

Chapter 1: *Them*

You first heard the rumour about some foreign children coming to live on your estate from Frank.

Frank was one of your brother's friends. The three of you were sitting by the lake on the edge of the housing estate where you'd lived throughout the war.

But now the war was over.

Wasn't it?

'There's some Germans coming,' Frank told you both. 'To live in the empty hostels. Three hundred of them. And they're coming tomorrow.'

You glanced at your brother to see if Frank was lying. You always did that. His friends were forever telling you stories, at least half of them lies.

But John nodded. 'It's true,' he agreed.

And so you believed it. John might have been the most annoying brother in the world, but he never lied. That was one of the rules Mum insisted on. No lies. Always tell the truth.

'But what are the Germans coming here for? That's what I want to know,' Frank went on. 'It's only a few weeks since we beat them and Hitler topped himself. How come they get to come over here? We've barely enough food for us.'

And that did seem strange to you. It was August 1945. The war against Nazi Germany had been finished for a little over three months. Why did

German children have to come to England? Half the British Army weren't even home yet. Your dad was still in Japan or somewhere like that. You'd not seen him for years. If he walked up along the side of the lake now you probably wouldn't even recognise him.

What Frank had said about the Germans had been going round and round your head. So when you saw your Mum coming back from town, walking with some of the other mums, you wanted to ask her about it. What did she know about these Germans?

Mum had been to do what she did every Tuesday. To watch the newsreel at the cinema in Windermere and then go shopping for food. She had to take ration coupons to the butcher and greengrocer and bakers to try and get food for the family. But you could see that her bag had barely anything in it and you couldn't help thinking what Frank had said about there not being enough food. Mum looked tired, but when she saw you she dropped the bag on the track, ran to you and hugged you hard. So hard it hurt. And you saw other mums doing the same to their children. It was so strange.

'What's up Mum?' you asked her.

She shook her head. 'Nothing. I love you. That's all.'

But you knew something was up. All the mums were weird that day. Like when they'd been in the cinema they'd not seen the newsreel at all, but had watched some horror film that had scared them all so much they had to cuddle their own children to feel better.

Later that night you were having your tea with Mum and your brother John. There wasn't much to eat. Just potatoes and carrots and you still felt hungry after it. But you'd had to get used to that feeling through 5 years of war. And there was even less to go round now it was over.

You caught your brother eyeing the tomatoes that Mum was growing in the window of the small house you lived in on the estate. Most families grew tomatoes. There was an excitement about when they'd be ripe and ready to eat. With rationing, you didn't get much in the way of fresh fruit and veg.

'Can't we have some of those?' John asked.

Mum shook her head. 'They're not ripe yet. Look. There's barely a blush of colour on them.'

And Mum was right. They were green or pale orange at best. Not red and ripe and rich like they would be when they were ready to eat. You could taste them by just thinking about it.

But John wasn't having it. He was angry. Hungry angry. He slammed his knife and fork down on the table, drawing a frown from Mum. She always said it was important to have good table manners. You had to hold your knife and fork properly and put them gently on the plate. Not slam things down. That was another one of Mum's rules.

'And who are these Germans that are coming to live here?' John demanded. 'Will we get even less food? Will the dog get less food too?'

You looked down at your dog, Spot, who was sitting patiently, waiting for someone to drop some food from the table. On purpose or by accident.

‘We need to talk about those Germans,’ Mum said. ‘They are children first and foremost. Remember that. And they’re not all Germans.’

‘Yes, they are,’ John snapped. ‘There’s 300 Germans coming to live here and we don’t have any more than one stupid potato to eat. What happens when they come? Do we all get half a potato then? Will they get all our tomatoes too when they’re ripe?’

‘John!’

‘I hate them already,’ your brother went on, ignoring Mum’s reprimand. ‘Frank says we should stop them coming. So they don’t take all our food and jobs and even our houses. We should send them back.’

‘John!’ Mum barked your brother’s name and the room fell silent.

