RUNNING WITH HORSES

Written and illustrated by
JASON COCKCROFT

ANDERSEN PRESS

Andersen Press Limited
20 Vauxhall Bridge Road,
London SW1V 2SA, UK
Vijverlaan 48, 3062 HL Rotterdam, Nederland
www.andersenpress.co.uk
2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced,
stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form, or by any means,
electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise,
without the written permission of the publisher.

The right of Jason Cockcroft to be identified as the author and illustrator
of this work has been asserted by him in accordance with
the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988.

Copyright © Jason Cockcroft, 2022

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data available.

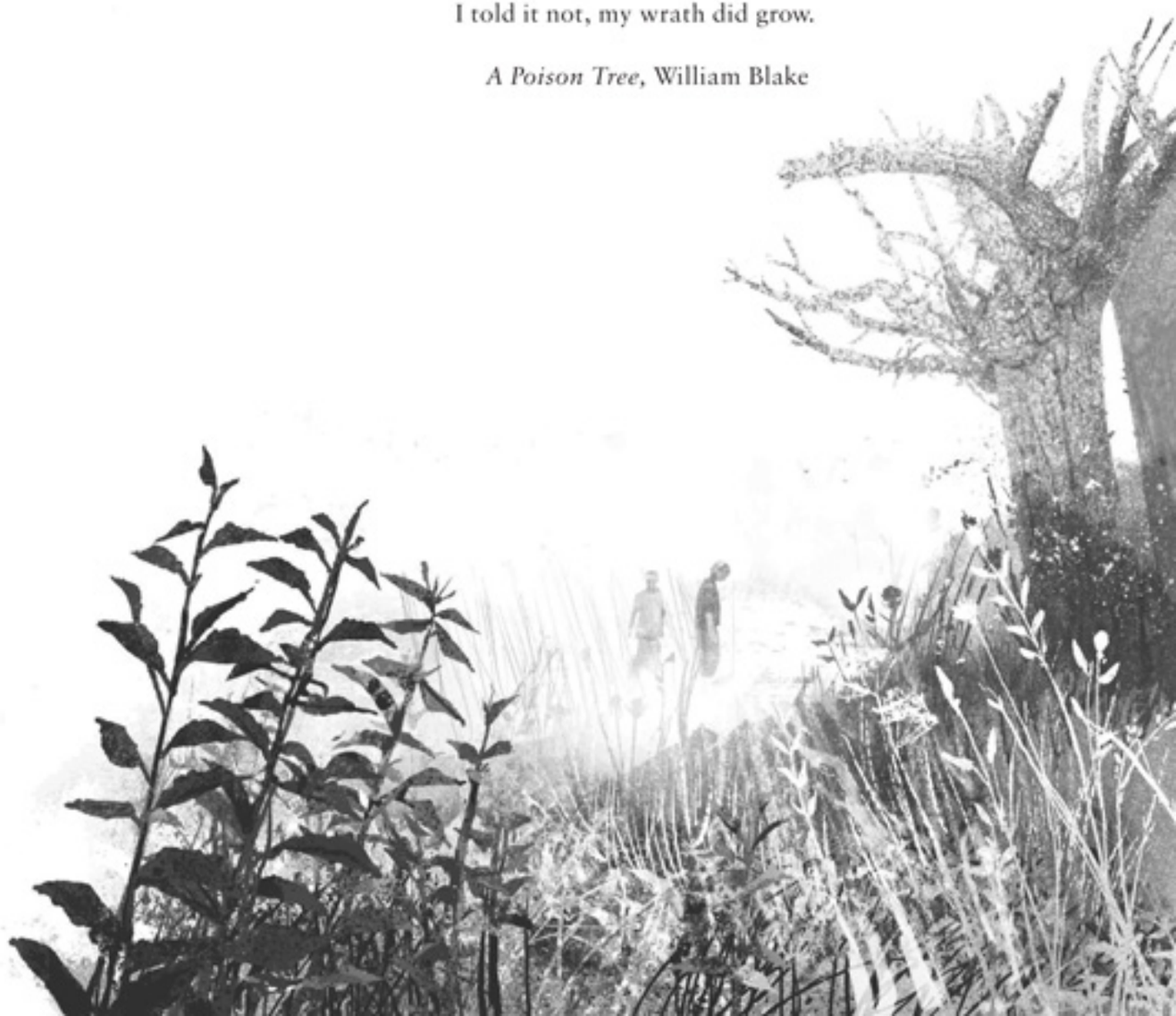
Hardback ISBN 978 1 83913 208 7
Trade paperback ISBN TBC

