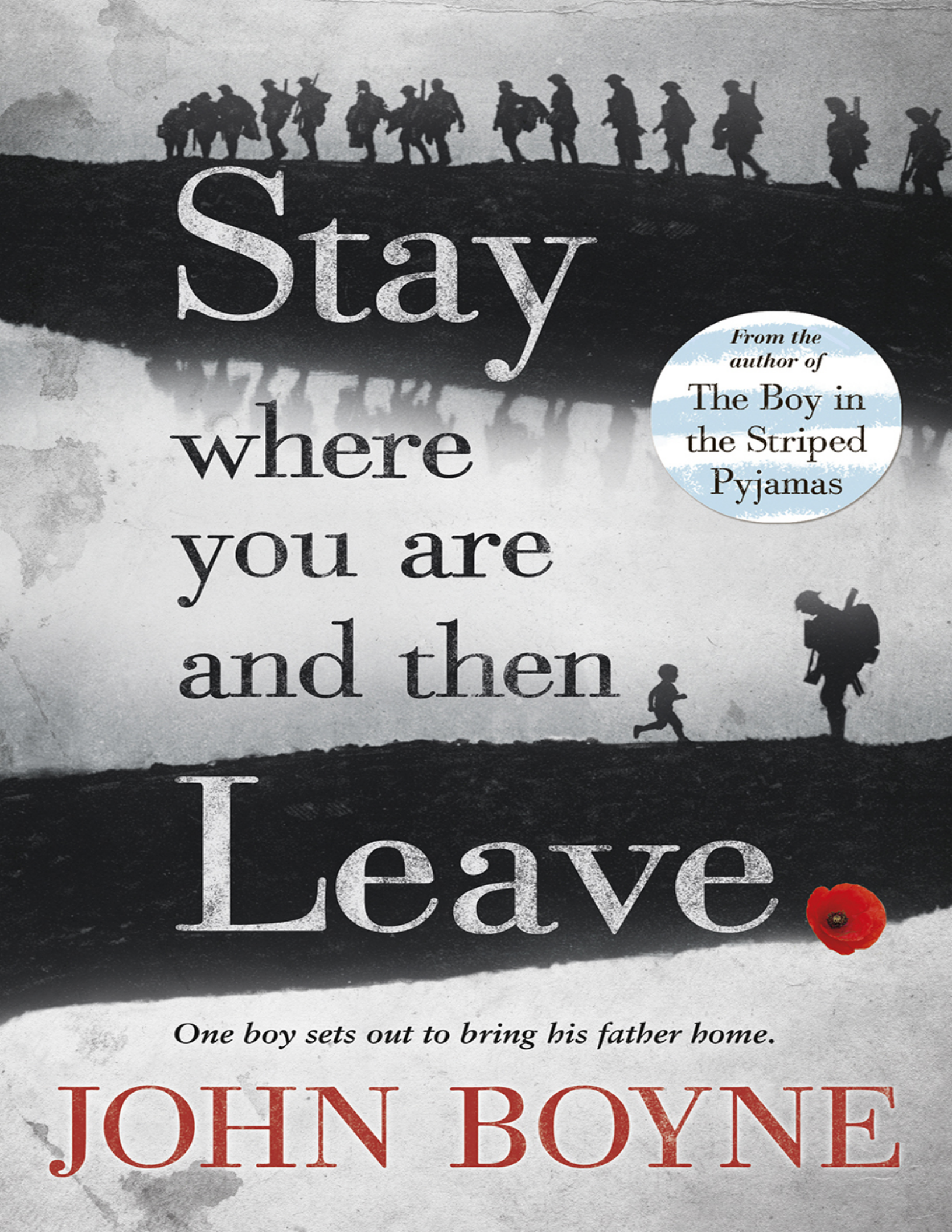
Stay
where
you are
and then
Leave
From the author of
The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas
One boy sets out to bring his father home.
JOHN BOYNE

Contents

About the Book

The day the First World War began, Alfie Summerfield's father promised he wouldn't go away to fight – but he broke that promise the very next morning. Four years on, his letters have stopped, and all Alfie knows is that he's far away on a special, secret mission.

Then, while shining shoes at King's Cross Station, Alfie unexpectedly sees his father's name on a stack of papers belonging to a military doctor. Bewildered and confused, Alfie realizes that he's a patient in a hospital close by – a hospital treating soldiers with an unusual condition. And he's determined to rescue his father from this strange, unnerving place . . .

A moving and uplifting story from the bestselling author of *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*.

