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opening extract from

Long Way Home

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CHAPTER 1

THE CAR PURRED COMFORTABLY AND GEORGE was bored with looking out of the window. He glanced down as Mrs Thomas changed gear, and he noticed that she had rather fat legs. She wore thick stockings that wrinkled at the ankles. He didn't like fat legs. Mrs Thomas had been his social worker for as long as he could remember, but he'd never noticed her legs before. She half turned her head, and George looked away quickly, hoping she hadn't seen him staring. He felt his face flush, but it went away quickly.

'They're really very nice people, George,' she said. 'I've known them for years now. I know you'll like Mr and Mrs Dyer. They work on the farm all by them-

selves, you know. Must be very hard work, I should think. Could do with some help, I expect. You've never lived on a farm before, have you, George?'

'No,' said George.

'There'll be a lot for you to learn. They'll keep you busy, I shouldn't wonder.'

'I told you, I don't want to go.'

'But George, there's hardly anyone left at the Home – no one your age, anyway. They're all on holiday.' She changed gear badly again and the Mini juddered along painfully at twenty miles an hour in top gear.

'I don't care,' George muttered.

'And anyway it's good for you to get away sometimes – good for everyone. We all need a change, don't we?'

'When can I come back?'

'Try not to think of that, George. You'll enjoy it, really you will.'

'When?' George insisted, turning to look at her.

'Well, term starts again early in September – you'll have to go back for that; but they're nice people, George, it's a lovely place and I know they're looking forward to having you.'

Mrs Thomas had known George all his life – ever since he first came to live at the Home when he was three years old, and this was a conversation she had been through with him every time she'd taken him to new foster parents. She knew her credibility must be wearing very thin. Every time they were going to be 'nice people' in a 'good home'. Every time he said he didn't want to go. And every time he was back in the Home within a year, sometimes within a month. He'd run away twice – back to the Home. In all there had been six sets of foster parents, but for one reason or another none of them had worked out: either they hadn't liked him because he was too quiet and sullen, or more often he just hadn't taken to them. It all made anything she said sound hollow and weak, but she had to say something.

'September? But that's over four weeks away.'

Mrs Thomas tried to ignore the despair in his voice and concentrated on the road; there was nothing else she could say about it, nothing that would help.

'Would you like the radio on?' she asked. But George said nothing; he was looking out of the window again. She leaned forward and switched it on anyway – anything was better than this silence.

'Do I have to, Mrs Thomas?' George was pleading now. 'Do I have to go?'

'Let's give it a try, George,' she said. 'It's only for the holidays after all, and you never know, you may have a wonderful time. Just give them time to get to know you – you'll be all right.' She knew George well enough by now to know that he'd lapse into a long silence until they arrived. She was bad at small talk and he had never responded to it, so she reached forward again and turned up the radio, filling the car with the raucous sound of a Radio One jingle and obliterating the silence that had fallen between them.

Tom pushed away his cereal bowl and began to butter his piece of toast. 'What time's he coming?' he said, pushing the butter angrily into the holes in the toast.

'I don't know, dear. Some time mid-morning, I think,' said his mother.

'Every year we do it, Mum. Do we have to do it every year? There must be other people . . .'

'We've been through all this before, Tom,' said his mother, leaving the stove with a plate of sausages.

'You said you wouldn't make a fuss this time – we

agreed.' A door banged upstairs. 'Please, Tom. Dad's coming down – don't go on about it.'

The door was pushed open, and Tom's father came into the kitchen in his dressing-gown and slippers. 'Those calves, they'll have to be moved,' he said, stroking his chin. 'I hardly shut my eyes last night with all that mooing.' He pulled the newspaper out of the back door letter-box, shook it open and sat down.

'And I suppose you'll want me to move them,' said Tom, looking at the picture on the back page of the newspaper and thinking that the Prime Minister looked about the same age as his father. The Prime Minister's face folded up in front of him as his father lowered the paper.

'It's Saturday, isn't it?' Tom knew what was coming. 'I give you five pounds for working weekends on the farm in the summer holidays, five pounds! I run this farm by myself, we've no other help . . .'

'Dad, I didn't mean it like that . . .' But it was no use.

'And it's not as if you even put in a full two days, and every time I ask you to do anything extra, you gripe about it. Your mother and me, we . . .'

'Dad, I was just asking, that's all, just asking if you

wanted me to move those calves.' Tom felt his voice rising in anger and tried to control it. 'Now, do you want me to move them or not?'