Printed and bound in Italy by Elcograf S.p.A

For the loved ones in my life,
and for those that are absent.

I was angry with my friend;
I told my wrath, my wrath did end.
I was angry with my foe:
I told it not, my wrath did grow.

A Poison Tree, William Blake



I thought the dreams were over and all in the past, and then the horse came.

A white horse it was, and beautiful. Eye as shiny as a marble, and teeth long like piano keys, candle-white. It came one night in my dreams, its breath hot and the sudden splash of moonlight on the mane bright enough to blind me.

I'd had dreams like it before, but this one was different. Because the horse wasn't a beast or a monster like in the past, nothing ancient and fearful. Just a horse. And I wasn't afraid when I saw it. At least, not for myself, because this great beautiful creature was running from something I couldn't see. Something that was hidden deep in the clouds on the horizon, in the waves.

Something that meant the horse harm.

Arriving soon, and never to settle.

PART ONE

ONE

Call me Rabbit.

It's not my name. Not my proper name.

My mam and dad would never have called me such a barmy thing, even as a joke. But Rabbit is what Joe called me, because for a while I didn't talk. First day me and Mam turned up at the caravan park, Joe clapped eyes on me and he laughed himself silly and said I was quiet as a rabbit. And the name stuck, just like that.

When I say I didn't talk, I mean it. I wasn't in a sulk, and I wasn't having a bad day, neither. And I wasn't taking it out on anyone, if that's what you think. I just didn't talk, not at all, not a word, and for months. And not just with Joe, but everybody.

At the time, most folk thought I had a speech impediment, something wrong with my voice box or something, but that's not what it was. Thing is, I never was much of a talker anyway, but they weren't to know that. My dad used to say, 'There are those that Talk and those that Do, and be bloody glad you're not one of the first lot.'

Although, if he'd talked more about the things that bothered him, I'm thinking maybe he'd still be alive. Maybe he wouldn't have ended up dead in the woods, because that's what happened. And maybe I wouldn't have had to watch him die. Maybe things would have been

different and I wouldn't have stopped talking, because that's what was behind it – me seeing something no lad should ever have to see.

This story isn't about my dad, though, it's about Joe and me and that summer we found the bloke down the hole. But before I get to that, there was something else he said, my dad, something he'd read somewhere. He said that there are two sorts of truth. There's the truth that Lights the Way, and there's the truth that Warms the Heart. Well, if you ask me there's a third sort – the truth that you have to get out no matter what. That's the truth I'm going to tell, because it's the only one I know.

And my truth starts and ends with Joe Fludde's smile.

I could draw you his teeth right now – straight and white and the one chipped dogtooth on the right that snagged on his top lip when he talked and gave him this baby-faced look that seemed to make a nonsense of all the stories about him. Like how he was a thief from a family of thieves, for instance, and a liar and vandal, too. Then there were the rumours of the fires, because the fires were all folk talked about that summer: the farm fires and who'd set them, and whose place would burn down next. And you can guess who they thought was behind it all. There'd been half a dozen that we knew about – barns and outhouses and store sheds and that. It had been going on for months now, and the police were everywhere you turned, searching out the culprit, and not having much luck with it, either.

This was in East Ferry, where me and Mam had moved to, which is somewhere you won't have heard of, probably. Nice town by the sea, quiet in winter and overrun with tourists in summer. But like any little town, it has its odd ways, and if you'd bothered listening to them, folk here would have told you that the fires hadn't been set by anyone born in East Ferry. Because anyone barmy enough to have burned people's property couldn't be from around here, had been their logic. See, the arsonist must have been an outsider, and there was no bigger outsider than Joe and his family – no matter that they'd lived there most of Joe's life. But that's how it was – if you weren't born in East Ferry, then you were an incomer, and shame on you if you thought different.

