

Goodnight Mister Tom - Chapter 22

Grieving

In the weeks that followed the news of Zach's death, Will survived each day in a zombielike daze. Outwardly he went on as normal, helping Tom, and catching up with schoolwork. 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 sank 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 who had lost parents and for the many who 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 continued 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, then 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 unpleasant aspects of high-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-dida 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 from the people in Little Weirwold. She was beginning to feel that she fitted into neither Little Weirwold nor the girls' high. She was grateful that there was so much schoolwork 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 ground itself 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 hoarfrost 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 with 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 stove 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 colorful 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 lest he break 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 center 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 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 center 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 with 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.