

darkness, opening up his throat to let all the tightness out. "I want Dad. I want Ma. Bang bang bang. I want Emily. Bang bang bang. I want Liz. Bang bang bang-bang *bang!* I want to go *home.*"

Mr Barrack raised his hand and the sound stopped as if it had been torn away in shreds. Silence, utter, swirling, hugging silence. Jim felt his thoughts tumbling into it and then settling into calm. He felt better.

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THE WILD THING

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"Joseph," Jim asked the bent man one day out in the yard. "How long have you been here?"

"Been here?" Joseph swung his head round and peered up at Jim. "Seems like I was born here. Don't know nowhere else, son. And I don't know all of this place, neither." He leaned against Jim so he could swing his head up to look at the long, high building with its rows of barred windows. "I've not been in the room where the women go, though long ago I must have been in the baby-room, I suppose, with my ma. I've been in the infirmary wards. But there's all kinds of little twisty corridors and attics and places I've never been in, Jim, and I don't want to, neither. It's the whole world, this place is." He spread out his hands. "Whole world."

"It ain't, Joseph," Jim told him. "There's no shops here, and no carriages. And no trees." He closed his eyes, forcing himself to try and remember

what it was like outside. "And there's no river. There's a great big river outside here."

"Is there, now?" said Joseph. "I should like to see that river. Though to tell you the truth, Jim, I don't know what a river is. Tell you something." He put his arm over Jim's shoulder to draw his ear closer to his own mouth. "I don't want to die in here. If someone will let me know what day I'm going to die, I'll be grateful. I'll climb over that wall first." He dropped his head down again and stared at his boots, whistling softly. "Yes. That's what I'll do."

Tip spluttered and nudged Jim, but Jim was looking up at the high walls that surrounded the workhouse, and at the bleak sky above it.

"How long have I been here, Tip?" he asked.

"How should I know?" Tip hugged his arms round himself. "Keep moving, Jim. It's cold."

It was impossible to tell one day from the next. They were all the same. School, sack-making, bed. The only thing that changed was the sky. Jim had seen the grey of snow clouds turning into the soft rain clouds of spring. He'd felt summer scorching him in his heavy, itchy clothes. And now the sky was steely grey again. The pump had long beards of ice on its handle.

"I've been here a year," Jim said.

It was then that the little secret promise that had nestled inside him began to flutter into life like a wild thing.

"I've got to skip off," he let the mad thought rise up in him. "If I don't, I'll be like Joseph. One day I won't remember whether I was born here or not. I won't know anywhere but here."

During lessons that day the old schoolmaster's voice droned on in the dim schoolroom. The boys coughed and shuffled in their benches, hunching themselves against the cold. Jim's wild thoughts drummed inside him, so loud that he imagined everyone would hear them. He leaned over to Tip and whispered in his ear, "Tip, I'm going to run away today. Come with me?"

Tip sheered round, and put his hand to his mouth. Mr Barrack sprang down from his chair, his eyes alight with anger and joy.

"You spoke!" he said to Jim, triumphant. "It was you."

Tip closed his eyes and held out his hand, but Jim stood up. He didn't mind. He didn't mind anything any more. The teacher hauled him off his stool and

swung his rope round. It hummed as it sliced through the air.

"I don't mind," Jim tried to explain, but this made Mr Barrack angrier than ever. At last he had caught Jim out, and he was beating him now for every time he had tried and failed. He pulled a greasy handkerchief out of his pocket and wound it round Jim's head, tying it tight under his chin.

"Just in case you feels like hollering," he said. All the other boys stared in front of them. The rope stung Jim again and again, and the beating inside him was like a wild bird now, throbbing in his limbs and in his stomach, in his chest and in his head, so wild and loud that he felt it would lift him up and carry him away.

When the schoolmaster had finished with him he flung him like a bundle of rags across the desk. Jim lay in a shimmer of pain and thrumming wings. He wanted to sleep. The bell rang and the boys shuffled out. Jim felt Tip's hand on his shoulder. He flinched away.

"That's what they do to the boys who skip off, Jim," Tip whispered. "They thrash 'em like that every day until they're good."

Jim felt the wild thing fluttering again. "Only if they catch them."

"They always catch 'em. Bobbies catch 'em and bring 'em in, and they get thrashed and thrashed.

Jim struggled to sit up. The stinging rolled down his body. "Won't you come with me?"

"I daresn't. Honest, I daresn't. Don't go, Jim."

Jim looked up at the great archways of the schoolroom. He knew the words off by heart. God is good. God is holy. God is just. God is love.

"I've got to," he said. "And I'm going tonight, Tip."