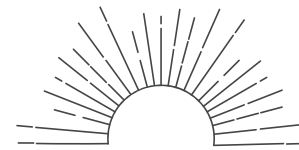


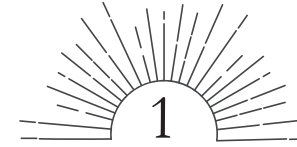
Percy finds the Sun

Ed Prichard



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Once there was a boy called Percy, who lived in an old and wonky but happy house at the foot of the Downs. Percy was nearly nine (or eight and a half and three quarters, as his mum used to tease him). He was small and wiry, with a mop of curly hair bleached by the sun. He lived with his mum, Stella, and his dad, Daniel and his big sister, Beth... At least, that was before. Now he lived with just his mum and his sister. His dad had become ill this time last summer and had died just before Christmas. Till then, the house had always been full of laughter but these days there were more tears. Everyone missed Daniel terribly, especially Percy, who used to go for long walks with him and sit for hours watching him make furniture in his workshop in the old barn up at Dean Farm.

Tonight, Percy was missing his dad more than usual; tonight was Summer Solstice eve. Every year, in the middle of the night of June 20th, Daniel would wake Percy and the whole family would set off together, out of the village, through the woods and then up the long chalk track to the top of Windover Hill to see the sun rise on the longest day of the year. When the sun was coming up, they would make their promises to themselves for the year ahead and then share Marmite sandwiches and sweet tea from a flask before walking home to spend the day together. This tradition had started long before Percy was born, when his mum and dad were first together; they'd taken his sister and then him to see the sun rise before his first birthday.

But this year was different. This year there would be no waking up in the middle of the night. No quietly walking through the sleeping village into the dark woods. No pointing out their favourite constellations in the clear night sky; no running up the last bit to get to the highest point on Windover Hill so they could see the sun peep over the horizon and rise into the sky.

All day, Percy felt very sad and alone. It started with a row over breakfast:

“...That’s enough, Percy,” said his mum, banging her mug on the table, sloshing tea over the rim. “We’re not going and that’s final.”

“But why... why can’t we go?” Percy whispered

“It’s alright, Percy, we’ll go another year,” said Beth, leaning over to squeeze his hand. Percy stared at the knots in the old pine table top then shoved his chair back and stomped out without looking at them, fighting back the tears as he slammed the door behind him.

For the rest of the day he was in a bad mood. He avoided the house and his mum and sister, even when they called him in for lunch. He climbed into the highest branches of the apple tree in the garden and made himself comfortable. Drifting in and out of sleep through the hot afternoon, he had strange dreams about walking up the hill and, in one, he felt the weight of his dad’s hand on his shoulder and heard his voice. He’d woken up with a start, with tears in his eyes and an ache in his heart, which made him more determined than ever that he was going to see the sun rise. If no-one else was going to go, then he would jolly well go on his own.

The long day stretched on and on, and it took forever for night to fall. He’d finally come in and eaten his tea in silence while his mum and Beth crept around him. As soon as he’d finished, he took himself upstairs to his room. Now he lay in bed, frustrated and annoyed, waiting for them come up to bed.

He listened to the old house creak and groan as its timbers cooled. Curled up against his legs, Tom-Tom, his big ginger cat, snored gently. Eventually he heard footsteps on the stairs and mum and Beth whispering to each other before they went into their rooms. Percy waited, his heart pounding and blood rushing in his ears. When he was sure they were asleep, he sat up and listened for a moment longer, then got up and quickly dressed in shorts and his favourite T-shirt. From under the bed he pulled out his dad’s old canvas rucksack. He’d packed it earlier with the faded tartan blanket

they used for picnics, a flask of tea with lots of sugar and some Marmite sandwiches wrapped in greaseproof paper. He flicked his torch on and off to make sure it was working. Tom-Tom eventually opened an eye, stood up and stretched.

Percy’s stomach was full of butterflies as he stood at the window, peering into the night. He could hear an owl calling far off in the woods but apart from that the world was silent. He looked down at the ground, then carefully climbed onto the sill and grabbed hold of the old wisteria that grew up the side of the house. (It had been there so long it looked like the house had been built around it.) In a few moments, he was standing in the flower bed, wiggling his toes in the cool earth while he watched Tom-Tom spring off the windowsill and slide down through the branches to join him. His heart was beating really loudly, and he was sure it would wake everyone. He’d never been out on his own at night and he was wondering if he was making a terrible mistake. The front door was locked now, and he couldn’t climb back up to his room, so he took a deep breath and turned to the cat sitting patiently on the fence.

