The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas

John Boyne

Chapter Ten

The Dot That Became a Speck That Became a Blob That Became a Figure That Became a Boy

The walk along the fence took Bruno a lot longer than he expected; it seemed to stretch on and on for several miles. He walked and walked, and when he looked back the house that he was living in became smaller and smaller until it vanished from sight altogether. During all this time he never saw anyone anywhere close to the fence; nor did he find any doors to let him inside, and he started to despair that his exploration was going to be entirely unsuccessful. In fact although the fence continued as far as the eye could see, the huts and buildings and smoke stacks were disappearing in the distance behind him and the fence seemed to be separating him from nothing but open space.

After walking for the best part of an hour and starting to feel a little hungry, he thought that maybe that was enough exploration for one day and it would be a good idea to turn back. However, just at that moment a small dot appeared in the distance and he narrowed his eyes to try to see what it was. Bruno remembered a book he had read in which a man was lost in the desert and because he hadn't had any food or water for several days had started to imagine that he saw wonderful restaurants and enormous fountains, but when he tried to eat or drink from them they disappeared into nothingness, just handfuls of sand. He wondered whether that was what was happening to him now. But while he was thinking this his feet were taking him, step by step, closer and closer to the dot in the distance, which in the meantime had become a speck, and then began to show every sign of turning into a blob. And shortly after that the blob became a figure. And then, as Bruno got even closer, he saw that the thing was neither a dot nor a speck nor a blob nor a figure, but a person.

In fact it was a boy.

Bruno had read enough books about explorers to know that one could never be sure what one was going to find. Most of the time they came across something interesting that was just sitting there, minding its own business, waiting to be discovered (such as America). Other times they discovered something that was probably best left alone (like a dead mouse at the back of a cupboard). The boy belonged to the first category. He was just sitting there, minding his own business, waiting to be discovered.

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Bruno slowed down when he saw the dot that became a speck that became a blob that became a figure that became a boy. Although there was a fence separating them, he knew that you could never be too careful with strangers and it wasalways best to approach them with caution. So he continued to walk, and before long they were facing each other.

‘Hello,’ said Bruno.

‘Hello,’ said the boy.

The boy was smaller than Bruno and was sitting on the ground with a forlorn expression. He wore the same striped pyjamas that all the other people on that side of the fence wore, and a striped cloth cap on his head. He wasn’t wearing any shoes or socks and his feet were rather dirty. On his arm he wore an armband with a star on it.

When Bruno first approached the boy, he was sitting cross-legged on the ground, staring at the dust beneath him. However, after a moment he looked up and Bruno saw his face. It was quite a strange face too. His skin was almost the colour of grey, but not quite like any grey that Bruno had ever seen before. He had very large eyes and they were the colour of caramel sweets; the whites were very white, and when the boy looked at him all Bruno could see was an enormous pair of sad eyes staring back. Bruno was sure that he had never seen a skinnier or sadder boy in his life but decided that he had better talk to him.

‘I’ve been exploring,’ he said.

‘Have you?’ said the little boy.

‘Yes. For almost two hours now.’

This was not strictly speaking true. Bruno had been exploring for just over an hour but he didn’t think that exaggerating slightly would be too bad a thing to do. It wasn’t quite the same thing as lying and made him seem more adventurous than he really was.

‘Have you found anything?’ asked the boy.

‘Very little.’

‘Nothing at all?’

‘Well, I found you,’ said Bruno after a moment.

He stared at the boy and considered asking him why he looked so sad but hesitated because he thought it might sound rude. He knew that sometimes people who were sad didn’t want to be asked about it; sometimes they’d offer the information themselves and sometimes theywouldn’t stop talking about it for months on end, but on this occasion Bruno thought that he should wait before saying anything. He had discovered something during his exploration, and now that he was finally talking to one of the people on the other side of the fence it seemed like a good idea to make the most of the opportunity.

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He sat down on the ground on his side of the fence and crossed his legs like the little boy and wished that he had brought some chocolate with him or perhaps a pastry that they could share.

