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# The boy with no shoes

William Horwood

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# AUTHOR'S NOTE

When I was thirty-four and had been iller than I knew for two long years, my recovery began in the strangest and most magical of ways. I woke one day from dreaming and saw myself when very young, as clearly as in a black-and-white Kodak photograph. I saw how desperately the little boy I once was had needed someone to talk to in a world where no one wanted to listen. I decided there and then to travel back in time and let myself as adult be listener to the child. This book and my final healing is the result of that imaginative listening over very many years.

Because the boy that I was seemed someone other than myself, it proved easier – in fact essential – to give him a different name and to change the names of those who most influenced him for good and ill. I even changed the name of his home town, which was, of course, my own. Adopting such disguise, I have been able to fill gaps, paper over cracks and visit distant places of emotion I would never otherwise have reached.

I have decided to leave things that way. For one thing it protects the dignity and innocence of others in the story, most of them now dead, whose perceptions of the same events would inevitably be different from my own. For another, though there is still someone left alive who calls me Billy, the fact is that the boy I listened to changed in the telling and will now always be Jimmy to me.

WH, Oxford, 2004

# PROLOGUE

My name is Jimmy and there was a man in my time long ago, before the Boy and the Girl, before my Darktime, before Granny came to help me; and that man held my hand and took me out of our cold house into the sun and then along a street to a great big place with a sign outside.

It was dark and deep, with lots of boxes and all sorts of things piled up and everything warm, with dust rising slowly, endlessly. He let me watch the dust caught shining in the sun. He didn't hurry me or shout.

That was the place and that was the day when the Man Who Was gave me the pair of shoes.

I know he did.

I know it was him.

I can remember that.

It is the very first thing I remember.

'Do you want them, Jimmy?' he said, squatting down and showing them to me.

I'm sure he said that.

When I nodded, he smiled. I can remember the feel of the smile all around me but I can't remember his face or the smile itself. The name on that smile was love.

Then he said, 'You will have to learn to tie these laces. Look!'

I tried to copy what he did but I was all fingers and thumbs.

'You'll learn,' he said, tying the laces for me one after the other, and I felt the good tightness of them on my feet and looked at my shoes in wonder.

He was the man who gave me the shoes.

There was sun, so warm and everything so good.

I remember that day because it entered my heart and stayed there, never to go away, never, even at the worst of times, even when I was dying.

The Man Who Was gave me the shoes.

I'm sure it was him.

Then came the day when it rained. It drummed on my head and into my hair as the train drew in, huffing and puffing and noisy with steam. The rain drummed down onto my T-shirt. It made my shorts sopping wet and ran down my bare legs and turned me cold, as cold as ice. I couldn't move and I couldn't run and I couldn't find my way beyond the rain towards the train he got on, that terrible day when the train door was shut and he was lost behind the reflections in the glass beyond the rain.

The rain was a cage I could not break out of.

I only had one hand to rattle its bars.

Ma held the other so painfully tight that it cracked my bones. She didn't want me to break out of the cage of the rain that drummed.

'You stay here,' she said. 'Just do as you're told for once.'

So I couldn't run to the train and ask him never, never to go.

I was unable to move as the rain drummed into me a terrible fear, enough to stop my breath and freeze my mind. And the fear was this: that when it cleared and I could see through the tears it made on my face, he would not be there to take my hand and keep me safe from Ma, and I would always, always be alone.

Then the rain was gone and so was he, gone for good along with the train, and I knew I had been right to feel that fear.

So all that was left were the shoes on my feet, which he gave me that day when he kneeled on the ground before me in a shaft of dusty sunlight and spoke my name like no one else, ever again.

# PART ONE

# JIMMY

# 1

# RUNNING

The park keeper in his uniform and hat shouted at me and grabbed one of my ears and pulled me towards him.

'KEEP OFF THE GRASS!' he yelled, so close it made my eardrums ache.

Then he said, 'I'll cut off your ears with my garden shears. I'll cut the bloody things off, seeing as you don't use them.'

That was what set me running across the grass I should never have walked on.

Out through the black iron gates with the spikes and shadows and spiders on top . . .

Down, and up, and across the streets, running away from the fat man, away from the shears that cut when they shut . . .

Past a black car that squealed and shouted . . .

Past a black dog that growled and snarled as I passed, so I had to run faster still . . .

Because the man was still coming.