“C’mon Tom-Tom,” he said, sounding braver than he felt. “Let’s get going or we’ll be late for the sun.”

Pulling the old gate shut behind them, he set off down the path towards the village with Tom-Tom on his heels. They stopped where the path met the lane and listened for cars, then turned down towards the church. The broken clock on the tower said ten to two. But, as his dad said, at least it was right twice a day.

The whole village was asleep, and they passed through without seeing anyone. They stopped again at the gap in the hedge that led into the woods. He’d never been in there at night either and it looked a lot darker than he remembered when the family were together. He stood for a long time, getting up the courage to take the first step. Finally, he switched his torch on and dived into the darkness. As soon as he was through the hedge, he started to run, his torch flashing wildly back and forth, throwing terrifying shadows, his rucksack bouncing on his back.

The only sound he could hear was his heart beating, his breathing and his bare feet slapping on the packed earth of the path. The further he ran, the more he felt sure someone was right behind him. The faster he tried to go, the more they sped up too. He finally got up courage to look over his shoulder, stubbed his toe on the root of a gnarly beech tree and found himself flying through the air.

He woke up and saw stars. He lay there for a moment, the wind knocked out of him. Silence. He realised he'd just been spooked by the sound of his own footsteps. Tom-Tom appeared and sat down next to him.

“Alright, Percy?” What happened back there then?”

There was a long silence while Percy and Tom-Tom looked hard at each other. Percy eventually broke it.

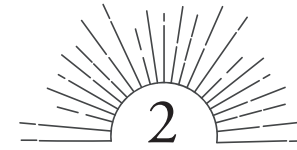
“Oh, Tom-Tom, I just scared myself that's all. There's no-one here, just us.”

“That's right, nothing to hurt us here,” said the cat. “Come on, we've got a long way to go.”

Percy stood up, feeling the lump on his head. Certain he hadn't done any permanent damage, he picked up the cat and sat him on his shoulder, then pointed his torch at the path ahead and carried on walking towards the far side of the woods.

For the first time all day, he suddenly felt very calm.

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The woods seemed much friendlier now, the shadows welcoming rather than threatening, especially once he started to recognise special trees he liked to climb when he played there in the daytime. Tom-Tom jumped down off his shoulder and zig-zagged ahead of him, leading the way. As they approached the edge of the woods, just before the path opened up into the field beyond, they could see a bundle lying in the path. They stopped and Tom-Tom circled around it at a careful distance while Percy shone his torch over it. To their surprise, it was a little old terrier, sound asleep and snoring gently. Tom-Tom hissed quietly under his breath, while Percy tried to work out how he would get past without waking the dog. Before he could decide what to do, the dog gave a huge snuffle, followed by lots of snorting, sneezing and wheezing. She rolled onto her back, paws in the air. Then she opened an eye.

Tom-Tom shot backwards, his hackles raised, fur standing on end all over, so he looked like a furry ginger balloon. The little dog continued to look at them with one eye, its tail swishing back and forth.

“Hello,” said Percy.

The dog wriggled and flipped up onto her feet. She gave herself a great big shake from the end of her shiny black nose to the tip of her tail in a blur of black and white fur. All this was followed by a big yawn and a stretch. But she didn't take her shining black button eyes of Percy and Tom-Tom.

“That's better,” she eventually said. “I was feeling a bit tired and I didn't think anyone would be wandering around here at this time.” Tom-Tom hissed loudly.

“Don't worry, he likes dogs really,” Percy said. “He's just a bit surprised to

see you.” Tom-Tom muttered under his breath.

“We’re off to see the sunrise on Windover Hill.”

“All on your own?” replied the little dog.

“Well, I’m technically not on my own because I’ve got Tom-Tom with me...” said Percy. “And now I’ve met you, I’m definitely not on my own.” A thought crossed his mind. “Um...I hope you don’t mind me asking, but what are you doing out here all alone?”

“Ah. Yes. A good question... I was left here by my family...” There was a pause. “I’m not a young whippersnapper, as you can see, and they got a new puppy and... well, here I am.”

“But why would anyone do that?” said Percy to himself. “I mean, you’re not that old, are you?”

“I’m eight...”

“So am I! Nearly nine, actually.”

“That’s nearly 60 in dog years, so I’m a little older than you.”