Praise for John Boyne

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‘A small wonder of a book’ *Guardian*

‘Extraordinary’ *Irish Examiner*

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Noah Barleywater Runs Away

‘Destined to become something of a children’s classic’ *Mail on Sunday*

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JOHN BOYNE

STAY WHERE YOU ARE & THEN LEAVE

with chapter titles hand-lettered by

OLIVER JEFFERS

RHCP DIGITAL

For my parents

1

SEND ME AWAY WITH A SMILE

Every night, before he went to sleep, Alfie Summerfield tried to remember how life had been before the war began. And with every passing day, it became harder and harder to keep the memories clear in his head.

The fighting had started on 28 July 1914. Others might not have remembered that date so easily but Alfie would never forget it, for that was his birthday. He had turned five years old that day and his parents threw him a party to celebrate, but only a handful of people showed up: Granny Summerfield, who sat in the corner, weeping into her handkerchief and saying, ‘We’re finished, we’re all finished,’ over and over, until Alfie’s mum said that if she couldn’t get a hold of herself she would have to leave; Old Bill Hemperton, the Australian from next door, who was about a hundred years old and played a trick with his false teeth, sliding them in and out of his mouth using nothing but his tongue; Alfie’s best friend, Kalena Janáček, who lived three doors down at number six, and her father, who ran the sweet shop on the corner and had the shiniest shoes in London. Alfie invited most of his friends from Damley Road, but that morning, one by one, their mothers knocked on the Summerfields’ front door and said that little So-and-so wouldn’t be able to come.

‘It’s not a day for a party, is it?’ asked Mrs Smythe from number nine, the mother of Henry Smythe, who sat in the

seat in front of Alfie in school and made at least ten disgusting smells every day. ‘It’s best if you just cancel it, dear.’

‘I’m not cancelling anything,’ said Alfie’s mother, Margie, throwing up her hands in frustration after the fifth parent had come to call. ‘If anything, we should be doing our best to have a good time today. And what am I to do with all this grub if no one shows up?’

Alfie followed her into the kitchen and looked at the table, where corned-beef sandwiches, stewed tripe, pickled eggs, cold tongue and jellied eels were all laid out in a neat row, covered over with tea towels to keep them fresh.

‘I can eat it,’ said Alfie, who liked to be helpful.

‘Ha,’ said Margie. ‘I’m sure you can. You’re a bottomless pit, Alfie Summerfield. I don’t know where you put it all. Honest, I don’t.’

When Alfie’s dad, Georgie, came home from work at lunch time that day, he had a worried expression on his face. He didn’t go out to the back yard to wash up like he usually did, even though he smelled a bit like milk and a bit like a horse. Instead, he stood in the front parlour reading a newspaper before folding it in half, hiding it under one of the sofa cushions and coming into the kitchen.

‘All right, Margie,’ he said, pecking his wife on the cheek.

‘All right, Georgie.’

‘All right, Alfie,’ he said, tousling the boy’s hair.

‘All right, Dad.’

‘Happy birthday, son. What age are you now anyway, twenty-seven?’

‘I’m *five*,’ said Alfie, who couldn’t imagine what it would be like to be twenty-seven but felt very grown up to think that he was five at last.

‘Five. I see,’ said Georgie, scratching his chin. ‘Seems like you’ve been around here a lot longer than that.’

‘Out! Out! Out!’ shouted Margie, waving her hands to usher them back into the front parlour. Alfie’s mum always

said there was nothing that annoyed her more than having her two men under her feet when she was trying to cook. And so Georgie and Alfie did what they were told, playing a game of Snakes and Ladders at the table by the window as they waited for the party to begin.

'Dad,' said Alfie.

'Yes, son?'

'How was Mr Asquith today?'

'Much better.'

'Did the vet take a look at him?'

'He did, yes. Whatever was wrong with him seems to have worked its way out of his system.'

Mr Asquith was Georgie's horse. Or rather, he was the dairy's horse; the one who pulled Georgie's milk float every morning when he was delivering the milk. Alfie had named him the day he'd been assigned to Georgie a year before; he'd heard the name so often on the wireless that it seemed it could only belong to someone very important and so decided it was just right for a horse.

'Did you give him a pat for me, Dad?'

'I did, son,' said Georgie.

Alfie smiled. He loved Mr Asquith. He absolutely loved him.

'Dad,' said Alfie a moment later.

'Yes, son?'

'Can I come to work with you tomorrow?'

