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The Boy at the Top of the Mountain

Written by

John Boyne

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Part 1

1936

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Chapter One

Three Red Spots on a Handkerchief

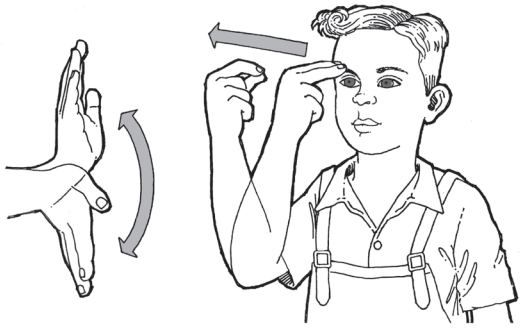
Although Pierrot Fischer's father didn't die in the Great War, his mother Émilie always maintained it was the war that killed him.

Pierrot wasn't the only seven year old in Paris to live with just one parent. The boy who sat in front of him at school hadn't laid eyes on his mother in the four years since she'd run off with an encyclopaedia salesman, while the classroom bully, who called Pierrot 'Le Petit' because he was so small, had a room above his grandparents' tobacco shop on the Avenue de la Motte-Picquet, where he spent most of his time dropping water balloons from the upstairs window onto the heads of passers-by below and then insisting that it had nothing to do with him.

And in an apartment on the ground floor of his own building on the nearby Avenue Charles-Floquet, Pierrot's best friend, Anshel Bronstein, lived alone with his mother, Mme Bronstein, his father having drowned two years earlier during an unsuccessful attempt to swim the English Channel.

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Having been born only weeks apart, Pierrot and Anshel had grown up practically as brothers, one mother taking care of both babies when the other needed a nap. But unlike a lot of brothers they never argued. Anshel had been born deaf, so the boys had developed a sign language early on, communicating easily, and expressing through nimble fingers everything they needed to say. They even created special symbols for each other to use instead of their names. Anshel gave Pierrot the sign of the dog, as he considered his friend to be both kind and loyal, while Pierrot adopted the sign of the fox for Anshel, who everyone said was the smartest boy in their class. When they used these names, their hands looked like this:



They spent most of their time together, kicking a football around in the Champ de Mars and reading the same books. So close was their friendship that Pierrot was the only person Anshel allowed to read the stories he wrote in his bedroom at night. Not even Mme Bronstein knew that her son wanted to be a writer.

This one's good, Pierrot would sign, his fingers fluttering in the air as he handed back a bundle of pages. *I liked the bit about the horse and the part where the gold is discovered hidden in*

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the coffin. This one's not so good, he would continue, handing back a second sheaf. *But that's because your handwriting is so terrible that I wasn't able to read some parts . . . And this one,* he would add, waving a third pile in the air as if he was at a parade. *This one doesn't make any sense at all. I'd throw this one in the bin if I were you.*

It's experimental, signed Anshel, who didn't mind criticism but could sometimes be a little defensive about the stories his friend enjoyed the least.

No, signed Pierrot, shaking his head. *It just doesn't make any sense. You should never let anyone read this one. They'll think you've lost your marbles.*

Pierrot too liked the idea of writing stories, but he could never sit still long enough to put the words down on the page. Instead, he sat on a chair opposite his friend and just started signing, making things up or describing some escapade that he had got up to in school, and Anshel would watch carefully before transcribing them for him later.

So did I write this? Pierrot asked when he was finally given the pages and read through them.

No, I wrote it, Anshel replied, shaking his head. *But it's your story.*

Émilie, Pierrot's mother, rarely talked about his father any more, although the boy still thought of him constantly. Wilhelm Fischer had lived with his wife and son until three years earlier, but left Paris in the summer of 1933, a few months after his son's fourth birthday. Pierrot remembered his father as a tall man who would mimic the sounds of a horse as he carried the boy on his broad shoulders through the streets, breaking into an occasional gallop that always

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made Pierrot scream with delight. He taught his son German, to remind him of his ancestry, and did his best to help him learn simple songs on the piano, although Pierrot knew he would never be as accomplished as his father. Papa played folk songs that brought tears to the eyes of visitors, particularly when he sang along in that soft but powerful voice that spoke of memory and regret. If his musical skills were not great, Pierrot made up for this with his skill at languages; he could flit between speaking German to his father and French to his mother with no difficulty whatsoever. His party trick was singing *La Marseillaise* in German and then *Das Deutschlandlied* in French, a skill that sometimes made dinner guests uncomfortable.

