

## *Goodnight Mister Tom - Chapter 22*

### *Grieving (Continued)*

"Will!" cried Aunt Nance, opening the back door. She was speechless for a moment. "Come in! Come in!"

Will stepped into the kitchen.

"Mulled wine?" she began, and then stopped herself. Mulled wine was Zach's nickname for hot black-currant juice.

"Yeh. Please," answered Will, and he sat down and watched her making it.

"We've missed you coming round," she said, handing it to him and joining him at the table. She lit half a cigarette lovingly as if it was the last one left in Great Britain, took a deep drag and began coughing violently.

"I've left Zach's room as it was," she said, recovering.

Will nodded and blew into his drink.

"Dr. Little and myself, we didn't want to touch anything until you'd been, until you wanted us to. All right?"

Will looked up and smiled. "Yeh."

"Good," and she sat back, feeling relieved.

"Can I ride his bike?"

Mrs. Little wasn't quite sure if she had heard correctly. "What?" she queried. "What did you say?"

"Can I ride his bike?"

"Zach's?"

"Yes."

"If you want." She stared at him for a moment. "You'll probably have to lower the seat."

"Yeh. I know."

"I didn't know you could ride."

"I can't. Not yet. But I will."

"It's in the Anderson. It'll probably need oiling and pumping up."

"Has you got any oil?"

"Yes. And there's a pump attached to it."

She rose from the table and opened a door leading to a pantry. In a large box below the bottom shelf was a collection of tools and string. She bent over it, moving the bits and pieces from one side to another.

"Ah," she cried, waving a spanner in the air. "I'll lower the seat for you."

"No," said Will, rising to his feet. "I want to do it meself."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeh."

"I tell you what, you do the dirty work and I'll hold the bike steady for you." He was about to refuse but changed his mind.

"Rightio," he said and then blushed, for that was one of Zach's expressions.

They dragged the bicycle out of the shelter and wiped the moistness off with an old dry rag, oiled it and reset the back wheel, as it was leaning heavily against the frame. The chain, which was loose, hung impotently against the pedals. Will took hold of it and placed it firmly and gently back in place. One of the inner tubes had a hole in it. With the help of Aunt Nance and Zach's puncture kit, he patched it up. He wiped the mudguards and scraped the rust away from around the handlebars. It was a strange feeling working on the bicycle, like touching a part of Zach.

He wheeled it round the cottage and through the long, overgrown grass. He was just struggling with the gate when Mrs. Little came running after him, carrying a small canvas shoulder bag of Zach's.

"I've made you a few jelly sandwiches," she gasped breathlessly, her thin chest heaving, "and there's a bottle of ginger beer inside."

He gazed at the bag uncertainly. "Thanks," he said at last.

Taking the bag, he put it over his head so that it hung loosely and securely across his back.

Mrs. Little pulled at the gate to let him out and watched him wheel the bicycle down the lane.

As Will approached the cottages he could feel his ears burning. He turned left and avoided looking around lest anyone notice him. He was playing truant from school, a thing he had never done in his life. Unnoticed by him, Emilia Thorne was standing by the school window and she observed him, saying nothing.

Will continued until he was well out of sight of the cottages, and when he had found a reasonably smooth stretch of road he swung his leg over the saddle and sat still for a moment. He placed the toe of his boot on one of the pedals. Gritting his teeth and taking a deep breath, he pushed it down and wobbled forward. The bicycle curved and swooped into a nearby hedge. He picked himself up and climbed back onto the seat. Again the bicycle skidded over to one side, so that he grazed his knees on the rough road. Undaunted, he clambered back on again; and each time he swerved and fell, he only grew more determined.

In spite of the hoarfrost that covered the hedgerows and surrounding fields, learning to ride was hot work, and soon his overcoat was left dangling from the branch of a nearby tree.

At times he managed to keep the bicycle balanced for a few yards, only to swerve into another clump of brambles or icy nettles. He could hear his dad's words over and over again inside his head. "Takes yer time, everythin' 'as its own time." But whether it was because it was Zach's bicycle or because the colours were so intense, he felt frustrated and impatient. He wanted to learn now. When at last he managed to ride it for a reasonable distance, he rewarded himself with Aunt Nance's black-currant-jelly sandwiches and the ginger beer. Perspiration trickled down his face and into his shirt and jersey. Soon the crisp January air was freezing it into a cold clammy sweat. He hung the bag on a branch and pushed the bicycle forward. The break had been a good idea, for when he set off again it seemed easier, far less of a struggle.