With Dad still away fighting in Japan, John fancied he was the boss sometimes. But not when Mum shouted his name like that. He was back to being a thirteen-year-old boy then.

‘You can’t send them back,’ Mum said in a quiet voice after a long silence. ‘They are children and they can’t go home again.’

John didn’t reply. He knew he’d gone too far.

But you were desperate to know why they couldn’t be sent back. It didn’t make sense. Why should a load of Germans, or children or whoever, whose mums and dads had started the war in the first place, get to come over here and eat your food?

So you asked, risking Mum being angry with you. ‘Why can’t we send them back?’

'They've no home to go *back* to.' Mum sounded sad not cross.

'So where are their mums and dads, then?' you asked.

'They're dead, mostly, love,' Mum said. 'They've no one.'

'Oh,' you said.

John was still silent. Mum faced him.

'The children that are coming... they're really not all German, John,' Mum told him. 'And it wouldn't matter if they were. They're children. Children who have lost their parents and their homes and,' Mum stopped speaking. She looked down at her plate, cut her potato in two and passed you each a half.

Your heart leapt and you picked up your fork again. Extra food!

But John put his potato half back on Mum's plate.

'I'm sorry, Mum,' he murmured.

So you did the same, reluctantly. Even though you were still hungry.

Later – after tea – by the edge of the lake again, you sat with some of the other children of the estate. There was electricity in the atmosphere. The sun had slipped behind the wooded hill on the far side of the lake and the air felt suddenly cool. Everyone was talking about the Germans who weren't Germans.

It was hard – on nights like these – not to feel that where you lived was paradise. There might not be much food and your dad might be away at war, but you lived by a lake where you could swim and woods where you could run. And the German bombers had never made it to Windermere.

Still, your brother and his friends were doing their best to spoil it, telling each other facts you knew were not facts at all, but things they had invented. Things they wanted to believe.

‘They’re not German.’

‘Some of them are.’

‘Their parents were German soldiers who got killed.’

‘One of them is Hitler’s son.’

‘They’re Jews.’

‘They’re landing at the airport now. They’ll be here in the morning.’

Then Peggy Wing was talking about the film the adults had seen at the cinema. Most of the grown-ups hadn’t told their children about the film that had made them act so funny. But Peggy’s mum had.

‘Mum told me the Jews had all been kept in camps and they’d not been fed for weeks and that lots of them had just died and that others had been murdered, then she started crying and wouldn’t tell me anything else. Said that she’d told me too much already.’

As the sky faded from bright blue to pale blue and stars began to twinkle, you sat and stared back at your lake and woods and hills and fields and wondered how it would be to have these children come and live among you. What would it be like in the morning when the Jewish children arrived? Would they be strange? Would they take all your food? Or would some of them become your friends?

Them is a story by children's author, Tom Palmer, based on his 10+ novel *After the War*, which is about a group of Holocaust survivors. You can read chapter two on Tuesday 25th January. *Them* has been commissioned by the National Literacy Trust to mark Holocaust Memorial Day 2022. Thank you for reading it. www.tompalmer.co.uk/after-the-war.

Chapter 2: *Them*

You couldn't sleep. And nor could your brother. In the bedroom, you shared you could hear the noises of trucks or buses arriving in the night. The sound of voices calling out, too. The Germans who were not Germans – and might be Jewish children – were coming.

You had taken it in turns to stare into the darkness through your small bedroom window to see what you could see, but it was so dark that night you had nothing to go on.

Later, when John had gone to sleep, you thought you heard someone crying across the estate. The way Spot reacted, his ears pricking up, made you sure that you really had heard something.

It was John's idea to spy on the Jewish children the next morning. Mum had been so cagey about who they were and what had happened to them, that you both wanted answers of your own. You felt like detectives. You needed to know whether they were good or bad.