It wasn't a bad place, though, if you ignored the daft talk. In fact, I liked it. I liked the slow pace of things on the coast, and the quiet. Liked the sea air and the fields and the wild of it all.

It was dead different than the town where I came from, and there were things I missed about my old life, of course. I missed Mam's house back on the estate in our town, for starters. I missed the nearby canal, and the stream and the woods leading out to the fields, where I used to walk and watch the fish and birds. And there were other things I missed, too – things that were gone for ever, never to come back. Like Dad.

But see, in my old town you never got to watch seals lazing on a beach, and you never dug fossils out of the cliffs with your bare hands, either. So, all in all, I thought it was just fine out here.

Joe, though, he didn't have any time for East Ferry. He said the place was cursed.

'You and me will always be aliens here, Rabbit,' he told me the day it started. 'Mark my words.' It was the first Sunday of the holidays, and we were running across the cliff, dashing against the blue sky heavy with insects and gulls, and Joe, he looked over and gave me a grin. 'Aliens, I tell you – *like that David Bowie bloke, except without the funny eyes*.'

Bowie was one of our things – me and Joe. He was a dead rock star from the seventies who dressed up like he was from outer space, and he had two different-coloured eyes. God's honest truth. Proper outsider, he was. We both liked him, me because Dad had always played his records when he was home from the army, and Joe, on account his old man was in a tribute band once, he says. Not that he had many memories of his dad, apparently, because he scarpered when Joe was still a nipper.

Anyway, it was Joe's catchphrase: *Like that David Bowie bloke, except without the funny eyes.*

He said it nearly every week, as though it was the first time I'd heard the joke. And always that smile of his, bright as daytime lightning. Most beautiful smile you've ever seen, and I'm not even joking.

So there we were, me and Joe, laughing out loud and running so fast we might take off. And then, as though it was the most natural thing in the world, Joe stops and grabs me by the shoulders and says: 'Here, Rabbit – you wanna see a dead horse?'

TWO

SOMETHING YOU NEED to know about me: I'm not one for trekking all day to see dead things, usually. So you'll be wondering what made me do it then. But you don't know Joe Fludde. See, when Joe smiled at you like that, you didn't say no. Something in him sort of shone out like nothing I'd known before. Like an energy. Something cosmic. Not that everyone felt like me, because they didn't. He had his enemies, all right. But I wasn't one of them, that's all I'm saying.

There's something else you need to know about me, and I might as well get it over with: I used to see things. This was before Joe and the caravan park and the fires. They weren't hallucinations, not really. I'd dream them first off, and then somehow they'd appear to me when I was awake. It was ancient animals I saw – wolves and bears and the like – out in the woods, out with Dad, before he died. Which I know sounds barmy, but he was a Troubled Soul, was Dad. That's what they call him now he's not here any more – a Troubled Soul – although when he was alive they had other names for him, of course. Which is one of the reasons I have no problem with outsiders like Joe. Because Dad was one, and I am, too.

Anyway, these animals – beautiful, they were. Except, you see, they weren't there, they couldn't have been. I'd made them up, or we had. Him and me.

It's not something you can easily tell people, though. As soon as anyone hears that you've been seeing stuff, you get a bad reputation real quick – and then, just like that, you're a mental case.

Course, they don't call you that. They're too polite. Louise, my counsellor, she says there are lots of common mental conditions, and it's lucky that I wasn't the type that sat in bed all day waiting for the world to end, or lined up the cutlery on the table, just so, because I thought it would protect my family from car accidents or plane crashes or fatal diseases.

Which is true, all right. But I was the sort instead that dreamed up ancient creatures out of the ground, which I'm not sure is any better. And, yeah, it might sound funny when you try to picture it, like it's some cartoon, but I can tell you it wasn't funny when it happened to me.