'That's not what it sounded like to me,' his father said, retreating a bit.

'Oh, do stop it, you two. Storme's awake, you know – she'll hear you,' said Tom's mother and she scuffled across the kitchen floor towards them with the teapot in one hand and a jug of milk in the other. 'Pour yourselves a cup of tea and do eat your sausages, Tom; they'll be cold.'

'She's heard us before, Mum,' said Tom. 'She's used to it.'

Tom's sister, Storme, thundered down the stairs, the kitchen door banged open and she came hopping in, pulling on a shoe that had come loose.

'It's today, isn't it?' she said, scraping back her chair.

'What is dear?' said her mother.

'That boy, that foster boy,' she said. 'He's coming today, isn't he?'

'Storme, I told you,' her mother said, sitting down for the first time that morning. 'I told you, you're not to call him that. You call him by his name, and his name's George.'

'It's not her fault, Mum,' Tom said, stabbing at the sausage with his fork and looking for the softest place to make an incision. 'Every summer I can remember we've had a foster child living with us, and they've all had different names.'

'Well this one's called George, and don't you forget it,' the newspaper said. The Prime Minister had his legs back again.

'Why do we do it, Mum?' Storme asked, scraping the last drop of milk from the bottom of her cereal bowl.

'Do what, dear?'

'Have all these foster children.'

'I don't really know, dear. I suppose it was your Auntie Helen who started it when she was a probation officer in Exeter – years ago now, before we had you. She suggested we might have a foster child out here for a few weeks in the summer – Anne was the first one, about your age now – and after that the habit just stuck. They wouldn't get a holiday otherwise, you know.'

'You don't know how lucky you are,' said her father.

'Lucky!' said Tom. 'What about last year then? That

girl Jenny, she wouldn't talk to anyone but Mum, you only had to look at her and she'd cry and she never stopped fighting with Storme.'

'You're a fine one to talk,' his mother said.

'Oh, come on, Mum, she was a bloody nuisance – you know she was.'

'Tom!'

'Well, she was,' Tom said. 'And what about the time she left the gate of the water-meadow open, "by mistake" she said, and let all the sheep out?' Tom's mother tried to pour herself another cup of tea. Tom watched as the tea trickled away to tea-leaves.

'She was only young, Tom,' she said quietly, 'and a city girl at that.' She filled the teapot, pulling her head away as the steam rose into her face. 'And if I remember rightly,' she went on, 'it was you that left the tractor lights on all night last Saturday, wasn't it?' Tom knew she was right, but that just made him feel more resentful.

'Anyway,' he said, 'Dad said we wouldn't do it again after her.'

'I said nothing of the kind,' his father said, folding the newspaper. 'I said we should choose more carefully next time, that's all – someone older, more adaptable.'

'And George is twelve, Tom,' said his mother, 'nearly your age. Mrs Thomas says he's a nice boy – shy and quiet, but nice. He just hasn't managed to settle anywhere.' She was scraping off the jam Tom had left on the butter. That was something else Tom and his father were always quarrelling about: dirtying the butter. She hated it when they argued.

'What's "adaptable"?' Storme asked, but no one answered her. She was used to that, so she tried again, pulling at her mother's elbow. 'Mum, Mum, what's "adaptable" mean?' But her mother wasn't listening to her, and Storme wasn't that interested anyway, so she gave up and went back to her sausage.

'I wonder why though?' Tom asked.

'Why what?' his mother said.

'Why he didn't settle anywhere else?'

'Well, I don't know,' Tom's mother said. 'Mrs Thomas didn't say.'

'She wouldn't, would she?' Tom said.

'Now what exactly do you mean by that?' There was an edge to his father's voice.

'Well, if there was something wrong about him, she wouldn't tell you, would she? You wouldn't have him, would you?' Tom looked deliberately at his

mother. He was trying to avoid another confrontation with his father. 'Anyway,' he went on, 'she always sends us the worst cases, you know that. You're the only ones that'll take them.'

'That's enough, Tom,' said his mother, but Tom ignored the plea in her voice. He didn't want this George to stay in the house. There had been only one foster child he'd got on with, and he'd been taken away after two weeks because they'd found a permanent home for him somewhere else. The rest of them had just been a nuisance. George might be more his own age than most of them, but somehow that made it worse, not better.

'I can tell you one thing,' Tom said, pushing his sausage plate away. 'I'm not going to look after him all the time, I can tell you that.'

'Please, Tom!' His mother was leaning towards him begging him to stop, but Tom couldn't respond to her – it had gone too far already.

