

## Sam's friend

Sam had looked forward to moving to London where his Dad now worked. He had not liked it in the country and always thought it was a bit spooky. Your neighbours were not very close and, with no street lights, it was dark at night - except, of course, when the moon was full. Then the shadows cast by the moonlight seemed menacing, as though they had a life of their own.

The old house had creaked at night. His parents had explained that it was just wood contracting in the coolness of the night. It is true he had never seen anything ghostly in the house, even when he had woken in the night. But he had not been convinced the creaking was just the wood of the house.

From his bedroom window he had looked across the field to the copse. Why did they call it a copse? There must, he had thought, be a corpse there. He had been sure it was haunted, especially when the wind moaned through the trees. Ghosts and ghouls and other ghastly things were dancing there; that is why the trees were agitated.

Yes, Sam, was delighted when they moved to London. The house was solid and brick-built, not a creaky old wooden one. There were other houses right up next to their house on each side. Sam thought that town houses were a very good thing; all those humans together would surely keep ghosts away.

Street lights were on all night long. There were no menacing corses. It is true that across the road from the house there was a small park. It was square, and there were roads around all its four sides, with rows of town houses bordering the roads. The park was open - not the sort of place for ghosts and ghouls. The street lights would put them off and so would the traffic.

There was always traffic; even at night there was still some traffic. This comforted Sam; ghosts did not like cars and buses and all the other things that go on in the city.

Sam had quickly made friends when he joined his new school in September and had settled in very well. His parents were relieved; they had wondered how he would react to living in such a different place.

One Saturday morning, as he came back from the shops, he noticed a boy he had not seen before in the park. The boy looked rather sad and lonely and Sam felt sorry for him. After he had taken the shopping into the house, he told his Mum that he would go off to the park for a while to play with a friend. His Mum said that was all right, but be sure to be back for lunch.

Sam went over to the park; the boy was still there. He said his name was Tom and that he lived on the other side of the park and that the people he lived with were not his parents.

"Are they your guardians?" asked Sam.

"Yes, I suppose you could call them that," replied Tom.

"What happened to your parents? Are they dead, or what?" asked Sam.

"They went away," answered Tom. "They could not take me with them; but I would like to be with them."

"Gosh, that's tough," said Sam. "Have you got any brothers or sisters?"

"No," replied Tom. "I did have a sister, but she went with my parents. I'm an only child now."

"Just like me!" exclaimed Sam. "But what about your guardians? Do they have any children?"

"Them?" said Tom, "no chance! I don't think they even like children."

"That's tough," said Sam. "They don't mistreat you, do they?"

"Oh no," answered Tom, "no, they have to put up with me."

Sam wondered what Tom meant by “they have to put up with me.” But he soon forgot about that as Tom showed him places in the park that he had not noticed before.

Sam and Tom got on very well together; and Sam was very pleased to have a friend in the same square. He had friends at school, of course, but none of them lived close by. He was happy he had a friend to play with at weekends.

Sam's parents were also happy that Sam had a friend who lived in the square. They had not been aware that there were other children living there.

Then one day, about a month before Christmas, Sam said to his Mum and Dad: “I've been thinking about Tom. He doesn't have a Mum and Dad; they've gone away. His guardians don't sound as though they're really interested in him. I wonder if Tom could come here for Christmas.”

“I don't see why not,” they said, “we've got room enough. But we'll have to ask his guardians if it's all right. Where does he live exactly?”

Sam realized he did not know, except that it was on the other side of the square.

“I'll ask him when I see him next,” said Sam.

When Sam met his friend the following Saturday, he told him his Mum and Dad said he could come and stay with them for Christmas.

“Thank you,” said Tom, “that is very kind of them. But I don't think they will really like having me.”

“But why?” asked Sam, surprised.

“Oh, just because ...”, answered Tom, enigmatically.

“Well, where do you live?” asked Sam, pointing at the houses on the opposite side of the park to his own. “Which house is it exactly?”

“Number 56,” said Tom. “That's where I've spent every Christmas.”

“Oh,” replied Sam, thinking. Then he added: “I must get you a present. What would you really like for Christmas?”