‘I live in the house on this side of the fence,’ said Bruno.

‘Do you? I saw the house once, from a distance, but I didn’t see you.’

‘My room is on the first floor,’ said Bruno. ‘I can see right over the fence from there. I’m Bruno, by the way.’

‘I’m Shmuel,’ said the little boy.

Bruno scrunched up his face, not sure that he had heard the little boy right. ‘What did you say your name was?’ he asked.

‘Shmuel,’ said the little boy as if it was the most natural thing in the world. ‘What did you say your name was?’

‘Bruno,’ said Bruno.

‘I’ve never heard of that name,’ said Shmuel.

‘And I’ve never heard of your name,’ said Bruno. ‘Shmuel.’ He thought about it. ‘Shmuel,’ he repeated. ‘I like the way it sounds when I say it. Shmuel. It sounds like the wind blowing.’

‘Bruno,’ said Shmuel, nodding his head happily. ‘Yes, I think I like your name too. It sounds like someone who’s rubbing their arms to keep warm.’

‘I’ve never met anyone called Shmuel before,’ said Bruno.

‘There are dozens of Shmuels on this side of the fence,’ said the little boy. ‘Hundreds probably. I wish I had a name all of my own.’

‘I’ve never met anyone called Bruno,’ said Bruno. ‘Other than me, of course. I think I might be the only one.’

‘Then you’re lucky,’ said Shmuel.

‘I suppose I am. How old are you?’ he asked.

Shmuel thought about it and looked down at his fingers and they wiggled in the air, as if he was trying to calculate. ‘I’m nine,’ he said. ‘My birthday is April the fifteenth nineteen thirtyfour.’

Bruno stared at him in surprise. ‘What did you say?’ he asked.

‘I said my birthday is April the fifteenth nineteen thirty-four.’

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Bruno's eyes opened wide and his mouth made the shape of an O. 'I don't believe it,' he said.

'Why not?' asked Shmuel.

'No,' said Bruno, shaking his head quickly. 'I don't mean I don't believe you. I mean I'm surprised, that's all. Because my birthday is April the fifteenth too. And I was born in nineteen thirty-four. We were born on the same day.'

Shmuel thought about this. 'So you're nine too,' he said.

'Yes. Isn't that strange?'

'Very strange,' said Shmuel. 'Because there may be dozens of Shmuels on this side of the fence but I don't think that I've ever met anyone with the same birthday as me before.'

'We're like twins,' said Bruno.

'A little bit,' agreed Shmuel.

Bruno felt very happy all of a sudden. A picture came into his head of Karl and Daniel and Martin, his three best friends for life, and he remembered how much fun they used to have together back in Berlin and he realized how lonely he had been at Out-With.

'Do you have many friends?' asked Bruno, cocking his head a little to the side as he waited for an answer.

'Oh yes,' said Shmuel. 'Well, sort of.'

Bruno frowned. He had hoped that Shmuel might have said no as it would give them something else in common. 'Close friends?' he asked.

'Well, not very close,' said Shmuel. 'But there are a lot of us – boys our age, I mean – on this side of the fence. We fight a lot of the time though.

That's why I come out here. To be on my own.'

'It's so unfair,' said Bruno. 'I don't see why I have to be stuck over here on this side of the fence where there's no one to talk to and no one to play with and you get to have dozens of friends and are probably playing for hours every day. I'll have to speak to Father about it.'

'Where did you come from?' asked Shmuel, narrowing his eyes and looking at Bruno curiously.

'Berlin.'

'Where's that?'

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Bruno opened his mouth to answer but found that he wasn't entirely sure. 'It's in Germany, of course,' he said. 'Don't you come from Germany?'

'No, I'm from Poland,' said Shmuel.

Bruno frowned. 'Then why do you speak German?' he asked.

'Because you said hello in German. So I answered in German. Can you speak Polish?'

'No,' said Bruno, laughing nervously. 'I don't know anyone who can speak two languages. And especially no one of our age.'