'I've got better things to do,' he said, and as he said it, he knew it sounded a challenge to his father.

'Like working on the farm, I suppose. Moving calves, perhaps?' His father was speaking quietly. Tom recognised the warning sign, but ignored it. It was his

holiday they were interfering with and there was only one summer holiday each year.

'I don't want him here. I've got my own friends, haven't I? He'll just be in the way, and what's more you never even asked me about it. It was all arranged between you and Dad and that Mrs Thomas. You're not going to look after him, I am – and no one bothered to ask me, did they?'

'That's not fair, Tom.' His mother sounded hurt, and Tom looked at her. She looked away and began piling up the plates, avoiding Tom with her eyes. 'You know very well I asked you about having another one this summer, and you agreed – well, you said you didn't mind anyway. Anyhow when Mrs Thomas rang up and told me about George, I had to say yes.'

He hadn't meant to upset his mother and he didn't want to go on, but he couldn't bring himself to finish without a final gesture of protest. He scraped back his chair and stood up. And then his father took the wind out of his sails.

'You've said enough.' His father was glaring up at him. 'You're always saying that we treat you like a child. Just listen to yourself. You carry on like a six-year-old.'

'When's he coming?' Storme asked, apparently oblivious of the anger on the other side of the table. It was a fortunately-timed question. Tom and his father were steamed up and ready for battle. Her mother took the opportunity with both hands. 'Mid-morning,' she said hastily. 'She said they'd be here some time around elevenish. It would be nice if all of us could be here to meet him – don't you think, Tom?'

Tom knew she hated his arguments with his father, but it had been better this holiday so far – hardly one serious quarrel until now. He'd managed to control his temper and even his father seemed less inclined to provoke a row. He looked down at his mother and saw in her face that weary, beseeching smile he'd seen so often when she was trying to bring a truce between them.

'I'll be there, Mum,' he said, pushing his chair in.

'You'll be nice to George, dear, won't you?' she went on. 'Give him a chance to settle, eh?' Tom nodded.

'Where do you want those calves, Dad?' he asked, bending down by the door to pull on his boots.

'They'll have to go down on the water-meadows until the winter, I reckon. And Tom, don't forget to

check the electric wire down there, will you? We don't want them running around in the woods.' His tone was gentler now. Tom felt it and warmed to it. The trouble was that he was too close to his father – they were too alike in many ways. He stamped his feet firmly into the bottom of his boots. 'What about the milk this morning? Did you do all right?' his father asked.

'Not bad,' said Tom, 'just under two gallons. My wrists are still aching – they'll never get used to it. I took my transistor over like you said and she seemed to like it, but I wish they wouldn't give the news so often – Emma doesn't seem to like it. I think she's bored with it.'

'Sensible cow,' his father laughed.

'Can I come?' Storme was pushing the last crust of toast into her mouth. She always left the crusts till last, always had done. 'I've finished,' she said, wiping her mouth and chewing hard.

'You can open gates if you like,' said Tom. 'I'll see you down there.'

It was as if there had never been a row – better in a way, he thought. He hardly ever thought about his parents unless he'd had a quarrel. He smiled at them

and shut the kitchen door behind him. It was blazing hot already and he stood for a moment squinting in the sunlight, then he scuffed his way across the yard, climbed the gate by the Dutch barn and sauntered slowly down the track towards the water-meadows. He kicked at a large piece of silver-black flint that lay in his path, unbuttoned his shirt and wondered about George.

George looked out of the window of the Mini; there was nothing else to do. The grass and the white heads of the hogweed leaned over into the lane ahead of them and bent suddenly in the wind that the car made as it passed. The radio prattled on: 'Well, well, welcome all you lovely people out there on this sunny, sunny day. And for a sunny day, let's all of us listen in to the new sunny sound of "Tin Pan O'Malley" in their amazing, chart-topping new release . . .' Mrs Thomas turned down the volume a little and smiled at him. He liked Mrs Thomas; she was one of the few people he'd known all his life. He was glad she'd stopped trying to talk to him, but she was always good that way.

The familiar dread of meeting new people welled

up inside him. He bit at his knuckle until it brought the tears to his eyes. If only she'd turn round and go back.

'How much further?' he asked.

'Not far now,' she said. 'Two or three miles – won't be long.'

George studied the grooves his teeth had made in his knuckle and the music changed to the hiss of static as they passed under a mesh of electric wires.

George looked out of the window again for the first glimpse of yet another home.