“What I would really, really like,” Tom replied, “would be to join my parents and my sister. That's what I would really like.”

“But,” asked Sam, “how can we give you that present?”

“Mrs Emerson at number 82 will tell you how,” said Tom.

Sam thought that was a rather strange answer; but he said “OK” and promised to do that. They played in the park for the rest of the morning.

That same morning, Sam's mother decided to take a detour through the park when she came back from the shops. She caught sight of Tom running about as though playing, but she could not see any other boy around. She thought that was rather odd and told her husband about it when she got back. He agreed it was a bit odd and they wondered if Tom was not, in fact, an imaginary friend – someone Sam had made up to comfort himself after the move there.

When Sam came in for lunch, he assured them that Tom was real and that he lived at number 56 on the other side of the square. He also told them about Mrs Emerson at number 82. They thought that was a bit odd also.

That afternoon Sam's Dad went over to number 56. He discovered that two men, Jeremy and James, lived there; he asked them about Tom.

“Tom?” queried Jeremy, “I don't know any Tom.”

“The boy who lives here – the one you look after,” said Sam's Dad.

“No boy lives here,” replied Jeremy, “we don't look after anyone.”

“Boy,” said James. “Yes, I've seen him.”

They explained that the house was reputed to be haunted and that it had been difficult to let.

“But we're quite happy here,” said James. “Jeremy has neither seen nor

heard anything. But I've seen the boy on odd occasions, looking out of the window onto the park. He's never remained long and never troubled me. A very sad boy, I couldn't help noticing."

When Sam's Dad got back home he told his wife what he had discovered. They both thought Sam must have heard about the boy who was supposed to haunt number 56 and had made him into his imaginary friend. When they asked him about this, Sam was annoyed:

"But Tom's *real*," he said. "I see him, and hear him, and speak to him. When I touch him he's solid. You would go through a ghost, wouldn't you? You go and ask Mrs Emerson. You go and ask her!"

Sam's parents were even more worried and decided they had all best go and see Mrs Emerson together. She was an old lady of 89, who now lived alone after her husband had died two years ago.

"Ah Tom," she sighed, "My nephew at number 56. That was a tragic story."

She told them how virtually all the houses on that side of the square had been destroyed during the blitz.

"My older sister, Ethel," she said, "had married Bert White and they lived in number 56 with their two children, Tom and Betty. After the raid, nothing remained of their house. They found Ethel, Bert and Betty; they all lie together up in the cemetery now. But they never found Tom. There are silly stories that he still haunts the new house they built there; but, if you ask me, that's just folk's imagination. I've never seen anything."

Sam was very thoughtful when they went home. The following Saturday when he met Tom, he asked straightaway: "You're a ghost, aren't you?"

Tom admitted he was and explained he had not wanted to say so before as he thought it might frighten Sam away.

"No fear," said Sam. "You might be a ghost, but you are a very good friend. Why should I be afraid? But I suppose you really want to be buried with your Mum and Dad and sister in the cemetery."

"More than anything," answered Tom, who took Sam to a dark corner of the park he had not noticed before.

"Look there," said Tom.

Sam told his parents about this; a few days later a tent appeared in that part of the park and police were digging there. A day or so after that the skeleton of a young boy was found. A DNA match with Tom's aunt, Mrs Emerson, soon showed that the bones were those of Tom White who had gone missing during the blitz seventy years ago.

On the Saturday before Christmas, Tom was buried next to his parents and his sister.

"Thanks," Sam heard Tom say to him. "Thank you very much. I'm sorry I shan't be seeing you again - not for a very long time to come. Good-bye!"

Sam was very sad, and began crying.

"Cheer up, Sam," said his Dad. "Tom is where he has long wanted to be. He is at peace now."

"I know that," sobbed Sam. "I know that and I'm very happy for him. But my friend has gone. I want another ghost friend."

"But," said his Mum, "you were always scared of ghosts when we lived in the country."

"They weren't *real* ghosts," protested Sam. "They were just imaginary ghosts. I want a *real* ghost friend for Christmas."