Even though you wanted to get outside quickly, Mum made you dress properly. John had wanted to run out and see them in his vest. But Mum made you both put on trousers and jumpers and a waterproof. It was still chilly from the night and there was a light drizzle coming off the fells. Another of Mum's rules, like manners at the table and not lying. You had to dress properly outside.

On the edge of the estate, adjacent to the hostels where the Jewish children were going to be housed, there were some dense woods on raised ground. If you crouched up there, you would be able to see everything. You took Spot. He would keep quiet and still if you wanted him to.

‘Be careful,’ John said as you found a vantage point. ‘Don’t let them see us. And if they do, run. Run as fast as you can home to Mum where they won’t be able to get you.’

You did wonder what John was so afraid the Jewish children would do to you if they did get you.

Once in position, you saw them. Dozens, just standing on the grass. Boys only. You couldn’t see any girls. They looked funny and it was hard to work out why until John said it out loud.

‘Underwear!’

‘What?’

‘They’re all in underwear.’

Now you were both laughing. It was such a funny sight to see. Rows and rows of boys going into some sort of a tent wearing underwear. Just vests and pants. In front of the rose beds that were still in flower in late August. And you wondered what your mum would think now to see these boys half undressed.

The tent they were going into puzzled you at first. The boys were passing through it. And – as they came out – they were covered in powder. White powder. They brushed it off themselves and the air clouded with it.

‘What the...?’ John said.

The scene reminded you of something to do with sheep. And then you got it. They were being cleaned or deloused. Like herds of farm animals.

‘Let’s get closer,’ John whispered. ‘Look... some of them are going into one of the dining halls.’

You followed John silently through the trees and across the grass so that you could peek in through the window of the dining hall and see them. Your mind was still reeling from seeing them herded into a tent, then doused in powder.

Reaching the window you stayed low and listened, not wanting to be seen. You could hear voices, some shouting. But none of it was intelligible. It was all in a foreign language.

‘They can’t even speak English,’ John said laughing. ‘They must be really dumb. As well as dirty.’

You didn’t reply to your brother. But you did wonder how they would get on in England if they couldn’t speak English. What was the point of them being here? How would they be able to do anything like go to school or get or a job or even just ask for a cup of tea? Maybe they would be better off staying where they came from, you thought. But – too keen to see them up close, see what the faces of these creatures looked like – you peeped in.

You both gasped at the same time.

The Jewish children were sitting at long tables and had been served with baskets of bread. Instead of passing them around, each taking a piece of bread in turn, they were grabbing hunks of it, some eating immediately, others

stuffing bread up their tops; there were pieces of bread flying around the room.

You have never seen anything like it. Mum would have gone mad to see you do this. You couldn't stop yourself laughing.

But John, not laughing, said: 'They're like animals.'

And then one of them was looking at you. His eyes wide as he chewed open-mouthed on his bread. He was smiling and then waving at you.

Now John saw him too and you both found yourselves running, fast and hard, back into the woods.

You stayed hiding in the woods until all the Jewish children had left the dining hall, some running into their hostels with several pieces of bread in their arms. Others wandered in the drizzle towards the rows of houses where the local people lived. Where you lived.

'What are they going to do now?' John asked you. His first words since you had run from the dining hall window.

It was strange. Very strange. John, who was always so confident and in control, seemed to have no idea what to do.

Now you watched as a group of three boys – all in underwear still – wandered around the estate and you could sense John becoming tenser as he saw them stand near your house.

John's and your bikes were both still propped outside your front door. The front door was open, too. But you knew Mum was out. You began to feel more anxious as the boys moved closer to your house.

'They going to rob us,' John spat out. 'Look. They're going to go into our house. They might even take the tomatoes. They're nearly ripe.'

You watched as the Jewish children stopped next to the two bicycles. They were talking. One of them knelt down and touched the tyre on John's bicycle. They were more interested in the bicycles than the tomatoes, it seemed.

'I hate them,' John spat, standing up, ready to run across to stop the refugee children touching your bikes. But not moving. Doing nothing to intervene.