Tom-Tom had retreated to the safety of Percy’s shoulder. Percy thought for a moment, looking off into the darkness between the trees.

“Well, you can’t stay here on your own, so why don’t you come with us? And then maybe you can come home with us tomorrow.” Tom-Tom dug his claws into his shoulder. Percy scowled at the cat, whose tail was flicking back and forth in irritation.

“Is it a long way?” asked the dog. “It’s just I can’t walk as far as I used to.”

“Don’t worry, it’s not far and we’ll have time to stop for a rest on the way,” said Percy. “By the way, I’m Percy and this is Tom-Tom. What’s your name?”

“My name’s Tinker but everyone calls me Tink. And thank you, I will come with you, at least some of the way.”

So the three of them set off out of the woods around the edge of the barley field. Tom-Tom rode on Percy’s shoulder for a while, then jumped down and disappeared amongst the crops, looking for unwary field mice to snack on.

As they walked, Percy looked up at the stars and remembered his dad carrying him on his shoulders, pointing out the Great Bear and Orion with its belt of three bright stars; and the Seven Sisters all huddled together in the deep velvety blue sky.

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At the stile that separated the field from the chalk path, Tom-Tom reappeared out of the barley and sprang up and over onto the other side. Percy went to climb over then noticed Tink was sitting looking up at the stile. He went over to her and crouched down.

“Would you like a hand?” he asked.

The old dog nodded. So Percy wrapped his arms around her and lifted her carefully over. Then he climbed over himself and they followed the gentle rise of the chalk path, which shimmered like quicksilver as it snaked away towards the top of the hill.

The fields stretched off on each side and big trees grew out of the hedgerows and over the path. Here and there, linking stretches of hedge, were flint walls. The sharp edges of the flints glimmered in the starlight. Percy was excited to be on his way with his new friend and Tom-Tom. Tink nudged his leg with her wet nose now and then as she walked stiffly beside him. Tom-Tom was happily distracted by sounds of what might be another dinner hiding in the hedgerows.

They came to a corner, where the path almost doubled back on itself. As they followed the loop around, they came across a pony, blocking the path. The pony was staring intently at the trunk of a horse chestnut tree. It turned to look at them, then flicked its tail and returned to studying the tree. Tom-Tom curled around Percy’s legs and Tink dropped back a little.

“Hello,” said Percy. “Can we squeeze by please?” Close up, they could see the pony was a lovely dappled grey.

“Oh, don’t mind me. I’m just checking this tree trunk,” said the pony in a

deep, rich, fruity voice, sweet and thick like jar of honey.

They all looked carefully at the tree trunk for a moment. Even Tink crept forward to see what was so interesting. The pony shuffled his feet, sending up small clouds of chalk dust.

Tom-Tom leant over: “Don’t mind us, we’re just passing through.”

“Oh, I do apologise. Please, don’t let me hold you up,” replied the pony. “But if you don’t mind me asking – isn’t it awfully late for you all to be out, what with you being so young and all.”

“Oh, it’s fine, everyone knows where we are,” said Percy, knowing that wasn’t strictly true. “We’re off to see the sunrise from the top of Windover Hill.”

“I see. You, the cat and the dog. All together. I see...”

“I’m Percy, this is Tink, and this is Tom-Tom. We always go to watch the sun rise every year, really, we do, at Summer solstice... Well, we always did, but this year my dad, he... er...he couldn’t make it. So we decided to come on our own, me and Tom-Tom. And then we met Tink...”

“I see,” said the pony again. “Percy, Tink and Tom-Tom. How delightful to meet you all. My name is Hamish.” The pony bowed his head. “But don’t let me stop you. As I said, I’m just here, enjoying this tree trunk.” He gave a little sigh and turned back to the tree.

“If you have time, you can come with us if you like,” said Percy. Tom-Tom dug his claws into his shoulder again, but Percy didn’t notice this time.

“That’s very decent of you,” replied Hamish. He looked up at the stars for a moment. “Yes... I think I can make time in my very busy schedule. Is it far?”

“Not so very far,” said Percy.

“In that case, I don’t mind if I do. Thank you kindly,” he said. “In fact, to be completely honest with you, I’m...er...well, that is to say...um... lost.”

“Lost?”

“Yes. It seems someone left the gate to my field open and I have become... how can I describe it... temporarily discombobulated as to the exact direction of home. I was asking this tree for directions but it has remained silent. But no matter, we shall worry about that in the morning. So off we go, lead on!” So the four travellers headed up the hill together. As they went, the path became steeper and steeper and they slowed their pace to give Tink a chance to keep up.

