

Title (up to 20 words) - Refugee

Strapline (up to 40 words) -

Copy (between 900 and 1000 words) -

I'm leaving today; and I don't know if I'll ever return. Or have anyone to return to. Mother's hand is warm against my own, holding so tight I can feel my bones bending - but I don't ever want to let her go. She's wearing her moss-green greatcoat, the thinnest patches covered up by scraps of green felt that don't quite match and rows of neat stitches. But besides her slightly worn appearance, she walks with pride: head up, dark hair held tightly in rolls, heels clipping on the floor, mirroring the quick rhythm of my heart. There's a glossy look in her eyes, one I've never seen before. Perhaps she's missing Father. We lost him eight months ago when he was conscripted to join Churchill's army. The greatest man to have ever lived, father once called him. Mother already lost him, now she's about to lose me too.

The train bellows, a warning that it's soon to leave the station. We speed up, the clipping increasing in fervour. The hand around my own presses tighter, our cold sweat mingling in a final goodbye. I'm afraid - but I can't admit it out loud; I need to be brave for Mother. She still calls me her brave little boy even though I'll be thirteen in a month and three days. Steam bellows from the train just as we reach an open carriage. I step up, off the platform, and into my future. Mother's face is pale and shiny, the gloss now forming tears at the corners of her eyes. She gives me a tight-lipped smile, so I do the same.

"Be a good boy for Mr and Mrs Garber; make sure to wash your hands and face before supper, remember to say please and thank you, and help them on their farm as much as you can. I love you."

She hugs me hard, and as she pulls back I see the tears leaving shining streaks down her cheeks. I walk further into the carriage. The train bellows again, plumes of smoke making her invisible as the train slowly moves away. Faster and faster, rolling on, towards the countryside. I wave though the smoke blocks my vision; my eyes sting but I'm determined to keep them open, searching for one last glimpse of that green greatcoat.

I imagine I can see it, far in the distance now, a hand freed from the sleeve waving back at me. "I love you too." I whisper, eyes wet, not just from the smoke.

Turning around, I find myself in a long corridor lined with wooden benches and tear-stained, expectant faces. Children of all ages stare, waiting for me to take my place on a packed bench. There is an empty seat in front of me, but walking closer I notice the occupants glaring at me

like I am a rat on the street; they are clearly related - three boys and one girl, younger than her brothers, all with dark brown hair and freckle-spotted faces, huddled together tightly as if frightened of letting each other go. I know how they feel, but at least they are not alone. I am facing this journey into the unknown completely on my own. I walk past to the next row but find it also to be full - crowded by two older girls attempting, and failing, to comfort many small children. Their cries cannot be drowned out by the wailing and screeching of the train's wheels; their distress is evident. The next few rows are also full. I make it to the back of the carriage where I spot a free seat next to a girl who looks to be about my age, with pale hair tied up in two shaggy plaits. She doesn't look at me, just stares at the floor. I sit down on the end of the bench; the children's wails still audible even at the opposite end of the carriage. Now I can see her properly, I realise she is cradling a book in her hands - it has a well-worn brown cover, peeling at the edges to reveal yellowed pages from years of story-telling and adventures. I was good at reading at school, but the only word I can read on the cover is 'Life' written in small black letters; the rest of the words seem smudged with dirt like the book has been dropped too many times. Noticing my gaze, she glances up at me with eyes the colour of smoke.

"Hello," I say, willing for a distraction from the thoughts of Mother and the relentless cries of the children at the front of the carriage. "My name's Thomas, but you can call me Tom. All my friends do." I hold out my hand.

"Hello Thomas," She looks at me intently, as if wondering why I would bother her in a moment of solitude with her book. Taking my hand hesitantly, she gives me a small smile.

"Why didn't you call me Tom?" I ask, confused.

"Because we're not friends yet," She replies, smiling again, bigger this time.

"Don't you want to be friends? You haven't told me your name yet," Why is she being so strange? I look around for another spare seat, but the entire carriage is cramped.

"I don't know, we've only just met. I'm Jenny."

"Who are you going to live with?" I'm curious as to who will end up with the strange girl.

She places the book gently on her lap and lifts up the brown paper tag tied loosely around her neck. Written in small, black letters is: Jennifer Worth, 26 Whitehill Road, Mr and Mrs Smith.

"I'm going to Whitehill Road too! I'm staying with Mr and Mrs Garber at number 20," Maybe I won't be completely alone after all...