Georgie shook his head. 'Sorry, Alfie. You're still too young for the milk float. It's more dangerous than you realize.'

'But you said that I could when I was older.'

'And when you're older, you can.'

'But I'm older now,' said Alfie. 'I could help all our neighbours when they come to fill their milk jugs at the float.'

'It's more than my job's worth, Alfie.'

‘Well, I could keep Mr Asquith company while you filled them yourself.’

‘Sorry, son,’ said Georgie. ‘But you’re still not old enough.’

Alfie sighed. There was nothing in the world he wanted more than to ride the milk float with his dad and help deliver the milk every morning, feeding lumps of sugar to Mr Asquith between streets, even though it meant getting up in the middle of the night. The idea of being out in the streets and seeing the city when everyone else was still in bed sent a shiver down his spine. And being his dad’s right-hand man? What could be better? He’d asked whether he could do it at least a thousand times, but every time he asked, the answer was always the same: *Not yet, Alfie, you’re still too young*.

‘Do you remember when you were five?’ asked Alfie.

‘I do, son. That was the year my old man died. That was a rough year.’

‘How did he die?’

‘Down the mines.’

Alfie thought about it. He only knew one person who had died. Kalena’s mother, Mrs Janáček, who had passed away from tuberculosis. Alfie could spell that word. *T-u-b-e-r-c-u-l-o-s-i-s*.

‘What happened then?’ he asked.

‘When?’

‘When your dad died.’

Georgie thought about it for a moment and shrugged his shoulders. ‘Well, we moved to London, didn’t we?’ he said. ‘Your Granny Summerfield said there was nothing in Newcastle for us any more. She said if we came here we could make a fresh start. She said I was the man of the house now.’ He threw a five and a six, landed on blue 37 and slid down a snake all the way to white 19. ‘Just my luck,’ he said.

‘You’ll be able to stay up late tonight, won’t you?’ Alfie asked, and his dad nodded.

‘Just for you, I will,’ he said. ‘Since it’s your birthday, I’ll stay up till nine. How does that sound?’

Alfie smiled; Georgie never went to bed any later than seven o’clock at night because of his early starts. ‘I’m no good without my beauty sleep,’ he always said, which made Margie laugh, and then he would turn to Alfie and say, ‘Your mum only agreed to marry me on account of my good looks. But if I don’t get a decent night’s sleep I get dark bags under my eyes and my face grows white as a ghost and she’ll run off with the postman.’

‘I ran off with a milkman, and much good it did me,’ Margie always said in reply, but she didn’t mean it, because then they’d look at each other and smile, and sometimes she would yawn and say that she fancied an early night too, and up they’d go to bed, which meant Alfie had to go to bed too and this proved one thing to him: that yawning was contagious.

Despite the disappointing turn-out for his birthday party, Alfie tried not to mind too much. He knew that something was going on out there in the real world, something that all the adults were talking about, but it seemed boring and he wasn’t really interested anyway. There’d been talk about it for months; the grown-ups were forever saying that something big was just round the corner, something that was going to affect them all. Sometimes Georgie would tell Margie that it was going to start any day now and they’d have to be ready for it, and sometimes, when she got upset, he said that she had nothing to worry about, that everything would turn out tickety-boo in the end, and that Europe was far too civilized to start a scrap that no one could possibly hope to win.

When the party started, everyone tried to be cheerful and pretend that it was a day just like any other. They played Hot Potato, where everyone sat in a circle and passed a hot

potato to the next person and the first to drop it was out. (Kalena won that game.) Old Bill Hemperton set up a game of Penny Pitch in the front parlour, and Alfie came away three farthings the richer. Granny Summerfield handed everyone a clothes peg and placed an empty milk bottle on the floor. Whoever could drop the peg into the bottle from the highest was the winner. (Margie was twice as good as everyone else at this.) But soon the adults stopped talking to the children and huddled together in corners with glum expressions on their faces while Alfie and Kalena listened in to their conversations and tried to understand what they were talking about.

'You're better off signing up now before they call you,' Old Bill Hemperton said. 'It'll go easier on you in the end, you mark my words.'

'Be quiet, you,' snapped Granny Summerfield, who lived in the house opposite Old Bill at number eleven and had never got along with him because he played his gramophone every morning with the windows open. She was a short, round woman who always wore a hairnet and kept her sleeves rolled up as if she was just about to go to work. 'Georgie's not signing up for anything.'

'Might not have a choice, Mum,' said Georgie, shaking his head.

'Shush – not in front of Alfie,' said Margie, tugging him on his arm.