'I don't want you doing that any more, Pierrot,' Maman told him one evening after his performance had caused a mild disagreement with some neighbours. 'Learn something else if you want to show off. Juggling. Magic tricks. Standing on your head. Anything that doesn't involve singing in German.'

'What's wrong with German?' asked Pierrot.

'Yes, Émilie,' said Papa from the armchair in the corner, where he had spent the evening drinking too much wine, something that always left him brooding over the bad experiences that haunted him. 'What's wrong with German?'

'Haven't you had enough, Wilhelm?' she asked, her hands pressed firmly to her hips as she turned to look at him.

'Enough of what? Enough of your friends insulting my country?'

'They weren't insulting it,' she said. 'They just find it difficult to forget the war, that's all. Particularly those who lost loved ones in the trenches.'

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'And yet they don't mind coming into my home, eating my food and drinking my wine.'

Papa waited until Maman had returned to the kitchen before summoning Pierrot over and placing an arm round his waist. 'Someday we will take back what's ours,' he said, looking the boy directly in the eye. 'And when we do, remember whose side you're on. You may have been born in France and you may live in Paris, but you're German through and through, just like me. Don't forget that, Pierrot.'

Sometimes Papa woke in the middle of the night, his screams echoing through the dark and empty hallways of their apartment, and Pierrot's dog, D'Artagnan, would leap in fright from his basket, jump onto his bed and scramble under the sheets next to his master, trembling. The boy would pull the blanket up to his chin, listening through the thin walls as Maman tried to calm Papa down, whispering in a low voice that he was fine, that he was at home with his family, that it had been nothing but a bad dream.

'But it wasn't a dream,' he heard his father say once, his voice trembling with distress. 'It was worse than that. It was a memory.'

Occasionally Pierrot would wake in need of a quick trip to the bathroom and find his father seated at the kitchen table, his head slumped on the wooden surface, muttering to himself as an empty bottle lay on its side next to him. Whenever this happened, the boy would run downstairs in his bare feet and throw the bottle in the courtyard bin so his mother wouldn't discover it the next morning. And usually, when he came back upstairs, Papa had roused himself and

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somehow found his way back to bed.

Neither father nor son ever talked about any of these things the next day.

Once, however, as Pierrot went outside on one of these late-night missions he slipped on the wet staircase and tumbled to the floor – not badly enough to hurt himself but enough to smash the bottle he was holding, and as he stood up a piece of glass embedded itself in the underside of his left foot. Grimacing, he pulled it out, but as it emerged a thick stream of blood began to seep quickly through the torn skin; when he hobbled back into the apartment in search of a bandage, Papa woke and saw what he had been responsible for. After disinfecting the wound and ensuring that it was tightly wrapped, he sat the boy down and apologized for his drinking. Wiping away tears, he told Pierrot how much he loved him and promised that he would never do anything to put him in harm's way again.

'I love you too, Papa,' said Pierrot. 'But I love you most when you're carrying me on your shoulders and pretending to be a horse. I don't like it when you sit in the armchair and won't talk to me or Maman.'

'I don't like those moments either,' said Papa quietly. 'But sometimes it's as if a dark cloud has settled over me and I can't get it to move on. That's why I drink. It helps me forget.'

'Forget what?'

'The war. The things I saw.' He closed his eyes as he whispered, 'The things I did.'

Pierrot swallowed, almost afraid of asking the question. 'What did you do?'

Papa offered him a sad smile. 'Whatever I did, I did for

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my country,' he said. 'You can understand that, can't you?'

'Yes, Papa,' said Pierrot, who wasn't sure what his father meant but thought it sounded valiant nevertheless. 'I'd be a soldier too, if it would make you proud of me.'

Papa looked at his son and placed a hand on his shoulder. 'Just make sure you pick the right side,' he said.