And you found it hard to believe that, still, John did nothing as the three boys lifted the bikes from the wall and began to laugh and chatter, their foreign words undecipherable to you, then climbing on the bikes as if to cycle away.

Why was your brother still doing nothing?

His face was twisted with anger, but he stayed squatting among the trees, as Spot picked up on his anger and began yapping at the boys.

You watched, Spot yanking at his rope, as one boy climbed onto one bicycle, one on the other, and as they cycled away in the direction of the lake. You could even see the looks on the faces of the boys. They were laughing.

'Let's follow them,' you said. 'Get the bikes back. They're heading down by the lake.'

John shook his head vigorously. And you understood. He was afraid of the Jewish children.

‘Shall I go?’ you heard yourself say.

John nodded, but his eyes wouldn’t meet yours.

‘I’ll go,’ you said again and you walked out from the cover of the trees across the open field towards the edge of the lake, led by Spot tugging at the rope as if he intended to take on the bicycle thieves himself.

It took you a few minutes to find them, but there they were, their silhouettes black against the rippling light coming off Windermere.

Were you afraid?

A bit.

What were you planning to say to the boys who had stolen your bikes?

You weren’t sure.

So you stood there until you saw one of them, then all three of them, look over at you, then stand to face you.

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Chapter 3: *Them*

‘So the boys were nice and brought the bicycles home?’ Mum asked as you sat down to eat your breakfast, the sun coming through the window where the tomatoes were ripening, redder every day.

It was the following morning.

‘Very nice,’ you told her, glancing at John. ‘One is called Mordecai and he speaks English. But the others – Yossi and Leo – don’t.’

‘They should learn to speak English,’ John muttered under his breath. ‘Them lot? They’ve no manners. They’re animals.’

‘They are learning,’ you snapped back.

‘Children,’ Mum said, heading off an argument.

Since the incident with the bicycles there was a lot of tension at home. Between you and your brother. It was strange. For years you had looked up to him and thought like him. But not anymore.

For days, you had had to hear him talking about how *they* steal bicycles and *they* take our food and *they* eat like animals when they get that food. And how – when Mum is not around – *they* will learn a lesson soon enough.

Your brother and Frank and the rest of them had a plan. You could tell that. But you had no idea what it was. Or when it would happen.

Until it did.

On Fridays at nightfall, many of the Jewish children gathered together in one of the halls for a religious service. You had wanted to go in and watch. To see if it was like when you and your mum and brother went to church. Or if it was completely different. And on the third Friday that they'd been here, you and Mum were allowed to go and be part of their service.

The children sat on benches and a man called Rabbi Weiss – who was a bit like a Jewish vicar – began talking and chanting in another language. You thought it might be German or Polish because you now knew that most of the boys were Polish, not German – but Mum told you that it was Hebrew, the Jewish language.

The children were all singing together when it happened.

A bang on the door, then loud crackling as a bunch of fireworks went off in the room, the stench of gunpowder in your nostrils. You put your hands over your ears and watched the fireworks, thinking maybe it was part of the service, some sort of display, but realising it wasn't as the boys panicked, running for the doors and windows, or just curling up on the floor. Some sobbing. You saw one younger boy wet himself, he was so frightened.

It was horrible. The way the boys reacted made you wonder what they had been through. They had acted like someone was shooting guns or throwing bombs at them. You had known it was a nasty trick from someone off the estate when you saw faces at the window, looking in on the chaos, grinning.

After the fireworks, Mum invited three of the boys home for something to eat. Yossi, Leo and Mordecai. They quickly recovered from the shock of the

fireworks as Mum sat them at the dinner table, laid out the best white tablecloth and set out the family's best silver cutlery for the boys to use. Mum served the boys scouse, a soup made of vegetables.

Your brother was nowhere to be seen. And you had to wonder why the boy who never missed a meal was not at the table. Had he thrown the fireworks? Him and his friends? Was that the lesson he was going to teach the boys that he had been talking about? Had that been his face at the window watching as the Jewish children had been so distressed?