'I'm just saying that this thing could run and run for years. I might have a better chance if I volunteer.'

'No, it'll all be over by Christmas,' said Mr Janáček, whose black leather shoes were so shiny that almost everyone had remarked upon them.

'That's what everyone is saying.'

'Shush – not in front of Alfie,' said Margie again, raising her voice now.

'We're finished, we're all finished!' cried Granny Summerfield, taking her enormous handkerchief from her

pocket and blowing her nose so loudly into it that Alfie burst out laughing. Margie didn't find it so funny though; she started to cry and ran out of the room, and Georgie ran after her.

More than four years had passed since that day, but Alfie still thought about it all the time. He was nine years old now and hadn't had any birthday parties in the years in between. But when he was going to sleep at night, he did his best to put together all the things he could remember about his family before they'd changed, because if he remembered them the way they used to be, then there was always the chance that one day they could be that way again.

Georgie and Margie had been very old when they got married – he knew that much. His dad had been almost twenty-one and his mum was only a year younger. Alfie found it hard to imagine what it would be like to be twenty-one years old. He thought that it would be difficult to hear things and that your sight would be a little fuzzy. He thought you wouldn't be able to get up out of the broken armchair in front of the fireplace without groaning and saying, *Well, that's me turning in for the night, then*. He guessed that the most important things in the world to you would be a nice cup of tea, a comfortable pair of slippers and a cosy cardigan. Sometimes, when he thought about it, he knew that one day he would be twenty-one years old too, but it seemed so far in the future that it was hard to imagine. He'd taken a piece of paper and pen once and written the numbers down, and realized that it would be 1930 before he was that age. 1930! That was centuries away. All right, maybe not centuries, but that's the way Alfie thought about it.

Alfie's fifth birthday party was both a happy and a sad memory. It was happy because he'd received some good presents: a set of eighteen different-coloured crayons and a

sketchbook from his parents; a second-hand copy of *The Life and Strange Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* from Mr Janáček, who said that it would probably be too difficult for him now but that he'd be able to read it one day; a bag of sherbet lemons from Kalena. And he didn't mind that some of the presents were boring: a pair of socks from Granny Summerfield and a map of Australia from Old Bill Hemperton, who said that someday he might want to go down under, and if that day ever came, then this map was sure to come in handy.

'See there?' said Old Bill, pointing at a spot near the top of the map, where the green of the edges turned brown in the centre. 'That's where I'm from. A town called Mareeba. Finest little town in all of Australia. Ant hills the size of houses. If you ever go there, Alfie, you tell them Old Bill Hemperton sent you and they'll treat you like one of their own. I'm a hero back there on account of my connections.'

'What connections?' he asked, but Old Bill only winked and shook his head.

Alfie didn't know what to make of this, but in the days that followed he pinned the map to his bedroom wall anyway, he wore the socks that Granny Summerfield had given him, he used most of the colouring pencils and all of the sketchbook, he tried to read *Robinson Crusoe* but struggled with it (although he put it on his shelf to come back to when he was older) and he shared the sherbet lemons with Kalena.

These were the good memories.

The sad ones existed because that was when everything had changed. All the men from Damley Road had gathered outside on the street as the sun went down, their shirtsleeves rolled up, tugging at their braces as they spoke about things they called 'duty' and 'responsibility', taking little puffs of their cigarettes before pinching the tips closed again and putting the butts back in their waistcoat pockets for later on. Georgie had got into an argument with

his oldest and closest friend, Joe Patience, who lived at number sixteen, about what they called the rights and wrongs of it all. Joe and Georgie had been friends since Georgie and Granny Summerfield moved to Damley Road – Granny Summerfield said that Joe had practically grown up in her kitchen – and had never exchanged a cross word until that afternoon. It was the day when Charlie Slipton, the paper boy from number twenty-one, who'd once thrown a stone at Alfie's head for no reason whatsoever, had come up and down the street six times with later and later editions of the newspaper, and managed to sell them all without even trying. And it was the day that had ended with Alfie's mum sitting in the broken armchair in front of the fireplace, sobbing as if the end of the world was upon them.

'Come on, Margie,' Georgie said, standing behind her and rubbing her neck. 'There's nothing to cry about, is there? Remember what everyone said – it'll all be over by Christmas. I'll be back here in time to help stuff the goose.'

'And you believe that, do you?' Margie said, looking up at him, her eyes red-rimmed with tears. 'You believe what they tell you?'

