

A shadow flits along the lane, like a man running. Not a jogger. More furtive. I rub my eyes and go to find my glasses. There's nothing. I'd imagined it. That's the trouble with being on your own. Things get out of proportion. I know I should go down to the lunch club every week. I might think about it later. Those marigolds won't plant themselves unless I get a shift on. Stan always said marigolds need a good month before they start to do anything.

By the time I'm ready, the sky has clouded over. I loosen the soil, make a hole, separate each tiny stem and press down the threadlike roots, nice and safe. I've only got a couple more to do when the heavens open. Talk about an April shower. I scurry inside. It won't last long. I make myself a cup of tea and sit down in the porch to wait.

A dark figure, hunched looking neither right nor left is standing under the laburnum tree in Mr Jenkin's garden. His hair is plastered to his head and his jacket has more rips and darns than material. Looks a youngster too. What is he doing round here? He's got a rucksack on his back but it's seen better days. He moves slowly along the road. I bet it was him I saw earlier. He's up to no good. Our lane is a dead end, only leading to the cutting where the motorway runs from Harwich to London. He must have felt my eyes on him as he starts to walk in the direction of the village. If he comes back, I'll call the police or Mr Jenkins. No. It's Tuesday. He always goes to the day centre on Tuesday.

At least the sky is clearing. It's time to get the last of the plants in. I stand up and ease my aching back. That dratted kid is still here, huddled under the horse chestnut tree. I tell a lie. He's slumped in a heap. Is he ill? I reach for the phone and I'm about to dial when I stop. He's trying to wrap something around his foot.

I go outside. 'Oy? What're you doing?'

He looks up, eyes as wild as a startled deer and scrambles to his feet. He backs away. I don't know what makes me do it but I beckon him. 'Are you all right?'

He walks slowly as if measuring every pace, his shoes flapping at each step and I know he's ready to run, although in those shoes he won't get far. I point down to his feet.

'Trouble?'

He shrugs. 'Broke. I mend.'

'What with? Magic dust?'

'What?'

'Magic- oh never mind.' I open the gate. 'Let me see if I can help.'

He half turns. 'No. I go.'

Poor kid is terrified. Skinny too. And his clothes? More like a heap of rags. 'Come into the porch. I've got a pair of my husband's shoes. They'll be a bit big but you can tie them on and they'll be watertight.'

He shakes his head. 'Shoes.' I point to his feet. 'New ones for you.'

A smile of understanding flickers and his face relaxes for a moment. 'Thank you.'

I open the porch door and he steps inside. 'Give me your coat and I'll put it through the dryer. Tea?' I lift my hand as if I'm draining a cup.

He nods. 'Please.'

I leave him sitting in the porch on my old chair. The kettle boils while I go through into the bedroom. I've never had the courage to throw away Stan's old stuff. It's comforting to know I've still got a bit of him here. I open his wardrobe and the smell of him wafts out; peppermints, Old Spice and maleness. I pick out a couple of jumpers, a shirt and a fleece. A pair of Stan's corduroy trousers with a belt will have to do and I rummage around to find his

nearly new walking boots. I take the pile to the boy and nod in the direction of the bathroom
'Bath. Change. OK?'

He takes the clothes and mumbles something. The bathroom door closes and I hear the bolt drawn in place. It should be me locking him in. Thousands of old dears would have rung the police. Except what could he do? If Hitler couldn't get rid of me all those years ago, I don't expect a kid like him to offer any threat. I smile at my own joke. I bet he could do with a decent meal.

Ten minutes later the water gurgles down the plughole and I switch on the gas. By the time the boy comes out, there's a couple of fried egg sandwiches and a pot of tea waiting for him. He'll never win a fashion competition; he'll be warm and clean for a while. He holds out the rags he's been wearing. I open the pedal bin. 'In.'

'In' he says and laughs.

He sits down at the table and I push the food over to him. 'Eat first, story later' I say and pour us both a cup of tea. Except I don't need to hear it. His face tells of nights huddled in the dark as hell rages around him, of bomb shattered streets and times you hardly dare breathe in case you are discovered.

I hold out my hand. 'Call me Gretta.'

'Ahmed.'

In broken English and a few signs, he tells me he'd been promised a safe passage. He has cousins in London. The driver forced them off the lorry at the port. He'd walked since then. No money. No papers. I could imagine the terror as he'd crossed the sea in a metal container. No water. No food and no sanitation. Animals are transported better. I reach into my purse and pull out two twenty-pound notes. I press them into his hand. 'If you follow the

road to the left, you'll reach the town. You can catch a bus to London. The 356.' I write down the number.

He clasps my hands. 'You are very kind. Thank you.' He stands up and I show him out. On the door step he hugs me. 'Thank you again.'

I watch as he walks off down the road. I close the door. The house is empty and silent. I am alone again. I go into the front room, pull a dented, metal box from the desk drawer and open it. It doesn't take me long to find the photo of two solemn faced children, aged five and nine, wrenched from their families to save their lives. It is dated 1944. You see, Stanislaw Pavel and Gretta Soloman had once made a similar journey.

I stand up. 'You'd have been proud of me, Stan' I say.

I put on my coat and go outside to plant the last of those darn marigolds. If I'm quick, I might even make the lunch club bus.

(1172 words)