Percy was worried about the old dog – he remembered how his dad had been so very tired before he died, and he didn’t have the energy to walk up to Dean’s Farm anymore. Instead he’d sit in the garden, wrapped in a blanket under the apple tree and watch the birds. The further they went, the slower Tink got until eventually she stopped and sat down.

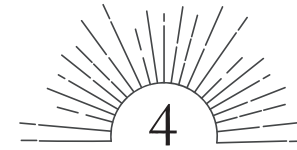
“Don’t worry, Percy, you all go on with out me. I’ll wait here for you to come back.”

“We won’t leave you on your own, Tink. We’re all going to see the sun rise,” said Percy. He thought for a moment. “I’ve got an idea.” He went over to Hamish and whispered in his ear. The pony nodded his head and the boy carefully lifted Tink onto his back.

“Just until we get to the farm – I’ve got a plan,” said Percy.

And off they went, Tink rocking from side to side with the swing of the pony’s hips. Then Tom-Tom jumped onto the pony’s shoulders started chatting quietly to Hamish. Percy couldn’t hear what he was saying but he had plenty to think about without worrying what nonsense a cat was telling a pony in the middle of the night out on the Downs.

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**F**urther up the hill they could see the dark shadow of the barn at Dean Farm. Percy led Hamish through the yard to the drinking trough. Then he hauled the barn door open and carried Tink inside. It was dry and warm inside, with the lovely sweet scent of fresh hay, baled up ready for the cows next winter. While Percy found some matches and lit the old storm lantern, Tink found a comfy spot on an old blanket where she curled up and fell asleep straight away. Tom-Tom slunk off to investigate the darkest corners of the barn. This was Daniel’s workshop. All his tools were still hanging in their places on the wall where he’d left them and, on the bench, stood a half-finished chair.

Percy clambered over a stack of bales and rooted around in the piles of junk that you find in all barns all over the world. Eventually he found what he was looking for amongst the old beds, chairs and tea chests: an old-fashioned pram, with big chrome wheels and white rubber tyres. He found a coil of rope hanging on a rusty nail and, in a few minutes, he made a harness from the rope, which he attached to the pram. Then he woke Tink and lifted her into the pram. He put the ropes over his shoulders and started to pull. It was a bit of a struggle, but he managed to get the pram across the farmyard and onto the track. He stopped to catch his breath, not sure whether he could pull her all the way to the hill.

Hamish clip-clopped over and nudged him with his nose. He looked at the pony, who rolled his eyes.

“I can do it. Come on, tie it to me.”

So Percy tied the ropes around the pony, using the picnic blanket from his rucksack as padding. Tom-Tom appeared from the barn, licking his lips, just in time to join them. Tink sat proudly in her chariot, tongue hanging out



and eyes shining. They'd only gone a little way when Percy stopped.

"Keep going, I'll catch you up!"

He turned and ran back down to the table at the farm gate. There was an old tin there with a label on top that read 'Percy'. He knew Mrs Dean remembered them every year, but how did she know he was coming tonight? As always, inside the tin sat a fresh, fluffy Victoria sponge, oozing jam and cream. He put the tin in his rucksack and ran up the hill after his friends.

After a while, they all began to feel tired, so they stopped to rest on the bank on one side of the path, under another horse chestnut tree. Above them, they could hear the birds twittering and shuffling in their sleep. Percy shared the cake with his new friends and gave each of them a drink from his water bottle, which he poured into his cupped hand.

Out of the darkness of the tree above, a little grey dove fluttered down onto the path in front of them. She folded her wings and looked at them, turning her head from side to side. Then she hopped over and pecked at the cake crumbs around their feet. Tom-Tom lay on his tummy watching the bird, his eyes half closed. Slowly he began to stretch himself, first one leg then the other and then rose carefully to his feet. He tensed himself to spring...

He narrowed his eyes then launched himself. But instead of landing in an explosion of fur and feathers, he found himself hanging in mid-air, Percy's hand firmly gripping him by the scruff of the neck. The dove carried on looking for crumbs, unaware of the commotion. Percy held Tom-Tom up and looked into his eyes. Tom-Tom squirmed but there was no escape.

"What have I told you, Tom-Tom? We don't eat our friends." The cat wriggled, trying to look away.

"Alright, alright," he muttered. "Won't happen again. Promise."