'What else can we do but believe?' said Georgie. 'We have to hope for the best.'

'Promise me, Georgie Summerfield,' said Margie. 'Promise me you won't sign up.'

There was a long pause before Alfie's dad spoke again. 'You heard what Old Bill said, love. It might be easier on me in the long term if—'

'And what about me? And Alfie? Will it be easier on us? Promise me, Georgie!'

'All right, love. Let's just see what happens, shall we? All them politicians might wake up tomorrow morning and change their minds about the whole thing anyway. We could be worrying over nothing.' Alfie wasn't supposed to eavesdrop on his parents' private conversations – this was something that had got him into trouble once or twice in

the past – but that night, the night he turned five, he sat on the staircase where he knew they couldn't see him and stared at his toes as he listened in. He hadn't intended sitting there for quite so long – he had only come down for a glass of water and a bit of leftover tongue that he'd had his eye on – but their conversation sounded so serious that it seemed like it might be a mistake to walk away from it. He gave a deep, resounding yawn – it had been a very long day, after all, as birthdays always are – and closed his eyes for a moment, laid his head on the step behind him, and before he knew it he was having a dream where someone was lifting him up and carrying him to a warm, comfortable place, and the next thing he knew he was opening his eyes again, only to find himself lying in his own little bed with the sun pouring through the thin curtains – the ones with the pale yellow flowers on them that Alfie said were meant for a girl's room, not a boy's.

The morning after his fifth birthday party, Alfie came downstairs to find his mother in her wash-day clothes with her hair tied up on her head, boiling water in every pot on the range, looking just as unhappy as she had the night before, and not just the normal unhappiness she felt every wash-day, which usually lasted from seven in the morning until seven at night. She looked up when she saw him but didn't seem to recognize him for a moment; when she did, she just offered him a dejected smile.

'Alfie,' she said. 'I thought I'd let you sleep in. You had a big day yesterday. Bring your sheets down to me, will you? There's a good boy.'

'Where's Dad?' asked Alfie.

'He's gone out.'

'Gone out where?'

'Oh, I don't know,' she said, unable to look him in the eye. 'You know your dad never tells me anything.'

Which Alfie knew wasn't true, because every afternoon when his father came home from the dairy, he told Margie every single detail of his day from start to finish, and they sat there laughing while he explained how Bonzo Daly had left half a dozen churns outside in the yard without the lids on and the birds had got at them and spoiled the milk. Or how Petey Staples had cheeked the boss and been told that if he continued to complain he could just go and find another job where they put up with guff like that. Or how Mr Asquith had done the poo to end all poos outside Mrs Fairfax from number four's house and her a direct descendant (she claimed) of the last Plantagenet King of England and meant for better places than Damley Road. If Alfie knew one thing about his father, it was that he told his mother *everything*.

An hour later, he was sitting in the front parlour drawing in his new sketchbook while Margie took a rest from the washing, and Granny Summerfield, who'd come round for what she called a bit of a gossip – although it was really to bring her sheets for Margie to wash too – held the newspaper up to her face and squinted at the print, complaining over and over about why they made it so small.

'I can't read it, Margie,' she was saying. 'Are they trying to drive us all blind? Is that their plan?'

'Do you think Dad will take me on the float with him tomorrow?' asked Alfie.

'Did you ask him?'

'Yes, but he said I couldn't until I was older.'

'Well, then,' said Margie.

'But I'll be older tomorrow than I was yesterday,' said Alfie.

Before Margie could answer, the door opened, and to Alfie's astonishment a soldier marched in. He was tall and well built, the same size and shape as Alfie's dad, but he looked a little sheepish as he glanced around the room.

Alfie couldn’t help but be impressed by the uniform: a khaki-coloured jacket with five brass buttons down the centre, a pair of shoulder straps, trousers that tucked into knee socks, and big black boots. But why would a soldier just walk into their living room? he wondered. He hadn’t even knocked on the front door! But then the soldier took his hat off and placed it under his arm, and Alfie realized that this wasn’t just any soldier and it wasn’t a stranger either.

It was Georgie Summerfield. It was his dad.

And that was when Margie dropped her knitting on the floor, put both hands to her mouth and held them there for a few moments before running from the room and up the stairs while Georgie looked round at his son and mother and shrugged his shoulders.

‘I had to,’ he said finally. ‘You can see that, Mum, can’t you? I had to.’

‘We’re finished,’ said Granny Summerfield, putting the newspaper down and turning away from her son as she looked out of the window, where more young men were walking through their own front doors wearing uniforms just like Georgie’s. ‘We’re all finished.’

