

# **Goodnight Mister Tom – Michelle Magorian**

## **Chapter 2: Little Weirwold**

Willie gave a short start and opened his eyes. In a chair opposite sat Tom, who was drinking tea and looking at a book. Sammy, who had been watching the slight twitching movements that Willie had made in his sleep, now stood at his feet.

Tom looked up. 'You feelin' better?' he asked. 'You'se lookin' better.' He poured him out a mug of hot, sweet tea and handed it to him. 'Ere, you git that down you.'

Willie looked apprehensively at his feet which were now being sniffed by Sammy.

'E won't harm you,' said Tom. 'E's a spry ole thing, but he's as soft as butter, ent you, ole boy?' and he knelt down and ruffled his fur. Sammy snuggled up between his knees and licked his face. 'See,' said Tom, 'e's very friendly.' Willie tried to smile. 'You want to learn somethin' wot'll make him happy?' He nodded. 'Hold one of yer hands out, palm up, like that,' and he showed the inside of his rough brown hand. Willie copied him. 'That's so he knows you ent going to harm him, see. Now, hold it out towards him and tickle his chest.' Willie leaned nervously forward and touched Sammy's fur. 'That's the idea. You jest keep doin' that.'

Willie stroked him. His fur felt silky and soft. Sammy gave his fingers a long lick.

'E likes you, see. When he licks you that's his way of sayin' "I likes you and you makes me happy".'

Willie held his hand out stiffly while Sammy lathered it with his tongue.

'Why does he sniff?' he asked, as Sammy crawled under the blanket to get to his legs.

'E likes to know what everythin' smells like so's he knows who to say hello to and who not.'

'Stop it!' said Willie as Sammy put his nose into his crutch. 'Naughty dog.' Immediately Tom dragged him from under the blanket and he began barking and chasing his tail. 'You'm getting' over-excited, Sam. 'E needs a good romp in the fields,' and he looked at Willie, and I reckon you do an' all, he thought.

Willie pushed the blanket out to one side, wormed his way to the end of the armchair and slid onto the floor.

'Smells like rain,' said Tom, leaning out of the front window. 'You got gumboots?'

Willie shook his head. 'No, mister.'

'Best put yer mackintosh on, anyways.'

The three of them trooped out into the hallway. Willie stared at the ladder.

'That's your room up there. Sort of attic.'

'Mine?' He didn't understand. Did Mr Oakley mean he was going to have a room to himself? Tom handed him his mackintosh and nodded. Sammy leapt up excitedly.

'Hang on a minute, Sam. We'se jest goin'.'

Tom looked at Willie's mac on the way out and noticed how thin it was.

They walked down the pathway and out of the gate, Sammy leading, Tom striding after him and Willie running to keep up with them. It was late afternoon now. The sun hung in a fiery ball above the trees. A mild breeze shook the leaves and a few dark clouds scudded across the sky. Sammy ran backwards and forwards, barking ecstatically.

'That dog's half mad,' Tom said to Willie but found that he was talking to the air for Willie was several yards behind, still trying to keep up, his cheeks flushed with the effort.

'You're a quiet'un. Why didn't you tell me I was goin' too fast?' But Willie could not answer and only gasped incoherently.

Tom slowed down and Willie walked more easily beside him. He stared up at the gruff old man who was so kind to him. It was all very bewildering. He looked down at Tom's heavy brown ankle boots, his thick navy overcoat and the

green corduroy cap with the tufts of white hair sticking out at either side. A small empty haversack dangled over his shoulder.

'Mister,' he panted. 'Mister!' Tom looked down. 'Can I carry your bag, mister?'

Tom mumbled something to himself and handed it to him. Willie hung on to it tightly with both hands.

The narrow road sloped gently upwards. Willie could just make out, in all the speed of their walking, the wild hedgerows flashing in low green lines beside him. It felt very unreal, like a muddled dream. When they reached the top of the hill Willie saw a row of small thatched cottages standing on either side of the road ahead. He tugged at Tom's sleeve.

"Mister," he gasped, "they got straw roofs." "That's thatch," said Tom.

"Wot's . . ." But he bit his lip and kept silent.

Tom glanced down. "I got some pictures of them at home. We'll have a look at them tonight."

Across the road a plump, middle-aged woman with graying auburn hair was peering out of a window. She disappeared for an instant and opened her front door.

"'Ello, Tom," she said, looking with curiosity at Willie.

He grunted. "Evening, Mrs. Fletcher. How are the boys, then?"

"Boys are doin' nicely."

"William," said Tom, "go and keep an eye on Sam. I'll be with you in a minute."

Willie nodded shyly and went after Sammy. "Skinny ole scrap, ent he?"

said the woman.

Tom gave another grunt.

"I didn't believe it was true when I heard," she continued. "I ent got room meself, but Mrs. Butcher got two to contend with. Girls, mind you, but they're regular tearaways, and Mrs. Henley, she had three last week and they keep runnin' away. Homesick, like."

"How's the knittin' coming on?" said Tom, changing the subject.

"What you talkin' about?" she said, leaning back and looking at him. "Since when have you been interested in my knittin'?"

"Since now," he replied shortly. He pushed his hands into his pockets and scraped one of his boots against a piece of stone. "Busy, are you?" he asked.

"No more 'n usual."

"Could do with a thick jersey. Not fer me, mind," and he looked at Willie trundling on ahead.

"You ent gotta clothe 'em, you know. They shoulda brought that with them."

"Well, he haven't," said Tom gruffly. "Can you knit me a jersey or can you not, that's what I'm askin'?"

"If that's what you want."

"And," he continued, "you don't know where I can get some good stout boots, small-like, and I don't want no commentary, jes' want to know."