Dad was a bit of a dreamer. He said the world was full of ancient animals and magic, and we were just passing by. He meant people. He had a way of talking that made things come alive – a bit like Joe – and when he spoke of nature and history it was as though I could see it in my dreams, all the creatures of the forests, every animal that had ever lived. Like they'd passed from his mind into mine. That's how close we were, me and him. Maybe some of the madness passed from him to me, too, I'm thinking.

Anyway, the dreams of wolves stopped pretty quick about a year ago, the same time the night sweats kicked in, and the shaking, the Scares. And that's when I first stopped talking.

Not long after my dad got killed.

I was there when it happened, saw it all go down. This is the story, if you want to know: he'd got into trouble with some bad men, gangsters. Not that he was bad, because he wasn't. But he'd had a tough life, and Louise says sometimes that no matter how strong or good a man is, life can become overwhelming, and that leads to bad decisions being made. And Dad, well, he made a bad decision, and ended up getting shot in the woods, which is something no one deserves, especially him. And me, I watched it happen, like I say.

Then came the Scares.

That's what I call them: the Scares. Because they come up on me like a horror film – some feeling that a terrible thing is gonna happen. And I'll be proper frightened, shaking with the fear. Like the worst panic attack you've ever had, but nothing is wrong, see.

No reason for it. Not as far as you can tell, anyway.

Louise says it's the wiring in my brain telling me I'm in danger, because in the past there *had* been danger. On that day in the woods. It's like a stuck record, she says. My primitive mind playing that same danger over and over, and reacting to it. Running scared, like a rabbit.

She means my dad and what happened to him. But she never mentions it right off, just lets me make my own way to the Meaning of it All. Death and Grief and all that. This is how they talk, counsellors, and always the same calm, quiet voice that makes you feel like you're going a bit deaf.

If you look at it, it's remarkable, she tells me. This is Louise again.

That's the word she uses – *remarkable*. Meaning amazing, meaning good. Meaning I'm not a complete basket case. Because when there *was* danger, that mind of mine knew exactly what to do – to run like stink, away from whatever was after me. She calls it my lizard brain. But me, I call it my rabbit brain. It's right down at the base of the skull, she says, the old part that goes back to when we were all walking around naked and hunting bears and living in caves. Times my dad would have loved, probably, because he liked the woods and hunting and foraging, and he was good at it. And when I dream about him – and I do, more times than I'd ever admit to Louise – well, it's always him and me in the woods, tracking pheasant or rabbit or something.

Anyway, what Louise tells me is this: it's got one function. She's talking about my rabbit brain again. All it has to do is get scared and

do something about it. Most people freeze, some run. I seem to sweat a lot and kick about in my bed so hard that I can't sleep in it any more, which seems like a pretty useless rabbit brain to me. Because when you wake up crying and your sheets are soaked through, then it's hard to pat yourself on the back for being a remarkably evolved creature, isn't it?

But Louise, she tells me not to look at it like that.

She says I'm a Work in Progress.

She says I'm a Survivor.

She says I'm Doing Just Fine.

And something she did must have worked, because after a while I began talking again. Not that I've ever been a loudmouth, but at least now I don't feel like I'm choking when I open my gob. And the Scares started to come less often, too. Now I only have to see Louise once every couple of weeks, which seems more than enough.

Thing is, right from the start she didn't mind that sometimes I didn't say anything. If I sat there for forty-five minutes saying bugger all, she'd just sit it out with me, like it was a silent staring competition. She didn't take it personally. I liked her for that.

It's why I liked Joe, too.

THREE

ANYWAY, HERE WE are, me and Joe, and it's the hottest summer on record and we're yomping through the hogweed and nettles, and it's a proper beautiful morning. Blue sky and not a bit of wind. And it's baking on your back, hot as an oven making your skin prickle, so you feel alive, and for once it's like I'm a kid instead of an old man with night sweats and a dead dad haunting his dreams.

We're on our way to the horse Joe was talking about.

'Big lovely nag. You'll see, Rabbit. She's beautiful.' And the way he says it, it could be something alive he's talking about, something that might just trot over to us and eat hay out of our hands, instead of something dead. 'Proper thoroughbred, she is, real class.'