For several weeks after this he stopped drinking. And then, just as abruptly as he had given up, that dark cloud he had spoken of returned and he started again.

Papa worked as a waiter in a local restaurant, disappearing every morning around ten o'clock and returning at three before leaving again at six for the dinner service. On one occasion he came home in a bad mood and said that someone named Papa Joffre had been in the restaurant for lunch, seated at one of his tables; he had refused to serve him until his employer, M. Abrahams, said that if he didn't, he could go home and never return.

'Who's Papa Joffre?' asked Pierrot, having never heard the name before.

'He was a great general in the war,' said Maman, lifting a pile of clothes out of a basket and placing it next to her ironing board. 'A hero to our people.'

'To *your* people,' said Papa.

'Remember that you married a Frenchwoman,' said Maman, turning to him angrily.

'Because I loved her,' replied Papa. 'Pierrot, did I ever tell you about when I saw your mother for the first time? It was a couple of years after the Great War ended: I had arranged to meet my sister Beatrix during her lunch break, and when I got

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to the department store where she worked, she was talking to one of the new assistants, a shy creature who had only started that week. I took one look at her and knew immediately that this was the girl I was going to marry.'

Pierrot smiled; he loved it when his father told stories like this.

'I opened my mouth to speak but couldn't find any words. It was as if my brain had just gone to sleep. And so I just stood there, staring, saying nothing.'

'I thought there was something wrong with him,' said Maman, smiling too at the memory.

'Beatrix had to shake me by the shoulders,' said Papa, laughing at his own foolishness.

'If it wasn't for her I would never have agreed to go out with you,' added Maman. 'She told me that I should take a chance. That you were not as daft as you seemed.'

'Why don't we ever see Aunt Beatrix?' asked Pierrot, for he had heard her name on a few occasions over the years but had never met her. She never came to visit and never wrote any letters.

'Because we don't,' said Papa, the smile leaving his face now as his expression changed.

'But why not?'

'Leave it, Pierrot,' he said.

'Yes, leave it, Pierrot,' repeated Maman, her face clouding over now too. 'Because that's what we do in this house. We push away the people we love, we don't talk about things that matter and we don't allow anyone to help us.'

And just like that, a happy conversation was spoiled.

'He eats like a pig,' said Papa a few minutes later, crouching

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down and looking Pierrot in the eye, curling his fingers into claws. 'Papa Joffre, I mean. Like a rat chewing his way along a cob of corn.'

Week after week, Papa complained about how low his wages were, how M. and Mme Abrahams spoke down to him and how the Parisians had grown increasingly mean with their tips. 'This is why we never have any money,' he grumbled. 'They're all so tight-fisted. Especially the Jews – they're the worst. And they come in all the time because they say that Mme Abrahams makes the best gefilte fish and latkes in all of Western Europe.'

'Anshel is Jewish,' said Pierrot quietly, because he often saw his friend leaving for temple with his mother.

'Anshel is one of the good ones,' muttered Papa. 'They say every barrel of good apples contains a single rotten one. Well, that works the other way round too—'

'We never have any money,' said Maman, interrupting him, 'because you spend most of what you earn on wine. And you shouldn't speak about our neighbours like that. Remember how—'

'You think I bought this?' he asked, picking up a bottle and turning it round to show her the label – the same house wine that the restaurant used. 'Your mother can be very naïve sometimes,' he added in German to Pierrot.

Despite everything, Pierrot loved spending time with his father. Once a month Papa would take him to the Tuileries Garden, where he would name the different trees and plants that lined the walkways, explaining how each one changed as season followed season. His own parents, Papa told him, had

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been avid horticulturalists and had loved anything to do with the land. 'But they lost it all, of course,' he added. 'Their farm was taken from them. All their hard work destroyed. They never recovered.'

On the way home he bought ice creams from a street-seller, and when Pierrot's fell to the ground, his father gave him his instead.

These were the things that Pierrot tried to remember whenever there was trouble at home. Only a few weeks later, an argument broke out in their front parlour when some neighbours – different ones to those who had objected to Pierrot singing *La Marseillaise* in German – began discussing politics. Voices were raised, old grievances aired, and when they left, his parents got into a terrible fight.

