still holding his sketch pad tightly under his arm. His face turned pink.

"You drawn a picture?" asked Tom.

"I'll say."

"You never stop saying," said Tom abruptly.

"Can we see it?" said Carrie.

"Please," added Ginnie.

Willie lifted the cover up shyly. George came and stood by his side and gave a low whistle.

"I told you, didn't I?" said Zach.

Tom leaned over their heads and peered down. It was a copy of the carved eagle on the pulpit. Its strong stubborn wings were swept back in a magnificent curve. Around it Willie had added rain so that it appeared to be flying against a great wind.

"That's a fine hand you have there, William," said Tom quietly. "A fine hand."

Willie blushed crimson.

"When I'm a famous author will you do my illustrations?" said Zach.

"I thought you was goin' to be a famous pilot this mornin'," retorted George.

"Well," said Zach, a bit put out, "I can write about my daredevil air exploits, can't I?"

They all settled down to eating while Willie, amidst all the chatter and laughter, found himself an object of praise. After tea there were more presents. A jigsaw puzzle from the twins, colored pencils from Zach, candy from George and some small cakes from Lucy.

"She baked them herself," said her mother.

Lucy gazed up at him. She was bursting with adoration. Willie didn't know how to treat her. The cakes were lovely, though.

"Ta," he said awkwardly, and she gave him one of her voluminous smiles.

After playing several party games, everyone finally returned home. Tom and Willie stood outside and watched them leaving. They turned back into the sitting room and closed the door.

"Mister Tom," said Willie, touching his sleeve. "It's the best . . . it's the best . . ." but he never finished. The excitement and food simply welled up inside him and he gave a short gasp and vomited all over the carpet.