Over the Line 2016
Chapter 4

Warning to teachers. This chapter includes a section – on page 3 - where a footballer/soldier appears to be blown up. This happens in Khal's mind. You may want to check it before reading it aloud to Year 3 children. Thank you.

Khal was on a football pitch in heavy boots. Playing for England against Wales. The mud was thick on the pitch. It was foggy. He had the ball at his feet, but, when he tried to run, he could barely move. He felt heavy. So heavy. And, then, he saw that the mud wasn't just under his feet. It was high on each side, like he was at the bottom of a deep hole. But it wasn't a hole. Khal knew that. He was in a trench, like the ones Mr Clarke, the history teacher, had shown them. He was in the war. There was a fizz-fizzing sound of bullets whipping through the air. Then Khal saw Grace standing at the end of the trench, looking away from him, like she was still cross. And, next to her, was Gareth Bale, his hands in the air because he'd just scored the winner against England.

Khal woke gasping for air, as if the mud had been coming down, suffocating him.

Had he cried out?

He didn't know.

This Battlefield Tour was getting to him. Haunting his nights as well as his days. That and the visions he was having and the thing with Grace and worrying about the England-Wales match tonight. It was too much.

Khal scrambled out of bed. These strange visions and dreams were defeating him. He had to do something about one of the things that was doing his head in. If he could solve one of them, maybe he'd feel better.

And he knew just where to start.

Khal waited outside school. He knew Grace would be in early. She always was – to do her bit at the library. As he waited by the long row of trees that led up to the school, Khal searched for the words he would say to her.

Be honest. That was always his dad's advice. Tell people what you mean in your heart and they will do the same to you.

Grace. Look. It's no big deal. It's just the lads came in and...

No. He couldn't say that. He still sounded rude.

Grace, I can't be seen with a girl's hand on my shoulder...

No. Not that either. Even more embarrassing.

I'm sorry, Grace. I was rude. I was mean. I was just embarrassed because my friends came in. It was really childish of me. Please forgive me.

Could he really say that to her? Maybe. It could work.

Then he saw her. Walking up the school path, weaving through the trees, her bag over her shoulder. Her face was blank as if she was deep in thought.

Khal stepped out in front of Grace.

She stopped. Her face shocked, then blank again.

'Hi,' Khal said.

'Hi.'

'I wanted to talk to you.'

'Did you?'

'Yeah.'

So far Grace had not walked away. That was good. She looked furious, but she was still here.

It was time. Say it now.

Khal's mouth felt dry. His heart was pumping. His legs felt like jelly. But he had to do this.

'I was stupid,' Khal said. 'I'm sorry. When my hand was... I mean when your hand was on my shoulder. When they came in I was... I felt... it was embarrassing. '

Grace raised an eyebrow.

'No,' Khal stumbled on. 'I mean... was embarrassed because they saw us. I mean me. And I'm sorry... it was rude of me and wish I could take it back, because I think you're my friend too.'

Grace smiled. 'That was clumsy,' she said.

Khal said nothing.

'But it means a lot,' Grace went on. 'Thanks.'

Khal sighed. What a relief.

'And if you want to see if Bale is a donkey,' Grace added. 'Wait until this afternoon. Wales are going to beat England.'

'No chance,' Khal laughed.

'Think about it,' Grace said. 'We beat Slovakia. Slovakia beat Russia. You only drew with Russia. That means we'll beat you.'

Khal was in history when it happened. There were a few of the pupils missing. Khal knew why. The school were not letting anyone watch the Wales v England match, which kicked off at 2 p.m. Those absent were pretending to be ill, so they could watch it at home.

The classroom was opposite the school sports fields, so if you stared out of the window instead of looking at Mr Clarke like you were meant to, you could see a whole football pitch and both goals.

There was a wind blowing, tossing the leafy trees around. Clouds scudding across the sky.

Khal studied the patches of mud on the pitch, remembering his dream and how awful it had been. He was thinking – in particular – about seeing Gareth Bale celebrating scoring a goal against England. And about Grace's prediction. He did not want England to lose to Wales.

As he gazed out at the football pitch he saw a lone man jogging after a ball, wearing long baggy shorts and with boots that looked huge. Khal guessed something weird was going to happen when he smelled burning again.

But he couldn't look away as the man on the pitch ran up to the heavy brown leather ball, pushed it forward, controlled it again, then swung his leg back to kick it into the net.

Khal watched like he always watched football pitches anywhere when there was a game on. Even one man kicking a ball at an empty goal needed watching. But he was aware of that smell again.

When the man struck the ball, he was flung instantly into the air as the ground beneath him shuddered and huge amounts of soil and grass and dust were thrown up, as well as smoke and flames.

Khal stood up, his chair thrust back and clattering behind him.

'KHALID! WHAT ARE YOU DOING?' Mr Clarke shouted.

But Khal ignored the teacher, instead watching the man on the pitch fall to the ground. Not wearing a football strip now, but a khaki soldier's uniform.