'If you'd only stop drinking,' Maman cried. 'Alcohol makes you say the most terrible things. Can't you see how much you upset people?'

'I drink to forget,' shouted Papa. 'You haven't seen the things I've seen. You don't have these images going around in your head day and night.'

'But it's so long ago,' she said, stepping closer to him and reaching across to take his arm. 'Please, Wilhelm, I know how much it hurts you, but perhaps it's because you refuse to talk about it sensibly. Maybe if you shared your pain with me—'

Émilie never got to finish that sentence, for at that moment Wilhelm did a very bad thing; a thing he had done for the first time a few months earlier, swearing that he would never do again, although he had broken this promise several times since then. As upset as she was, Pierrot's mother always found some way to excuse his behaviour, particularly when she

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found her son crying in his bedroom at the frightening scenes he had witnessed.

'You mustn't blame him,' she said.

'But he hurts you,' said Pierrot, looking up with tears in his eyes. On the bed, D'Artagnan glanced from one to the other before jumping down and nuzzling his nose into his master's side; the little dog always knew when Pierrot was upset.

'He's ill,' replied Émilie, holding a hand to her face. 'And when someone we love is ill, it's our job to help them get better. If they will let us. But if they won't . . . She took a deep breath before speaking again. 'Pierrot,' she said. 'How would you feel if we were to move away?'

'All of us?'

She shook her head. 'No,' she said. 'Just you and me.'

'And what about Papa?'

Maman sighed, and Pierrot could see the tears forming in her eyes. 'All I know,' she said, 'is that things can't go on as they are.'

The last time Pierrot saw his father was on a warm May evening, shortly after his fourth birthday, when once again the kitchen was littered with empty bottles and Papa began shouting and banging the sides of his head with his hands, complaining that they were in there, they were all in there, they were coming to get their revenge on him – phrases that made no sense to Pierrot. Papa reached over to the dresser and threw handfuls of plates, bowls and cups on the floor, smashing them into hundreds of pieces. Maman held her arms out to him, pleading with him in an attempt to calm his temper, but he lashed out, punching her in the face, and screaming words that were so

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terrible, Pierrot covered his ears and ran into his bedroom with D'Artagnan and they hid in the wardrobe together. Pierrot was shaking and trying not to cry as the little dog, who hated any kind of upset, whimpered and curled himself into the boy's body.

Pierrot didn't leave the wardrobe for hours, until everything had grown quiet again, and when he did his father had vanished and his mother was lying on the floor, motionless, her face bloody and bruised. D'Artagnan walked over cautiously, bowing his head and licking her ear repeatedly in an attempt to wake her, but Pierrot simply stared in disbelief. Summoning all his courage, he ran downstairs to Anshel's apartment, where he pointed towards the staircase, unable to utter a word of explanation. Mme Bronstein, who must have heard the earlier commotion through her ceiling but was too frightened to intervene, ran upstairs, taking the steps two or three at a time. Meanwhile Pierrot looked across at his friend, one boy unable to speak, the other unable to hear. Noticing a pile of pages on the table behind him, he walked over, sat down, and began to read Anshel's latest story. Somehow he found that losing himself in a world that wasn't his own was a welcome escape.

For several weeks there was no word from Papa and Pierrot both longed for and dreaded his return, and then one morning word came to them that Wilhelm had died when he fell beneath a train that was making its way from Munich to Penzberg, the same town where he had been born and in which he had spent his childhood. When he heard the news, Pierrot went to his room, locked the door, looked at

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the dog, who was snoozing on the bed, and spoke very calmly.

'Papa is looking down at us now, D'Artagnan,' he said. 'And one day I am going to make him proud of me.'

Afterwards M. and Mme Abrahams offered Émilie work as a waitress, which Mme Bronstein said was in poor taste as they were simply offering her the job that her dead husband had had before her. But Maman, who knew that she and Pierrot needed the money, accepted gratefully.

The restaurant was located halfway between Pierrot's school and home, and he would read and draw in the small room downstairs every afternoon while the staff wandered in and out, taking their breaks, chatting about the customers and generally fussing over him. Mme Abrahams always brought him down a plate of whatever that day's special was, with a bowl of ice cream to follow.