Joe's face lights up when he says it, like it always does when he has a new idea in his head, which is most days. He says he saw it last night, this horse, but from a distance, so he couldn't get a proper look. But what he saw, he tells me, was like 'marble under the moonlight, pale and glowing.'

I don't ask how come he was out in the middle of nowhere at night, and without me. But I think it. And later there'll be other thoughts, too, like how come he knew this story of his would get me out here with him? Why a dead horse? Why that particular lie?

'Glowing, it was,' he says, 'bright as a ghost.'

That's how Joe talks.

He doesn't bother reading, but he has a way with words, like a poet. Better, even. And I think if he'd only look at one of the books I give him, maybe he'd write one himself someday. Not that I've always been into books, because I haven't. Time was I didn't see the point, either, but Joe's worse. He says he knows things you don't get from books. Says he absorbs it out of the ether, but me, I think he just talks to his nan a lot, and the rest he gets from YouTube.

Joe knows how to navigate without looking at a compass, knows which rocks have fossils in them, knows how to tickle fish out of a stream, and knows where to find spring water, or so he tells me. He knows the names of death spirits and Native American legends and Viking gods. He knows how to read your palm and tell your future.

The only thing he doesn't know is where he comes from.

Joe always says he's half Welsh. Doesn't know which half.

Maybe my legs, he jokes.

His dad buggered off, and he never knew his mam, so he was brought up by his grandma Win in one of the bungalows on the caravan park. Sometimes I think, maybe that's what we have in common, him and me – missing dads.

'You sure about this horse?' I ask him, once we're thrashing through the barley field, midway there. 'I mean, you know it was dead, right?' Something inside me is hoping he's wrong, because I'm not looking forward to seeing some poor dead thing, not at all. Not on a day like

this. It's a day when you feel so hot and calm you might melt into the land itself, quick as a rain shower sucked down into the summer soil until you become part of it. You and the earth and the air, all mixed together.

'Course it was,' says Joe, without looking up, and he's sounding annoyed that I'd even doubt him. But I see that his shoulders are hunched when they're usually lithe and open. His smile's vanished. Proper smiler is Joe, but not so much today.

The sun is slamming down on us hard, but in a good way, and you can smell the summer in it, like it's concentrated one hundred per cent undiluted sunshine, feeding right into the pits of your bones.

'What did it do then, this horse? Have a heart attack?'

'How would I know?'

'I'm just asking,' I say.

'What's up, Rabbit?' Joe replies. 'You scared?'

Truth is I'm not scared, not really. Just wary. Joe's one for adventures, and me, I've learned to like the simple life since coming to East Ferry. If it was anyone else I'd have to argue the point, though. But Joe, he's already onto the next thing, that quick mind of his always running when others are slow.

'Here, do you know the heart of a horse is nine times as big as a bloke's heart?'

He tells me it's the size of a football, and I'm nodding along, because I don't know any better, you see. So I'm Happy as Larry, as Mam says. Why shouldn't I be? I'm with Joe and we're in a field in the middle of nowhere and not a soul around for miles, and that's where I want to be.

Don't get me wrong. It's not that I'm in love with Joe.

It's not that, not really, although there's plenty who make jokes about it and take the mick when they see us together.

But I do love him.

He gets me, see, he knows me. Me and Joe, we're closer than mates. Close as you can get without being brothers. Not that I tell him any of this, of course. There's a lot I don't tell him. Like the new dreams I've been having.

'Here, what's on your list?' This is Joe talking again. It's how he thinks – in short bursts of nonsense that stay in your head and make you think. 'What's on your list, Rabbit?'

'What sort of list?'

'Your bucket list. Things you want to do before you die. You must have one.'

We've found the old drainage ditch now. That's how you get to the horse, Joe tells me – out to the Cullen farm and through the barley field, down into the ditch, past the fallen tree that looks like a sleeping cow, then across the hill into the valley, by the old, rusted tractor and through the nettles.