"You say that every time," said Percy. "Now, you behave or there will be trouble." He dropped Tom-Tom carefully onto the chalky road. The cat

stretched and yawned, avoiding looking at Percy. Then he started to groom himself, licking his paws and washing his face.

Percy held out a piece of cake for the dove. She hopped onto his finger and delicately pecked the cake, cooing the whole time. When she'd finished, she fluttered up onto his shoulder.

"Hello, little bird," said Percy.

"Hello," replied the dove. "Thank you for the cake, I was feeling rather peckish. What are you all doing here in the middle of the night?"

"We're going to see the sun rise from the top of Windover Hill. I'm Percy and these are my friends – we all met on the way here, apart from Tom-Tom...he's my oldest friend. Don't worry, he won't hurt you, or he'll have me to answer to."

"My name is Blue," said the bird. "And that sounds like a lovely thing to see. Would you mind if I join you?"

"The more the merrier, Blue," said Percy looking up at the lightening sky. "I think we need to get a wiggle on or we'll be too late. Everybody, this is Blue and she's coming with us. Ready Tink? Come on Hamish, let's go."

And so the friends started out on the final leg of their trek. Hamish pulled Tink in her makeshift chariot, while Tom-Tom rode on his back. Percy led the way. Blue flew up and circled above them as they walked slowly up the hill.

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By the time they were almost at the top of the hill, the sky had quickly changed colour from deep blue, to greys and yellows, before turning a deep pink. They stopped and Percy untied the harness from Hamish and carefully lifted Tink out of her chariot while Tom-Tom jumped down from Hamish's back. By now they were all tired and they walked the last bit together slowly, pleased they were almost there and enjoying being together. Percy was especially quiet, thinking of how lucky he was to have met such a special group of friends. And for the first time in as long as he could remember, he realised he was happy.

As they got nearer the summit, he remembered how last summer he and had run ahead to be the first to reach their special spot. He closed his eyes as they climbed the last few yards, imagining how it would feel to open them and find his dad was waiting for him at the top.

When he did open them, he wasn't surprised that his dad wasn't there. But he was amazed to see his mum and Beth waiting for them.

"There you are, Percy," said Beth. "About time!" Percy's heart leapt and he ran to them. They hugged and kissed him and fussed over him, as if it was years not hours since they had seen each other.

"I'm sorry, Percy, I knew you'd want to be here," said his mum. "But your dad would have wanted you to find your own way, to make this year as special as all the times we came together." Percy hugged her again, then, wiping the tears from his eyes he turned to his new friends.

"Everybody, this is my mum and big sister, Beth. Mum and Beth, these are my new friends – Hamish and Tink and Blue. And you know Tom-Tom..."

The animals barked and whinnied, meowed and cooed their hellos before they all settled down together on the rugs that were spread on the dewy grass. His mum sat down next to Percy and wrapped the old picnic blanket around them both. Beth cuddled up on the other side so they were snug and warm. Hamish lay down behind them so they could rest against his back, while Tink lay across their feet. Tom-Tom curled up on Percy's lap and went straight to sleep, while Blue nestled into his shoulder, cooing gently in his ear.

While they waited for the sun to show his face, they shared the delicious sweet, tea from flask, which was still hot. They sat in silence, content and tired, watching the sky get lighter.

They made their promises to themselves for the year ahead, remembering their families and friends, and all the good things in their lives. And they were all thankful to be alive in that most beautiful place on that very special day.

The edge of the sun suddenly peeked over the horizon, rising quickly to become a flaming orange ball that turned the sea silvery pink in the distance, setting the high, wispy clouds on fire.

And they all glowed a little more.

As they watched the sun climb higher in the sky, the world began to wake up around them. The air was filled with the rich scent of warming grass and the rising songs of the larks above them; the lazy buzz of bees and the chitter-chatter of insects were all around. The world turned and everything was perfect as it could be.

As they the sun climbed higher, they lost themselves in the view over the hazy rolling green of the Downs and the sea shimmering in the distance. Percy's mum bent her head towards his and whispered in his ear.

"Penny for your thoughts."

“I was just thinking...” he said quietly. “If only dad was here with us.” She smiled and pulled him closer.

“But he is, Percy.” She put her hand on his chest, over his heart. “He’s always with us, right here.”

Percy thought for a moment, looked at his friends, old and new, sprawled contentedly around them on the grass. Then he leant into his mum’s arm, closed his eyes and turned his face to soak up the warmth of the sun.

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