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| Where the story began, though. was where mostof our projects and adventures began – at Keith’shouse. At the tea table, in fact – I can hear thesoft clinking made by the four blue beads thatweighted the lace cloth covering the tall jug oflemon barley...No, wait. I’ve got that wrong. The glass beadsare clinking against the glass of the jug becausethe cover’s stirring in the breeze. We’re outside,in the middle of the morning, near the chickenrun at the bottom of the garden, building thetranscontinental railway.Yes, because I can hear something else, as well- the trains on the real railway, as they emergefrom the cutting on to the embankment aboveour heads just beyond the wire fence. I can seethe showers of sparks they throw up from thelive rail. The jug of lemon barley isn’t our tea- it’sour elevenses, waiting with two biscuits eachon a tray his mother has brought us out fromthe house, and set down on the red brick pathbeside us. It’s as she walks away, up the red brickpath, that Keith so calmly and quietly drops hisbombshell.When is this? The sun’s shining as the beadsclink against the jug, but I have a feeling thatthere’s still a trace of fallen apple blossom on theearthworks for the transcontinental railway, andthat his mother’s worried about whether we’rewarm 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’sa Saturday or a Sunday. No, there’s the feel ofa weekday morning in the air; it’s unmistakable,even if the season isn’t. Something that doesn’tquite fit here, as so often when one tries toassemble different bits to make a whole.Or have I got everything back to front? Had thepoliceman already happened before this?It’s so difficult to remember what order thingsoccurred in – but if you can’t remember that, thenit’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 anarrative 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 statesof light. Certain individual moments, which seemto mean so much, but which mean in fact so littleuntil the hidden links between them have beenfound. | Where did the policeman come in the story? Wewatch him as he pedals slowly up the Close.His appearance has simultaneously justifiedall our suspicions and overtaken all our efforts,because he’s coming to arrest Keith’s mother...No, no- that was earlier. We’re running happilyand innocently up the street beside him, andhe represents nothing but the hope of a little excitement out of nowhere. He cycles right pastall the houses, looking at each of them in turn,goes round the turning circle at the end, cyclesback down the street ... and dismounts in frontof No. 12. What I remember for sure is the lookon Keith’s mother’s face, as we run in to tell herthat there’s a policeman going to Auntie Dee’s.For a moment all her composure’s gone. Shelooks ill and frightened. She’s throwing the frontdoor open and not walking but running down thestreet...I understand now, of course, that she and AuntieDee and Mrs Berrill and the McAfees all livedin dread of policemen and telegraph boys, aseveryone did then who had someone in the familyaway fighting. I’ve forgotten now what it hadturned 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’sface, and this time I think I see something elsebeside the fear. Something that reminds me of thelook on Keith’s face, when his father’s discoveredsome dereliction in his duties towards his bicycle orhis cricket gear: a suggestion of guilt. Or is memorybeing overwritten by hindsight once more?If the policeman and the look had alreadyhappened, could they by any chance haveplanted the first seed of an idea in Keith’s mind?I think now that most probably Keith’swords came out of nowhere, that they werespontaneously created in the moment they wereuttered. That they were a blind leap of purefantasy. Or of pure intuition. Or, like so manythings, of both.From those six random words, anyway, cameeverything that followed, brought forth simply byKeith’s uttering them and by my hearing them.The rest of our lives was determined in that onebrief moment as the beads clinked against the jugand Keith’s mother walked away from us, throughthe brightness of the morning, over the last of thefallen white blossom on the red brick path, erect,composed, and invulnerable, and Keith watchedher go, with the dreamy look in his eye that Iremembered from the start of so many of ourprojects.‘My mother’, he said reflectively, almostregretfully, ‘is a German spy.’ |