'KHALID?'

Khal could hear uproar around him. Kids shouting his name. Other laughing. The sound of banging on desks. Then his own voice shouting 'NOOOOOOOOOO.'

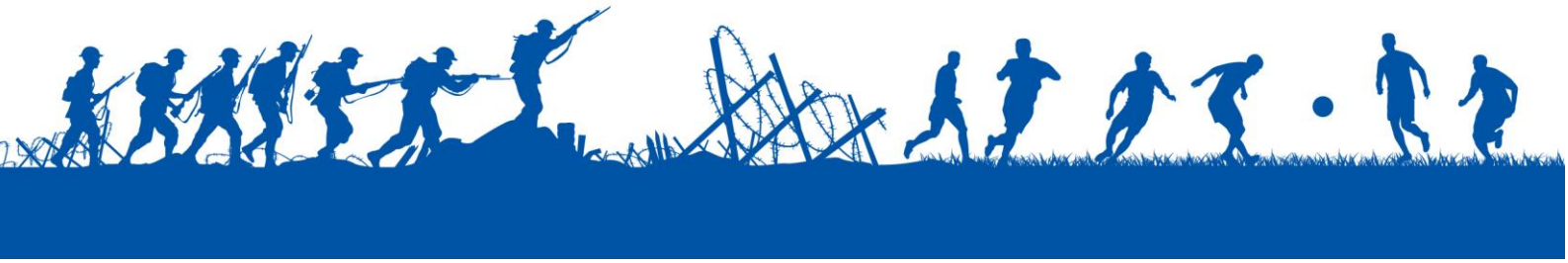
Then Khal was on the floor and the laughing had stopped and Mr Clarke's voice was soft and caring instead of hard and harsh and all the other children were utterly silent as they all filed out of the room.

After a while – Khal didn't know how long – his dad arrived to take him home, just an arm round his son as they walked to the car, seat-belted him in. The muttered voices of adults outside the car as he sat alone.

'If he's not well, he doesn't have to go to France...'

Then leaving the school, past the football pitch, Khal looked back to check if what he had seen was still there. It wasn't.

But he'd seen it. He knew he'd seen it.



Khal's dad didn't ask him many questions. He brought him home. Felt his forehead, pulse and checked his vision. Put him in the front room, a blanket by his side. Made him some food and drink. Put the Wales v England game on.

Khal stared at the screen. The big match. The showdown. It was time. England v Wales. It was huge. And here he was, unlike most of his mates, watching it at home, while they were doing Maths.

But, still, he felt like he was watching it from a million miles away. Because he was coming to understand something. All these things he'd been seeing. They were signs, not a threat. Signs that he had to do something, understand something. And that that had to happen in France on the Battlefield Tour.

But in the kitchen, Khal's dad was on the phone to Khal's mum.

'He's okay now,' Khal's dad said. 'But the school say he was very disturbed. He was shouting.'

'I'll come home as soon as I can,' Khal's mum said.

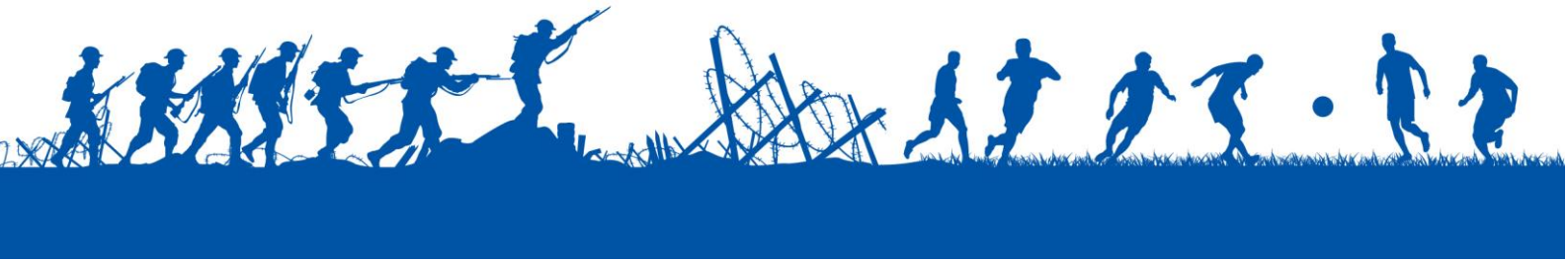
'Okay. See you then.'

'And when I get home from work we need to talk about whether we should let Khal leave for France or remain at home with us.'

'Yes, of course,' Khal's dad said. 'We have a decision to make.'

We would now like you to make a decision that will have a huge impact on this story. This is your own referendum on Europe! Talk as a group or class and make a decision between you, then cast one vote for the class.

Please visit www.tompalmer.co.uk/first-world-war-literacy-resources. Vote only once by clicking on the circle next to your choice, entering your details and pressing SUBMIT. Votes must be submitted before 4 p.m. on Thursday 16th June.



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