Soon he began to grow confident. He put his coat back on, leaving it undone, and slung the bag over his head and shoulder. He understood now why Zach loved riding so much. There was a marvellous feeling of freedom once you'd got the hang of it.

As he rode, his coat flapping behind him, the crisp wind cooling his face, he suddenly felt that Zach was no longer beside him, he was inside him and very much alive. The numbness in his body had dissolved into exhilaration.

"Yippee. Callooh! Callay!" he yelled.

The bicycle shuddered over the small rough road, jangling his bones in such a way that he wanted to laugh.

"Wizzo," he cried, steering the bright machine with a new dexterity round a corner. He stopped abruptly. A steep hill had conquered his unused bicycle legs. He wheeled it up to the brow. It was wonderful to stand at the top with the bicycle leaning gently against his body. He looked down at the wide stretch of fields and woods and tiny icy streams. The sky was pale and cloudless. A small patch of sunlight was working its way through the woodland's dark branches. He breathed in deeply. "Zach isn't dead," he murmured. "Not really. Not the inside of Zach." And he gazed

happily down at the fields. "No one can take memories away, and I can talk to him whenever I want."

He watched the sun gradually sinking into the roots of the trees.

"Now, Zach," he said out loud. "What shall I do now?"

"I should turn slowly and leisurely back," he replied to himself, "and pop in to see Annie Hartridge."

"What a good idea," said Will.

"And oh, I say," continued the imaginary Zach. "Jolly well done. Learning to ride my bike." And Will patted himself on the back.

He turned the bicycle and cycled back down the hill, controlling the fast decline with his brakes. It was even more pleasurable to ride after his little sojourn on the hill. He was more relaxed, more at peace with himself.

He was winding his way round a corner when he caught sight of Annie Hartridge's cottage. He wheeled the bicycle to her front door and leaned it against the wall.

"I'll knock," said "Zach," and he took hold of the brass knocker and banged it vigorously against the door.

Annie opened it, holding a telegram in her hands. She was crying.

"Oh hello, Will," she said, half laughing. "Come in, do come in." She closed the door behind him. "I've just had the most wonderful news. Mr. Hartridge is alive. He's in a prisoner-of-war camp in Germany. We can write to each other and I can send him Red Cross parcels, food parcels. Oh Will!" she cried. "I'm so happy. I can't believe it. I want to write to him right now."

She looked at Will's grubby face and followed his body down to his feet.

"What have you been doing? You're covered with grazes and scratches."

"I've been learning to ride Zach's bike," he said absently. Annie was speechless for a moment.

"Did you manage to stay on it?" she said at last.

"Eventually," he answered, plunging his hands into his shorts pocket and leaning on one leg.

"Why, you . . ." but she stopped. She was about to say that he looked and sounded a little like Zach. He had an extrovert air about him that was unusual in Will.

During the weeks that followed the bicycle-riding incident everyone noticed a dramatic change in Will, especially Emilia Thorne. She had decided to do her own version of Peter Pan. She cast Will to play Peter Pan, but to her surprise he stood up in the hall and in front of everyone said, "I'd like to play Captain Hook. May I?"

Miss Thorne had been a little taken aback. Captain Hook was a comic, flamboyant role.

"Let's try you out," she said, after recovering her breath.

Will surprised her and everyone in rehearsals. Unbeknownst to the others, while working on his lines up in his room he would place a cushion in front of himself and say, "Zach, how do you think I should say this line?" or "How do you think Hook's feelin' in this bit, when the crocodile appears for the third time?"

Then he would sit on the cushion and not only answer his questions as Zach but even deliver the lines as him.

The play was a great success. Will had people laughing helplessly at his angry Hook outbursts of temper and his cowardly flights from the crocodile. It was so obvious that the audience loved Will that when several of the children pushed him forward to take a separate bow, the hall erupted into cheers.

Tom was terribly proud of him, but then he had been for a long time. He met him outside the tiny back door which led to the communal dressing room behind the stage, and they walked home chatting in animated tones all the way back to their graveyard cottage.

As Will lay back in his bed that night he felt a little sad, in spite of all the applause. He was sad that Zach hadn't been there to share it. He realized now that the Zach he had been talking to for the last weeks was a person created from his own imagination and a handful of memories. It was just that the Zach part of himself, the outgoing, cheeky part of himself, had been buried inside him, and it was his friendship with Zach that had brought those qualities to the surface.

He snuggled down deep into the blankets and was just about to fall asleep when he gave a sudden start.

I'm not half a person anymore, he thought. I'm a whole one. I can live without Zach even though I still miss him.

He turned over and listened to the wind howling through the graveyard. He was warm and happy. He sighed. It was good to be alive.