And that was everything that Alfie remembered about turning five.

2

IF YOU WERE THE ONLY BOCHE IN THE TRENCH

The Janáčeks had already been gone for almost two years when Alfie stole the shoeshine box.

They had lived three doors down from the Summerfields for as long as he could remember, and Kalena, who was six weeks older than him, had been his best friend since they were babies. Whenever Alfie was in her house in the evening, Mr Janáček could be found sitting at the kitchen table with the shoeshine box laid out before him, shining his shoes for the next day.

‘I believe a man should always present himself to the world with elegance and grace,’ he told Alfie. ‘It is what marks us out from the animals.’

All the people on Damley Road were friends, or they had been before the war began. There were twelve terraced houses on either side of the street, each one attached to the next by a thin wall that carried muffled conversations through to the neighbours. Some of the houses had window boxes outside, some didn’t, but everyone made an effort to keep the place tidy. Alfie and Kalena lived on the side with all the even numbers; Granny Summerfield lived opposite, with all the odd ones, which Margie said was particularly appropriate. Each house had one window facing onto the street from the front parlour, with two more up top, and every door was painted the same colour: yellow. Alfie remembered the day Joe Patience, the conchie from

number sixteen, painted his door red, and all the women came out on the street to watch him, shaking their heads and whispering to each other in outrage. Joe was political – everyone knew that. Old Bill said he was ‘his own man’, whatever that meant. He was out on strike more often than he was at work and was forever handing out leaflets about workers’ rights. He said that women should have the vote, and not even all the women agreed with him about that. (Granny Summerfield said she’d rather have the plague.) He owned a beautiful old clarinet too, and sometimes he sat outside his front door playing it; when he did, Helena Morris from number eighteen would stand in her doorway and stare down the street at him until her mother came out and told her to stop making a show of herself.

Alfie liked Joe Patience, and he thought it was funny that his name seemed to be the opposite of his character because he was always getting worked up over something. After he painted his front door red, three of the men, Mr Welton from number five, Mr Jones from number nineteen and Georgie Summerfield, Alfie’s dad, went over to have a word with him about it. Georgie didn’t want to go but the two men insisted, since he was Joe’s oldest friend.

‘It’s not on, Joe,’ said Mr Jones as all the women came out on the street and pretended to wash their windows.

‘Why not?’

‘Well, take a look around you. It’s out of place.’

‘Red is the colour of the working man! And we’re all working men here, aren’t we?’

‘We have yellow doors here on Damley Road,’ said Mr Welton.

‘Whoever said they had to be yellow?’

‘That’s just the way things have always been. You don’t want to go mucking about with traditional ways.’

‘Then how will things ever get better?’ asked Joe, raising his voice even though the three men were standing directly

in front of him. ‘For pity’s sake, it’s just a door! What does it matter what colour it is?’

‘Maybe Joe’s right,’ said Georgie, trying to calm everyone’s tempers. ‘It’s not that important, is it? As long as the paint isn’t chipping off and letting the street down.’

‘I might have known you’d be on his side,’ said Mr Jones, sneering at him even though it had been his idea to ask Georgie to join them in the first place. ‘Old pals together, eh?’

‘Yes,’ said Georgie with a shrug, as if it was the most natural thing in the world. ‘Old pals together. What’s wrong with that?’

In the end, there was nothing that Mr Welton or Mr Jones could do about the red door, and it stayed that way until the following summer, when Joe decided to change it again and painted it green in support of the Irish – who, Joe said, were doing all they could to break off the shackles of their imperial overlords. Alfie’s dad just laughed and said that if he wanted to waste his money on paint, then it was nothing to do with him. Granny Summerfield said that if Joe’s mother was still alive, she’d be ashamed.

‘Oh, I don’t know,’ said Margie. ‘He has an independent streak, that’s all. I quite like that about him.’

‘He’s not a bad fellow, Joe Patience,’ agreed Georgie.

‘He’s his own man,’ repeated Old Bill Hemperton.

‘He’s lovely looking, despite everything,’ said Margie. ‘Helena Morris is sweet on him.’

‘She’d be ashamed,’ insisted Granny Summerfield.

But other than that, the people on Damley Road always seemed to get along very well. They were neighbours and friends. And no one seemed more a part of that community than Kalena and her father.

Mr Janáček ran the sweet shop at the end of the road. It wasn’t just a sweet shop, of course – he also sold newspapers, string, notepads, pencils, birthday cards,