The afternoon is clammy – this real humid sweat rising up from the grass that makes it hard to breathe. We're maybe half a mile from the farm. Half a mile from the bloke in the ground, too, but I'm not to know that. I'm still thinking about that horse Joe talked about. And my dream. Because this morning I'd woken from a night of dreaming. And the thing – the strange thing – is that what I'd dreamed about was a horse. A big white horse running from something that I couldn't see, splashing through the tide. Same dream I've had for almost a week now. And what are the odds of that, eh?

So I'm thinking of horses and dreams, and how they've come together. On this day of all days.

'Everyone's got a list.' This is Joe talking. 'Me, before I'm seventeen I got three things on mine. Things I wanna do. Number one, See a dead body. Two, Find treasure. Three, Read my name in the papers.' He counts them off on his thumb and fingers, one-two-three, like a magician who's setting up some trick. Magic's in the air this summer.

'And a dead horse counts as a body, does it?' I say.

'Today it does,' Joe says, and there's that smile again.

Some people smile and they look happy, other people – people like my mam, for instance – can't help looking sad when they smile. But when Joe Fludde smiled there was this charge in the air that made the hair stick up on your arms, and your teeth ache. When he smiled at you, you thought anything could happen, and all it would take was for you to stride out into the world with him and see what it had to offer. At least, that's what I thought. But after things went wrong that summer and me and Joe found ourselves in deep trouble, well, my mind would ask what exactly had been hiding behind that smile of his.

Because, you see, I was about to find out that what folk said about him happened to be true.

It wasn't East Ferry that was cursed. It was Joe Fludde and his family.

FOUR

There's something else I miss from my old life, by the way.

Her name's Sophie.

I haven't mentioned her until now, but she was a girl I knew back in my old town. That's another story. We were sort of in love, me and her, but then the Scares came and I stopped talking to her, and the Shame came, too. Because here's the thing, what I haven't said until now is I should have been able to save my dad. That's how I think, see. He needn't have died if I'd been braver, stronger, if I'd done something different. Although Louise doesn't agree. She says, when bad things happen sometimes no one can stop it. That it wasn't my fault. That it's just the Scares talking, because Shame and Scares are the same sometimes. And Shame eats away at you, like the sea eats away at a cliff. It stops you from confiding in folk. Makes you feel weak.

Anyway, Sophie. When you stop talking to someone without ever telling them why, eventually they stop talking to you. Funny, that. So me and Sophie just drifted apart. Then one day Mam tells me there's a job free, managing a caravan park on the coast, and she's going to apply for it, and things will be better out there, you'll see.

Then we're moving, maybe going for a year, maybe longer. It would do me good, shake me out of my mood, she thinks. She hopes. Maybe get me talking again, get me back to my old self. She's told my counsellor, the first one – he was called Jon, and he was all right, but not as good as Louise – and he says he's happy about it.

I wanted to describe all this to Sophie, of course, but those Scares and that Shame stopped me. By now, me and her had stopped texting, even, and it's like we never knew each other, which is weird. Because we were as close as two people could be, almost like me and Joe. Closer. Proper love, it was.

Mam's plan with the caravan park, it didn't sound like much of an idea to me at the time, to be honest. But the thing is, it works. Not straight away, but it works now. After a while I start feeling like myself again, and the Shame goes.

My head says it's because of Louise, but my heart knows it's all down to Joe.

FIVE

Not far now. We're past the fallen tree that looks like a cow, and nearing the top of the hill. Rusted old tractor to the right. Then it's down, down into more grass. Yorkshire fog, it's called, all purple on top and waving, thick as a tide. And I pretend we're dragging ourselves through water, like the field is flooded, all shimmer-bright and sparkling. Kids' thoughts, but that's what we're like today. Running through the grass and giggling like kids. And this is when life's best, I'm thinking. Days like this, with nothing to worry about, no counselling for a couple of weeks and no school, no thoughts of Dad and no dreams of animals underground. Just Joe and the fields and the sky.

Wait now. Stop. There in the distance.

The barn.

It's this long, low ramshackle sort of mess. All rectangles and black tar and broken windows. Rotting rain gutters dragging off the shingles, an old plastic bath set as a cow trough to one corner, and a hazel tree growing through its roof.