You weren't sure, but you suspected.

Mum placed large bowls of soup in front of Yossi, Leo and Mordecai. Then one for you. And you watched as they ate, noticing they no longer tore at their bread, or stuffed it into their clothes. You smiled as Leo and Mordecai ate. But then saw that Yossi was not eating. His head was hanging over his bowl. For a minute you thought he was praying. Until Mordecai stood next to him and put a hand on his shoulder and you saw that Yossi was crying, whispering half-formed words to his friend.

Now Mordecai looked at Mum.

'He sad because of meal and table cloth. Reminds him of Shabbat, that's what Jewish people call our religious day. Like your Sabbath. On Friday nights at home we did this. With our parents and brothers and sisters. Before.'

Yossi was listening, trying to understand the conversation.

'Look,' he took a piece of newspaper out of his pocket. He showed it to Mum, but not to you. Mum took it and read the article. She studied a photograph too. But she wouldn't let you see even though you asked to.

Now you noticed your brother in the doorway. It was hard to read the expression on his face, to put yourself in his position. A boy comes home to see his mum feeding and comforting other boys he doesn't think should be in his country, let alone his home and at his seat at the dinner table.

John moved back into the night. Mum folded the piece of newspaper and returned it to Yossi. Then the children continued to eat.

When Mordecai, Yossi and Leo had gone, John returned and ate what was left of the scouse in silence.

You could tell that Mum wanted to ask him about the fireworks. Had it been his doing? Sometimes Mum challenged John about his behaviour; sometimes she didn't.

'What was in the newspaper?' you asked.

'Nothing,' Mum said.

You saw John narrow his eyes. He will have seen their newspaper too. He will want to know what was in it.

But Mum refused to say.

After the meal – and the uncomfortable silence, Mum glancing at John all the time – Frank appeared in the open doorway. His eyes were bright.

'Can John come out to play?' Frank asked Mum. 'They are up to something down by the lake.'

They. That word again. They. Them. They. Them.

'Can I leave the table, please, Mum?' John asked.

Mum sighed. ‘Yes. But take your sister. I need some time on my own.’

You saw John and Frank share a frown. You knew they didn’t want to take you. But there’s no way you were missing out on this.

You followed your brother and Frank towards the side of the lake. They were well ahead of you now. So far you couldn’t see them. They must have been down there already. It was so nearly dark, but, still, there was just enough light to see the silhouettes of several figures, attaching a rope to a tree, then heaving something onto the end of the rope.

You gasped. The thing on the end of the rope was in the shape of a man. And they were stringing him up.

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Chapter 4: *Them*

You crept closer to the edge of the lake. There were maybe fifty of the refugee children standing at the shore. It was dark, but there was enough light to see them and what they were doing.

There was a rope attached to the low bough of a tree. It was a bough you had climbed along and jumped into the lake from since you were five years old. But tonight it was not a playground: tonight it had a figure hanging off it attached to the end of a rope.

The figure of a man.

You gasped, then put your hand over your mouth and one of the boys, alerted, looked round at you. It was Mordecai. His face clouded with worry, then he smiled a friendly smile and he moved towards you. He could tell you were confused and upset at what you were seeing.

‘It is a model,’ he told you. ‘A model of Hitler. Not a man. He is made of paper and wearing old clothes. Please do not worry. You see it is paper. It is burning.’

Mordecai was pointing at the figure. It was on fire now. And you could see it was not a real person strung up on the lakeside. It was like a Guy Fawkes figure. An effigy.

Now that the flames rushed up the body of Adolf Hitler, you saw the faces of the refugee children light up in the flames too. They were not smiling or laughing. They were staring at the figure with looks of intense concentration.

And then you saw your brother. He came for you and grabbed you by the hand, dragging you away from the scene by the side of the lake.

