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OWEN AND THE SOLDIER

LISA THOMPSON

With illustrations by
Mike Lowery

Barrington Stoke

For Clare, Jeff, Grace and Ella

CHAPTER 1

Everyone has a secret, don't they? Not a big fat secret like they robbed a bank or they poisoned their grandma by accident. But small secrets. Something people keep hidden deep inside, hoping it won't bubble up their throat and burst out of their mouth for everyone to hear.

Maybe some people secretly wish they could be a stuntman in a Hollywood film or perhaps they secretly fancy Amelia Carey in class 9A. Or maybe their secret is something a bit … different, like mine. Maybe they like to sit on a bench in the park and talk to a soldier. Not a

living, breathing soldier, but a soldier made of stone.

There was a stone soldier in our park. The park wasn't really used any more, except as a shortcut on the way to somewhere else. There was an old toilet block that had bars on the window and was always locked, and there was a tennis court in the middle that was free to use. Someone stole the net last summer, so now it was just a rectangle of tarmac with a fence around it.

I walked across the park on my way to and from school. There was a war memorial garden behind some high hedges and I always looked in at the stone soldier inside. He sat on a bench, all on his own, and one day I saw he looked different. There was a white stain across the top of his cap. I thought someone had scribbled graffiti on the soldier at first, but when I got closer I realised it was bird poo. There was no one around, so I went in and over to the bench.

I got my drinking bottle out of my bag and dribbled some water on top of his head to wash the poo away. The water poured over his cap and ran down his face. I sat beside him on the bench.

"There's no need to cry about it," I said as I watched the water drip onto the dusty ground. "You can't sit there with poo on your head, can you? You'd look like a right idiot."

The stone soldier stared down at the floor. He wore a uniform from the First World War and sat leaning forward with his elbows on his knees.

I'd looked at the soldier many times as I walked past, but I'd never seen him close up before. There were a few lines across his forehead and his lips were pressed together. Some of his chin had crumbled away and half of one of his boots was missing. I thought he must have been sitting in the garden for a long time.

"Do you like being a soldier?" I asked him as I studied his face.

Dad once told me that in the last two years of the First World War, men didn't have a choice about fighting. The people in charge of the country made them go to war. I thought the stone soldier must have been one of those men. He didn't look so brave to me – he just looked like a normal man who was made to go to war.

"I don't think you do like it really, do you?" I said as I put my water bottle away and spotted a packet of tissues in the bottom of my bag. Mum had put them in there months ago. They were covered in tiny yellow ducks and far too embarrassing to use in school, but I kept forgetting to throw them away. I took a tissue out and began to wipe some of the water off the soldier's cheeks.

"Sorry about the ducks," I said.

I thought the soldier looked better now that he didn't seem like he was crying. I used another tissue to wipe the last of the poo from his head, then I got up and put them in a bin by the hedge.

The small area behind the hedge was known as the war memorial garden, but there weren't any flowers or plants in it. There was just the stone soldier on the bench, the bin and a plaque with twenty-five names engraved on it. Those were the names of men from our town who died during the First World War. I once asked Dad which one the soldier was, but Dad said that he represents all of the soldiers who died and that he wasn't a real-life person. I wanted to ask Dad what regiment he might have been in if he had been real. But I hadn't seen my dad for two years now, so that wasn't going to happen.

I sat back down on the bench and took out a tinfoil parcel. Inside was my leftover sandwich

that I hadn't finished at lunch-time. I normally had ham and lettuce, but today I had fish paste because that was all I could find in the cupboard.

As I ate my sandwich, I watched the sun and shadows flicker across the soldier's back. I almost thought I'd see him move as he took a deep breath and sighed.

I screwed up the tinfoil and put it back into my bag and then I stood up.

"Well, I'll see you tomorrow then," I said, and I went out past the hedge.

And that was how it all started.

That was when I began to talk to the stone soldier.