'How come you went without me?' I ask now, hiding the childish hurt in my voice. Because lads aren't supposed to get jealous like that, are they? And not about something so daft. But what I mean is last night when he says he saw the horse, how come he didn't take me with him, because he always does. Because me and Joe, ever since I moved into the caravan park, me and him have done everything together. Stuck together like flypaper, Mam says. Like twins. Stuck like trouble.

The day we moved in, even before Mam and me had had time to unlock the door of our little bungalow, it was Joe climbing up into the removals van and grabbing something to carry. And Mam's eyes on him, like if she wasn't careful, he'd nick something. Nick meaning steal, meaning thieve, meaning rob.

Which he might have done if him and me hadn't struck it off so quick, he tells me after, laughing.

The thing with Joe is he's never short of words, and soon enough he's charmed Mam, too. It's his superpower, he tells me. 'If *your* superpower is to listen and hardly say a word, then mine is turning shit into gold.'

He could talk his way out of a house fire, he tells me. Talk his way out of the grave.

Mam sees it, of course. And later that day she shakes her head and tells me, 'That lad talks trouble.'

But I like the sound of the trouble Joe talks. His trouble sounds like poetry to me.

It doesn't matter if sometimes I don't say much, because he can talk enough for the both of us. Only, right now in the field under the sun, he's struggling for a single word. I can see it. His lips are all stopped up.

He shrugs, eyes down. Brown eyes, he has, dark as a doe's eyes.

'The thing is,' he says, 'Billy came back last night.' This is what he tells me, finally, when he does open his mouth. He has this bashful sort of tone to his voice that doesn't suit him. Because Joe's usually brash not bashful. 'He needed me to drive up the bay with him to help lug some bottles into the pickup.'

The bottles are gas, to plumb into the caravans and run the heating, and there are plenty of holiday parks around here, and money you can make if you can get hold of cheap bottles, then half fill them and sell them full price.

Billy is Joe's half-brother, who comes and goes and always brings a bad smell with him when he does. Different as you can get from Joe. So me, I let it go. Because Joe can't say no to Billy, not if he doesn't want a hiding. And Joe's had enough in his time, that's what I'm guessing. You just have to see how Joe is around him. Skittish and scared, which tells a story, I'm thinking. And bruises that go too deep to be accidental.

Billy's a bastard, all right.

It's still out there, by the way: the barn. It hasn't gone anywhere. Sitting beneath the sky, low and leaning, close enough that we can see the silver of the water in the cow bath shimmer.

The place hasn't moved, and neither have we. Thing is, I'm not sure I want to see a dead horse. I do and I don't. If anyone knows things die, it's me, so I'm not squeamish, not really. But I'm asking myself if I'm so desperate to stare at some sad beautiful thing dead in a field anyhow? On a day like this, where I feel drunk-happy and we could just keep walking and walking until it's dark, and laugh and joke and not bother with anything dead.

Maybe Joe's thinking the same, because we're both standing there, not moving, faces slick with sweat and eyes blinded by the sun.

'You sure it was dead?' I ask again.

'Told you, didn't I?' he says, but Joe looks worried, and I'm thinking maybe he's got Billy on his mind. Because fights and robbing is what Billy's good at, and in and out of prison since he was old enough.

Meaning Billy's the trouble that Mam thinks Joe talks.

'Don't you want to go look?' Joe asks, sort of shy. Sweat on his lip now, and his eyelashes flickering long and black. Good-looking, is Joe, but today there's something jumpy in him. 'Thought you liked animals.'

I want to tell him I *do* like animals, but there's a difference between listening to a thrush sing and me gawping at the carcass of some poor old nag rotting away in a field, and it's a difference Joe doesn't seem to get. Or doesn't want to. 'You first,' I say.

'Yellow belly,' Joe replies, but there's no poison in it, just a phrase. If anything, he sounds more nervous than me. I follow him through the field, and he's idling now, grabbing a handful of grass. A long sheaf of Yorkshire fog that he waves about him to keep away the flies. It cuts past my sight, bright as a horse's tail.