

THEO'S STORY

SURVIVING THE STORM

Theo was sailing in his ship across the wide open sea. His teddy bear stood up against the headboard, looking out for icebergs and enemies. Yesterday Carole, his foster mum, had moved the books that were on the carpet, stepping stones, lining the route from the landing to his craft, but she realised her mistake and put them back, not quite in the right place but close enough.

Carole called him down for tea and he jumped up, left First Mate Ted in charge and in his haste to run downstairs, stepped in the water instead of onto his stones. He quickly removed his socks and put them in the laundry basket in the bathroom. Carole grinned as he sat at the table, his bare feet swinging to and fro, as he stuck his fork into a sausage. 'Wet toes again?' she asked.

Theo nodded.

John and Carole had been thinking of replacing the turquoise carpet in Theo's bedroom but had changed their mind. It made the perfect sea. Instead they put some marine-life stickers on the wardrobe door, an octopus, a starfish and a dolphin.

Buster, the old collie, lay at his feet. Theo bent down and stroked his smooth head. He liked feeling the warm breath on his fingers when he secretly fed him from the table. He watched as the family cat, Purdy, stretched and walked back towards the kitchen. Theo heard the slap of the cat flap. She always liked to go out in the early evening for an hour or two. Theo thought he was, himself, possibly more of a cat than a dog. Purdy would come and sit on laps and purr contentedly, but then she would suddenly jump down and disappear. Buster was always there, at your feet or beside you on the sofa.

Theo liked to spend a little time on his own as well. In his bedroom where he was surrounded by toys and picture books. In his quiet boat where he felt safe. Because he hadn't always had a place to hide.

After tea he watched a bit of TV and played draughts. He liked all sorts of board games. John was going to teach him to play chess when he was a bit older. He already knew the name of all the pieces.

After cleaning his teeth, waiting for the buzzer to tell him the two minutes were up, Theo went to bed. Carole asked if he would like to listen to a story but he said no. He wanted to be a pirate tonight, in his boat. 'You need a parrot,' Carole declared, 'let's see if we can find one.' She left his room and returned a few minutes later, her arms behind her back.

'Ted is going to have to walk the plank,' Theo told her, 'he's lost all the treasure.'

'Poor Ted,' replied Carole, bringing her arms forward. An old, small, soft pink flamingo, its head flopped to one side, one eye missing, looked at Theo. Carole hoped it would pass muster.

'My parrot,' he exclaimed, grabbing it eagerly. 'It needs a patch over its eye. Thanks.'

Carole realised she needn't have worried. A child's imagination had few boundaries. If a bed was a boat, a flamingo could certainly be a parrot.

Later that night there was a thunderstorm. Through the open kitchen door John called for Purdy, who sauntered back in just before the rain fell. The power went off for a moment. Only a moment but long enough for Theo came rushing downstairs in panic. He jumped up beside Carole who put her arm round him and held him tight. 'It's only thunder and lightning,' she whispered into his ear as another bright flash of light and loud clap seemed to shake the house. 'It'll soon be over.'

'Have you got a name for your ship?' John asked cheerfully.

Theo hadn't thought of that. 'What shall we call it?' He bit his lip, thinking hard, no longer fearful.

'How about The Soggy Seaweed?' John suggested.

'I like it.' Theo agreed. Laughing. John wrote the words out neatly in block capitals on a scrap of paper and the lad sat at the table colouring the letters in.

Theo's eyelids felt suddenly very heavy and Carole took him back up to bed. She told him that she and John would follow shortly afterwards. 'Tonight,' she told him, 'we will sleep with the bedroom door open so you can call out to us in the night if you get scared.'

'Pirates don't get scared,' Theo corrected her, putting his hand over one eye and looking up at the name plate, *The Soggy Seaweed*, that John had just blu-tacked to the wall behind his bed.

He took the mug of warm milk, or pretend rum, with an 'avast, me hearties!' He had no idea what it meant but he had heard John say it earlier.

Buster didn't like the storm either. When everyone was in bed he left his basket in the hallway and silently crept up the stairs and jumped onto Theo's duvet. Theo was delighted and immediately promoted him over Ted who became the Quartermaster. The storm was dying down, there were longer and longer gaps between the loud bangs. Carole crept out of her room to check on the boy and saw Buster with his head beside the boy on the pillow. She smiled to herself as she realised she was stepping on the books, avoiding the water.

Theo didn't notice her. He was plotting his route through uncharted waters to a deserted island, imagining the boat rising and falling in the angry sea. The wind gushed, his hair fell over his eyes and his face stung as the waves came up over the sides. He held tightly onto Buster and Ted so they didn't fall into the sea. It was very exhausting being a Pirate Captain, so exhausting in fact he was soon fast asleep, with his crew members safe beside him.