

and him. The other boys are upstairs in their hammocks, all cosy in the big room we sleep in. And downstairs there's just me and him, special.

I want to laugh. I'm so full of something that I want to laugh out loud, and I stuff my fist in my mouth to stop myself.

Barnie gives me that look, all quiet. 'Just tell me your story.'

My story! Well. I creep back to the fire for this. I hug my knees. I close my eyes, to shut out the way the flames dance about and the way his shadow and mine climb up and down the walls. I shut out the sound of the fire sniffing like a dog at a rat-hole. And I think I can hear someone talking, very softly. It's a woman's voice, talking to a child. I think she's talking to me.

'Mister,' I says, just whispering so's I don't chase the voice away. 'Can I tell you about my ma?'

I

The Shilling Pie

Jim Jarvis hopped about on the edge of the road, his feet blue with cold. Passing carriages flung muddy snow up into his face and his eyes, and the swaying horses slithered and skidded as they were whipped on by their drivers. At last Jim saw his chance and made a dash for it through the traffic. The little shops in the dark street all glowed yellow with their hanging lamps, and Jim dodged from one light to the next until he came to the shop he was looking for. It was the meat pudding shop. Hungry boys and skinny dogs hovered round the doorway, watching for scraps. Jim pushed past them, his coin as hot as a piece of coal in his fist. He could hear his stomach gurgling as the rich smell of hot gravy met him.

Mrs Hodder was trying to sweep the soggy floor and sprinkle new straw down when Jim ran in.

'You can run right out again,' she shouted to him. 'If I'm not sick of little boys today!'

'But I've come to buy a pudding!' Jim told her. He danced up and down, opening and closing his fist so his coin winked at her like an eye.

She prised it out of his hand and bit it. 'Where did

you find this, little shrimp?' she asked him. 'And stop your dancing! You're making me rock like a ship at sea!'

Jim hopped onto a dry patch of straw. 'Ma's purse. And she said there won't be no more, because that's the last shilling we got, and I know that's true because I emptied it for her. So make it a good one, Mrs Hodder. Make it big, and lots of gravy!'

He ran home with the pie clutched to his chest, warming him through its cloth wrapping. Some of the boys outside the shop tried to chase him, but he soon lost them in the dark alleys, his heart thudding in case they caught him and stole the pie.

At last he came to his home, in a house so full of families that he sometimes wondered how the floors and walls didn't come tumbling down with the weight and the noise of them all. He ran up the stairs and burst into the room his own family lived in. He was panting with triumph and excitement.

'I've got the pie! I've got the pie!' he sang out.

'Sssh!' His sister Emily was kneeling on the floor, and she turned round to him sharply. 'Ma's asleep, Jim.'

Lizzie jumped up and ran to him, pulling him over towards the fire so they could spread out the pudding cloth on the hearth. They broke off chunks of pastry and dipped them into the brimming gravy.

'What about Ma?' asked Lizzie.

'She won't want it,' Emily said. 'She never eats.'

Lizzie pulled Jim's hand back as he was reaching out for another chunk. 'But the gravy might do her

good,' she suggested. 'Just a little taste. Stop shovelling it down so fast, Jim. Let Ma have a bit.'

She turned round to her mother's pile of bedding and pulled back the ragged cover.

'Ma,' she whispered. 'Try a bit. It's lovely!'

She held a piece of gravy-soaked piecrust to her lips, but her mother shook her head and turned over, huddling her rug round her.

'I'll have it!' said Jim, but Lizzie put it on the corner of her mother's bed-rags.

'She might feel like it later,' she said. 'The smell might tempt her.'

'I told you,' said Emily. 'She don't want food no more. That's what she said.'

Jim paused for a moment in his eating, his hand resting over his portion of pie in case his sisters snatched it away from him. 'What's the matter with Ma?' he asked.

'Nothing's the matter,' said Emily. She chucked a log on the fire, watching how the flames curled themselves round it.

'She's tired, is all,' Lizzie prompted her. 'She just wants to sleep, don't she?'

'But she's been asleep all day,' Jim said. 'And yesterday. And the day before.'

'Just eat your pie,' said Emily. 'You heard what she said. There's no more shillings in that purse, so don't expect no more pies after this one.'

'She'll get better soon,' Lizzie said. 'And then she'll be able to go back to work. There's lots of jobs for cooks. We'll soon be out of this place. That's what she told me, Jim.'

'Will we go back to our cottage?' Jim asked.

Lizzie shook her head. 'You know we can't go there, Jim. We had to move out when Father died.'

'Eat your pie,' said Emily. 'She wants us to enjoy it.'

But the pie had grown cold before the children finished it. They pulled their rag-pile close to the hearth and curled up together, Jim between Emily and Lizzie. In all the rooms of the house they could hear people muttering and yawning and scratching. Outside in the street dogs were howling, and carriage wheels trundled on the slushy roads.

Jim lay awake. He could hear how his mother's breath rattled in her throat, and he knew by the way she tossed and turned that she wasn't asleep. He could tell by the way his sisters lay taut and still each side of him that they were awake too, listening through the night to its noises, longing for day to come.

The Stick Man

They must have slept in the end. The next thing Jim heard was a stamping of heavy feet on the stairs and the rapping of a cane on the floor outside their room.

'The Stick Man!' whispered Emily.

Before the children could sit up the door was flung open and in strode the owner of the house, stamping snow off his boots. He swung off his cape, scattering snowflakes round the room, and as he shook it into the hearth the white embers spat.

'I did knock,' Mr Spink barked. 'But when lie-abeds don't answer then lie-abeds must be got up.'

Emily and Lizzie scrambled to their feet at once. Jim would have crawled under the covers but his sisters hauled him up between them. The children stood in a limp row in front of their mother.

Mr Spink pushed the damp, yellowy strings of his hair behind his ears and peered over their heads at her. His breath came in little wheezing gasps.

'Is she dead?'

'No, sir, she ain't dead,' said Emily, fright catching at her throat.