"I'll ask around."

He mumbled his thanks and strode on up the road.

Mrs. Fletcher stood quite motionless and stared after him, until she was sure he was out of earshot. "Madge," she cried, running into the next cottage, "Madge, you'll die when I tell you.  
. . ."

The road leading through the row of cottages extended into a long stretch of open country with lanes leading off it. Inside the last cottage at the corner there was a small shop.

"Won't be long," said Tom, and he took the haversack from Willie and left him and Sammy sitting on the stone steps. Willie stared in amazement at the fields, his thin woolen socks heaped around his ankles. As Tom came out he became conscious of them again and quickly pulled them up. Sammy sniffed at the food in the bag and Tom tapped him tenderly on the nose.

"If I start gettin' me stride up agin," he said to Willie, "you jes' call out."

It was a long, quiet road, the silence broken only by the whirring of a tractor in the distance. They turned to the right and walked down a tiny lane.

Willie's attention was drawn to a small brown bird in one of the hedgerows. Tom stopped and put his finger to his lips and they stood and watched it hopping in and out among the changing leaves.

"That's a hedge sparrow," he whispered. "See its beak? Very dainty." The bird looked up and flew away. "And shy."

They continued down the lane towards a farm. Sammy was already sitting waiting for them, his tail thumping the ground impatiently from side to side. They pushed open the long wooden gate where he sat. It squeaked and jingled on its hinges as they swung it behind them.

Tom led Willie round the back of a large, cream-colored stone house towards a wooden shed. A middle-aged man with corn-colored hair and the bluest eyes Willie had ever seen was sitting on a stool milking one of several cows. Willie gazed at the gentle way he fingered the teats and at the warm white liquid spurting down into a bucket underneath.

"Mister," he said, tugging at Tom's coat sleeve. "Mister, what's that?"

Tom was astounded. "Ent you never seen a cow?" But Willie didn't answer. He was too absorbed in watching the swollen udder decrease in size.

"I'll be wantin' extra milk from now on, Ivor," he said. Ivor nodded and glanced at Willie.

"One of them London lot?" he asked. Tom grunted. "You'd best take a jug with you. Roe's inside."

Tom tramped across the yard to the back of the house. He carried Sammy in his arms, as he had a habit of yapping at cows. Willie stayed to watch the milking.

A fresh-faced brunette woman in her thirties, wearing a flowery apron, opened the back door.

"Come in," she said. "You'll be wantin' extra milk."

"How d'you know?" said Tom.

"Lucy saw you comin' up the yard with him."

A chubby six-year-old with brown curly hair, earth smudged over two enormous pink cheeks, was standing at her side holding on to her skirt.

"Don't be so daft, girl," she said. "Go on, say hello to him. I got things to do."

She clomped down the steps and stood shyly beside Willie, twisting the hem of her dress in her hand till her knickers came into view.

"There ent much difference in size between them two," said Tom, observing them together. "I dunno what they do with little 'uns in that ole city." And he disappeared into the warmth of the kitchen.

After calling Willie several times and getting no response, he eventually gave up and tapped him on the shoulder.

" 'Ere, dreamer, you carry that," he said handing him a tin jug. "You can take a look if you've a mind."

Willie lifted the lid and peered in. Fresh milk. Lucy stared at him. She'd never seen a boy so thin and pale-looking. She still hadn't spoken and had only just, so she thought, heard his name.

" 'Bye, Dreema," she said suddenly, and turned and fled into the house.

"Where's that ole thing?" said Tom, looking round for Sammy. He caught sight of his black-and-white fur at the gate. He was sitting waiting for them with a bone in his mouth.

Willie looked at the front of the house. The woman called Roe was putting up some black material inside the front window.

"What's she doin'?" Willie asked.

"Puttin' her blackouts up, boy. We all got to do it from tonight."

Willie was about to ask why—but he knew that was rude, so he kept silent.

"It's so planes don't see where to bomb," continued Tom, as if he had read his thoughts. "Waste of time if you asks me. Reckon it'll all be over by Christmas, and anyways who'd want to bomb Li'l Weirwold. That's the name of this village," he added. "Little Weirwold." He looked up at the sky. It had suddenly become darker. "Best be movin'," he said, and set off at a jaunty pace back up the lane towards the main road. They had walked past the cottages and were halfway down the hill when the first drop of rain fell. As they neared the foot of the hill, the sky opened and a heavy torrent fell mercilessly down. It blinded Willie and trickled down inside the collar of his mackintosh. Tom buttoned his overcoat up to his neck and raised his collar. He looked down at the drenched figures of the boy and dog. Willie had to run to keep up with them. His sneakers were now caked with heavy clods of wet earth, and his jersey was already wet from his soaked mackintosh.

Willie and Tom ran up the pathway towards the cottage, through the graves and under the oak tree. They ran into the hall, Tom's boots clattering on the tiles. He shook the rain from his overcoat and cap and proceeded to undo his boots. Sammy stood on the mat shaking his fur by the open door. Willie struggled with his mackintosh. His fingers were mauve with the cold.

"You're soaked through," said Tom. He pointed to Willie's bespattered sneakers. "Take them ole canvas things off. Stay here while I put some newspapers down."

Willie pulled off the sneakers and stood in the dark hallway shivering helplessly, his teeth rattling inside his clamped jaw. After much shuffling from the living room Tom opened the door. He had laid newspaper in front of the range and was putting up blackouts at the windows. But for the glow of embers in the fire, there was almost total darkness. He lit a gas lamp that hung from the ceiling, and an oil lamp on the table.

"Stay on them newspapers. You too," he said to Sammy, who was sending out a constant spray of water with his tail.