‘Come away,’ he said. ‘They’re animals.’

‘No,’ you told him. ‘It was Hitler. They were burning Hitler.’

‘I don’t care. You’re coming. Now.’

You argued all the way home. But he wouldn’t let go of your hand until you were inside and Mum was standing there. Then he released you as Spot raced around between you, yapping and stressing, knowing something was wrong.

Mum rushed towards you and took something from your hair. It was a large piece of paper turned to ash.

‘What’s this? What happened, John?’

‘They made an effigy of Hitler,’ John said, reaching for the dog and stroking him to calm him. ‘They strung him up and burned him. But we thought he was a real man. It was horrible. They’re animals.’

Your brother had said it again. Animals, he called them.

For the most part, Spot went where he liked on the estate. He was everybody’s friend. He had taken a liking to the boys who you are pretty sure were feeding him scraps of food.

The day after the boys burned the effigy of Hitler by the lake, you had not seen Spot for a while and so went searching for him. There was a

classroom where the boys were taught art. Pots full of paintbrushes. Huge sheets of paper. Easels for them to paint on while standing up. It was a place you would have liked to go and do art too, but it was out of bounds for the children of the estate.

As you approached the art room, you heard Spot yapping. Someone had him in there and – without thinking – you burst into the room.

Four of the boys looked up and – seeing you – Spot broke away and bolted for the door. But he was not the brown and white Jack Russell you knew so well. His legs were all different colours. Red, yellow, green, blue. The boys had painted him.

Before you raced after Spot, you look at the boys and you could see two were smiling, two looking guilty. They had painted your dog. You had no doubts that, when Spot got home, Mum would go mad.

And you were right. At home, Mum was already scrubbing Spot with a bucket and brush when you got there. John, leaning against the door laughing, but not so loud that Mum could hear.

‘Who did this? Did you do this?’ she asked you.

‘No.’

‘Who did it, then?’

You saw them coming as she was asking the question. The four refugee boys who painted Spot were walking sheepishly over from the art room to your house. You glanced at them, then back at Mum.

'They did,' you said.

John was no longer laughing.

Mum looked down at Spot and continued to scrub the paint off him. She was furious. You could tell. The refugee boys had had it now.

John watched, saying nothing, but he had a dark look on his face. One it was hard to interpret. Was he angry? Was he upset? Or perhaps he was confused.

The boys approached. Mordecai was at the front. But Mum refused to acknowledge them.

'We say sorry,' Mordecai said.

Yossi was holding a pair of roses.

'We is sorry.'

The other boys said it now in faltering English and you wondered if they actually knew what they are saying, what it meant.

Mum scrubbed away. Faster and faster. Spot yelped in pain.

The boys watched in silence, as did you and John.

When she had finished, Mum stood up and Spot shook himself off.

Mordecai offered the roses again. Mum took them.

'Thank you,' she said as John disappeared into the house and the boys walked away, slowly, heads hung.

John was furious. He turned on Mum, perhaps for the first time in his life.

‘Why did you let them get away with it? If I had painted the dog you would have gone mad with me. Made me stay in my room for days. For weeks. I’m your son, not them. I behave well at the table. I never steal. I never lie. So why would I still get punished and they won’t?’

You saw Mum’s face go pale. She sat down, her eyes on the table in front of her. Then she looked up.

‘You don’t know what those children have been through.’

‘So tell me.’

‘I don’t know either.’

‘Yes, you do. You went to see that film and you read that boy’s newspaper and you talk to the other adults. You know stuff. So tell me.’

‘Yes,’ Mum admitted, ‘maybe I do know some things.’

And so – that evening, as they made tea together – Mum explained to John what had happened to the children who had come to stay on your estate. Come as refugees.

You were told to walk the dog and not listen at the door.

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Chapter 5: *Them*

You woke late the next morning and stumbled into the kitchen to find your brother stood in the window, picking tomatoes off the tomato plants, then placing them gently in a basket.

