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| Where the story began, though. was where most  of our projects and adventures began – at Keith’s  house. At the tea table, in fact – I can hear the  soft clinking made by the four blue beads that  weighted the lace cloth covering the tall jug of  lemon barley...  No, wait. I’ve got that wrong. The glass beads  are clinking against the glass of the jug because  the cover’s stirring in the breeze. We’re outside,  in the middle of the morning, near the chicken  run at the bottom of the garden, building the  transcontinental railway.  Yes, because I can hear something else, as well  - the trains on the real railway, as they emerge  from the cutting on to the embankment above  our heads just beyond the wire fence. I can see  the showers of sparks they throw up from the  live rail. The jug of lemon barley isn’t our tea- it’s  our elevenses, waiting with two biscuits each  on a tray his mother has brought us out from  the house, and set down on the red brick path  beside us. It’s as she walks away, up the red brick  path, that Keith so calmly and quietly drops his  bombshell.  When is this? The sun’s shining as the beads  clink against the jug, but I have a feeling that  there’s still a trace of fallen apple blossom on the  earthworks for the transcontinental railway, and  that his mother’s worried about whether we’re  warm enough out there. ‘You’ll come inside,  chaps, won’t you, if you get chilly?’ May still,  perhaps. Why aren’t we at school? Perhaps it’s  a Saturday or a Sunday. No, there’s the feel of  a weekday morning in the air; it’s unmistakable,  even if the season isn’t. Something that doesn’t  quite fit here, as so often when one tries to  assemble different bits to make a whole.  Or have I got everything back to front? Had the  policeman already happened before this?  It’s so difficult to remember what order things  occurred in – but if you can’t remember that, then  it’s impossible to work out which led to which,  and what the connection was. What I remember,  when I examine my memory carefully, isn’t a  narrative at all. It’s a collection of vivid particulars.  Certain words spoken, certain objects glimpsed.  Certain gestures and expressions. Certain moods,  certain weathers, certain times of day and states  of light. Certain individual moments, which seem  to mean so much, but which mean in fact so little  until the hidden links between them have been  found. | Where did the policeman come in the story? We  watch him as he pedals slowly up the Close.  His appearance has simultaneously justified  all our suspicions and overtaken all our efforts,  because he’s coming to arrest Keith’s mother...  No, no- that was earlier. We’re running happily  and innocently up the street beside him, and  he represents nothing but the hope of a little excitement out of nowhere. He cycles right past  all the houses, looking at each of them in turn,  goes round the turning circle at the end, cycles  back down the street ... and dismounts in front  of No. 12. What I remember for sure is the look  on Keith’s mother’s face, as we run in to tell her  that there’s a policeman going to Auntie Dee’s.  For a moment all her composure’s gone. She  looks ill and frightened. She’s throwing the front  door open and not walking but running down the  street...  I understand now, of course, that she and Auntie  Dee and Mrs Berrill and the McAfees all lived  in dread of policemen and telegraph boys, as  everyone did then who had someone in the family  away fighting. I’ve forgotten now what it had  turned out to be- nothing to do with Uncle Peter,  anyway. A complaint about Auntie Dee’s blackout,  I think. She was always rather slapdash about it.  Once again I see that look cross Keith’s mother’s  face, and this time I think I see something else  beside the fear. Something that reminds me of the  look on Keith’s face, when his father’s discovered  some dereliction in his duties towards his bicycle or  his cricket gear: a suggestion of guilt. Or is memory  being overwritten by hindsight once more?  If the policeman and the look had already  happened, could they by any chance have  planted the first seed of an idea in Keith’s mind?  I think now that most probably Keith’s  words came out of nowhere, that they were  spontaneously created in the moment they were  uttered. That they were a blind leap of pure  fantasy. Or of pure intuition. Or, like so many  things, of both.  From those six random words, anyway, came  everything that followed, brought forth simply by  Keith’s uttering them and by my hearing them.  The rest of our lives was determined in that one  brief moment as the beads clinked against the jug  and Keith’s mother walked away from us, through  the brightness of the morning, over the last of the  fallen white blossom on the red brick path, erect,  composed, and invulnerable, and Keith watched  her go, with the dreamy look in his eye that I  remembered from the start of so many of our  projects.  ‘My mother’, he said reflectively, almost  regretfully, ‘is a German spy.’ |