'Mama is a teacher in my school and she taught me German,' explained Shmuel. 'She speaks French too. And Italian. And English. She's very clever. I don't speak French or Italian yet, but she said she'd teach me English one day because I might need to know it.'

'Poland,' said Bruno thoughtfully, weighing up the word on his tongue. 'That's not as good as Germany, is it?'

Shmuel frowned. 'Why isn't it?' he asked.

'Well, because Germany is the greatest of all countries,' Bruno replied, remembering something that he had overheard Father discussing with Grandfather on any number of occasions. 'We're superior.'

Shmuel stared at him but didn't say anything, and Bruno felt a strong desire to change the subject because even as he had said the words, they didn't sound quite right to him and the last thing he wanted was for Shmuel to think that he was being unkind.

'Where is Poland anyway?' he asked after a few silent moments had passed.

'Well, it's in Europe,' said Shmuel.

Bruno tried to remember the countries he had been taught about in his most recent geography class with Herr Liszt. 'Have you ever heard of Denmark?' he asked.

'No,' said Shmuel.

'I think Poland is in Denmark,' said Bruno, growing more confused even though he was trying to sound clever. 'Because that's many miles away,' he repeated for added confirmation.

Shmuel stared at him for a moment and opened his mouth and closed it twice, as if he was considering his words carefully. 'But this is Poland,' he said finally.

'Is it?' asked Bruno.

'Yes it is. And Denmark's quite far away from both Poland and Germany.'

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Bruno frowned. He'd heard of all these places but he always found it hard to get them straight in his head. 'Well, yes,' he said. 'But it's all relative, isn't it? Distance, I mean.' He wished they could get off the subject as he was starting to think he was entirely wrong and made a private resolution to pay more attention in future in geography class.

'I've never been to Berlin,' said Shmuel.

'And I don't think I'd ever been to Poland before I came here,' said Bruno, which was true because he hadn't. 'That is, if this really is Poland.'

'I'm sure it is,' said Shmuel quietly. 'Although it's not a very nice part of it.'

'No.'

'Where I come from is a lot nicer.'

'It's certainly not as nice as Berlin,' said Bruno. 'In Berlin we had a big house with five floors if you counted the basement and the little room at the top with the window. And there were lovely streets and shops and fruit and vegetable stalls and any number of cafés. But if you ever go there I wouldn't recommend walking around town on a Saturday afternoon because there are far too many people there then and you get pushed from pillar to post. And it was much nicer before things changed.'

'How do you mean?' asked Shmuel.

'Well, it used to be very quiet there,'explained Bruno, who didn't like to talk about how things had changed. 'And I was able to read in bed at night. But now it's quite noisy sometimes, and scary, and we have to turn all the lights off when it starts to get dark.'

'Where I come from is much nicer than Berlin,' said Shmuel, who had never been to Berlin. 'Everyone there is very friendly and we have lots of people in our family and the food is a lot better too.'

'Well, we'll have to agree to disagree,' said Bruno, who didn't want to fight with his new friend.

'All right,' said Shmuel.

'Do you like exploring?' asked Bruno after a moment. 'I've never really done any,' admitted Shmuel.

'I'm going to be an explorer when I grow up,' said Bruno, nodding his head quickly. 'At the moment I can't do very much more than read about explorers, but at least that means that when I'm one myself, I won't make the mistakes they did.'

Shmuel frowned. 'What kind of mistakes?' he asked.

'Oh, countless ones,' explained Bruno. 'The thing about exploring is that you have to know whether the thing you've found is worth finding. Some things are just sitting there, minding their own business, waiting to be discovered. Like America. And other

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things are probably better off left alone. Like a dead mouse at the back of a cupboard.'

'I think I belong to the first category,' said Shmuel.

'Yes,' replied Bruno. 'I think you do. Can I ask you something?' he added after a moment.

'Yes,' said Shmuel.

Bruno thought about it. He wanted to phrase the question just right.

'Why are there so many people on that side of the fence?' he asked. 'And what are you all doing there?'

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