You watched him until the tomato plant was bare and he turned to smile at you. 'I've nearly finished,' he says. 'You can help me if you like.'

'What's going on?' you asked.

'Come and find out,' John said. 'You carry one basket. I'll carry the other. You'll see what's happening.'

Your brother handed you a basket and you followed him out onto the track and then the grass and walked towards the kitchens where the children's food was usually prepared.

'What are we going you do?' you asked.

'What everyone else is doing,' John told you.

And you could see that other people from the estate were leaving their houses, some with baskets of tomatoes, others with bags of tomatoes, more just carrying them loose in their arms. The whole estate's tomato crop – just ripe – being taken to the kitchens through the chilly autumn air.

The children stood outside their hostels, watching this scene in silence.

The kitchens were hot and steamy compared to the cooler air outside, condensation on the inside of the windows. And there you saw hundreds of

tomatoes being chopped and dropped into a huge cauldron with herbs and salt and onions.

‘I still don’t get it,’ you said to your brother.

‘The tomatoes are for them,’ he told you. ‘Me and mum thought it up. And everyone on the estate thinks it’s a good idea. All the estate’s tomatoes will make the healthiest tomato soup for them to enjoy.’

You nodded. But you still didn’t get it. Why was John doing this? John who is always so cross about the children. The boy who called them Germans, Jews, Them. Animals even.

‘But why do they get our tomatoes?’ you asked.

John smiled and you walked back out onto the grassy area between the refectory and your row of houses.

‘Because they need them more than we do,’ he explained.

‘But why? Why should they have our food? We grew it.’

‘Because I didn’t know why they had to come here and why we have to help them. Not until last night when Mum told me.’

‘But what did happen to them?’

‘Mum says I can’t tell you. You’re too young.’

‘So how do I know that it’s a good thing we’re helping them? You used to think they were taking everything. You used to hate them. How am I supposed to know?’

John was quiet for a moment. His face crumpled a bit like it used to when he fell over and he was desperate not to cry.

‘Mum said to me that I had to think what would it be like if something bad happened here. To us. Like what I know happened to them. She said what would it take for me and you and her to leave our house, our friends, our village, even Spot.’

‘We’re not leaving Spot!’

‘But they left everything, pets and all. Just like if we had to leave all the things we own and arrive in another country with nothing and hope that the people in that country will help us.’

‘But I still don’t know what they’ve been through. How am I supposed to know I have to help them?’

‘Because you trust Mum,’ John told you. ‘She knows what happened to them. And before – when I was saying mean stuff about them – I didn’t know what had happened to them.’

‘I was saying send them back to their own country. But I didn’t know then how their own country had treated them. And Mum does. And if we trust her we can do the right thing. We trust Mum, don’t we?’

‘Yes,’ you said.

Later, when the soup was ready, a lot of the people from the estate gathered to watch it being served to the refugee children. You joined them.

As you watched them eat the soup with huge chunks of white bread, you thought about what your brother had said.

You tried to imagine what it would be like to be forced out of your home. To have to leave all your possessions or have had them stolen. To abandon your dog. Forever. To leave your village or town or city and never return because it was too dangerous. To be afraid. To be hungry. To have lost people you love. To travel on your own without your mum or dad or brother. To go to another place you had never been to, or seen, or even heard of. And to ask for help – for refuge – in that new country when you didn't even know their language. To be a refugee. And for people – who didn't know your story, what had really happened to you – to make up stories about you and be mean to you, to say you should go home. To call you Them. When you know deep down really we are all Us.

***Them* is a story by children's author, Tom Palmer, based on his 10+ novel *After the War*, which is about a group of Holocaust survivors. *Them* has been commissioned by the National Literacy Trust to mark Holocaust Memorial Day 2022. Thank you for reading it. To find out the story of Yossi, Leo and Mordecai's point of view, please visit www.tompalmer.co.uk/after-the-war.**



Changing life stories

Chapter 3: *Them*