Pierrot spent three years, from the ages of four to seven, sitting in that room every afternoon while Maman served customers upstairs, and although he never spoke of him, he thought of his father every day, picturing him standing there, changing into his uniform in the morning, counting his tips at the end of the day.

Years later, when Pierrot looked back on his childhood, he experienced complicated emotions. Although he was very sad about his father, he had plenty of friends, enjoyed school, and he and Maman lived happily together. Paris was flourishing and the streets were always buzzing with people and energy.

But in 1936, on Émilie's birthday, what should have been a happy day took a turn towards tragedy. In the evening Mme

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Bronstein and Anshel had come upstairs with a small cake to celebrate, and Pierrot and his friend were munching on a second slice when, quite unexpectedly, Maman began to cough. At first Pierrot thought that a piece of cake must have gone down the wrong way, but the coughing continued much longer than seemed normal, and only when Mme Bronstein gave her a glass of water to drink did it come to an end. When she recovered herself, however, her eyes appeared bloodshot and she pressed a hand to her chest as if she was in pain.

'I'm fine,' she said as her breathing returned to normal. 'I must be getting a chill, that's all.'

'But, my dear . . .' said Mme Bronstein, her face growing pale as she pointed towards the handkerchief that Émilie held in her hands. Pierrot glanced across and his mouth fell open when he saw three small spots of blood in the centre of the linen. Maman stared at them too for a few moments before crumpling it up and tucking it away inside her pocket. Then, placing both hands carefully on the arms of her chair, she rose, smoothed down her dress and attempted to smile.

'Émilie, are you quite all right?' asked Mme Bronstein, standing up, and Pierrot's mother nodded quickly.

'It's nothing,' she said. 'Probably just a throat infection, although I am a little tired. Perhaps I should get some sleep. You were so thoughtful to bring the cake, but if you and Anshel don't mind . . . ?'

'Of course, of course,' replied Mme Bronstein, tapping her son on the shoulder and making her way towards the door with more urgency than Pierrot had ever seen before. 'If you need anything, just stamp on the floor a few times and I'll be up in a flash.'

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Maman didn't cough any more that night, or for several days afterwards, but then, while she was waiting on some customers in the restaurant, she seemed to lose control of herself entirely and was brought downstairs to where Pierrot was playing chess with one of the waiters. This time, her face was grey and her handkerchief was not spotted with blood but covered in it. Perspiration ran down her face, and when Dr Chibaud arrived, he took one look at her and called for an ambulance. Within an hour she was lying in a bed in the Hôtel-Dieu de Paris hospital as the doctors examined her and whispered amongst themselves, their voices low and worried.

Pierrot spent that night in the Bronsteins' apartment, top-to-tail in the bed with Anshel, while D'Artagnan snored on the floor. He felt very frightened, of course, and would have liked to talk to his friend about what was happening, but as good as his sign language was, it was no use to him in the dark.

He visited Maman every day for a week, and each day she seemed to be struggling for breath more and more. He was the only one with her on that Sunday afternoon when her breathing began to slow down entirely and her fingers fell loose around his own; then her head slipped to one side of the pillow, her eyes still open, and he knew that she was gone.

Pierrot sat very still for a few minutes before quietly pulling the curtain around the bed and returning to the chair next to his mother, holding her hand and refusing to let go. Finally an elderly nurse arrived, saw what had happened and told him that she needed to move Émilie to a different place where her body could be prepared for the undertaker. At these words, Pierrot burst into tears that he felt might never end, and clung to his mother's body while the nurse tried to console him. It

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took a long time for him to calm down, and when he did, his entire body felt broken on the inside. He had never known pain like this before.

'I want her to have this,' he said, retrieving a photograph of his father from his pocket and placing it next to her on the bed.

The nurse nodded and promised that she would ensure the picture remained with Maman.

'Do you have any family I can call for you?' she asked.

'No,' said Pierrot, shaking his head, unable to look her in the eye in case he saw either pity or lack of interest there. 'No, there's no one. It's just me. I'm all alone now.'

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