'You little bugger, you . . .'

The man with the shears was coming, out of the park where he normally stayed. That's why I was certain that this time my aching ears would be cut right off my head.

Round Dumpton Road and up into the street where I lived, past the old woman's house at the end, with its familiar wall and railings. Past that was almost to safety – but when I looked back he was still coming.

'I'll tell your mum, you little . . .'

Ma was busy, so I knew he wasn't going to talk to her; but still he was coming.

So, as fast as I could, I was running, my breathing desperate and painful, for the fat man was coming and his feet were drumming like rain on my head, telling me something bad was going to happen.

I turned onto the concrete path of No 15, up towards the big wooden gate, to try to open it before the man got there with the shears for my ears.

Running and banging on the gate, shouting for Ma, who was busy inside with a man but would help, might help, must help.

'Ma! *Help!*'

The gate was shut, the gate was shut fast.

'*Ma! Maaaaa!*'

Beyond the gate I heard the back door open. She growled out in anger like a dog, did Ma when roused, which was often, and it was that growling I heard. But better that than the shears. Above my head the latch shot up, the gate banged open and out of my yard Ma's red raw hand crashed down and then straight across my face, one, two and three: SLAP! SLAP! *SLAPPPP!*

'Ma . . .'

'I told you to stay away; I *told* you . . .'

She was all dolled up and smelt of powder and perfume and her face was red.

'Ma, there's a man coming . . .'

'I told you,' she snarled, 'not to come back yet.'

Then the gate crashed shut, leaving me outside, and I knew I was wrong to come back early, but the man with the shears said he would cut off my ears; and now he had reached the concrete path and the gate was locked and the back door slammed shut and there was nowhere to go.

What could I do?

I sank down on my knees and put my cheek against the warm wood of the gate and felt its soft roughness as a caress.

I put up my hand on the wood because it was the nearest I could get to Ma.

Then I bowed my head and felt my knees grazed on the concrete

path. But that didn't hurt. My breathing was so fast I began to choke as I huddled down to wait for the man with the shears to come those last few steps to cut off my ears.

Then I looked at my legs and my feet and there I saw the only thing I owned that someone might want.

Not my khaki shorts, which were hand-me-downs from another boy whose Ma, Ma knew.

Not my shirt, which was the Boy's.

But my canvas shoes with white rubber on the front and laces that I had learnt to tie so that one day I could show the Man Who Was how clever I was, if he ever came back.

They were my own shoes, my very own, the only thing to call my own. Not hand-me-down shoes from the Boy or woollen gloves from the Girl. My own.

So then I knew what I had to do to save my ears.

My hands were shaking like my breath, and in the silence of my fear I took off my shoes and laid them neatly on the path as an offering, a gift, the only thing I had to give; my greatest thing.

I had walked on the grass and so had to lose my shoes.

Then I looked up and heard my terror thumping in my chest because there was the man with the shears, come to cut off my ears.

He shouted through his blubber mouth and yellow teeth, 'I'm sick and tired, I'm sick and tired of all you boys. So you see these shears . . . *look at me* . . .'

I tried but I couldn't. I was too afraid to look up at him. Then the man reached down and grabbed my ear and I felt the cold of metal on the side of my head.

The gate crashed open and I saw the black boots of the man with Ma.

'What's he done now?'

'He's walked on the grass once too often, that's what he's done, so I'm going to cut off an ear right close to his head.'

The other man laughed high, high above my head and I smelt the stink of the parkman's trousers.

'Cut 'em both off, for all I care . . .'

'*Maaaa . . .*'

And in straining my head to try and see Ma, searching past the man at the gate towards the back door, hoping she would come to help, I felt the root of my ear beginning to burn and the *snip snip snip* of their laughter just before the cutting was to start.

That was the moment I screamed and caught my first glimpse of that great dark place which is betwixt and between, the place that was Darktime and is. Because I knew if Ma wasn't coming to save my ears, she was a ma who would never come, not ever.

Then the gate slammed shut and silence fell as my screams died away. When I dared look up, the park keeper had gone and I was alone, except for my shoes. So I picked them up and held them close to my chest, and since there was nowhere in all the world to go I stayed where I was until the sun dropped out of the sky and evening came and I grew cold.

Once in a while people came and went along the pavement at the bottom of our concrete path. I stared into the face of each and every one because I thought that maybe one of them might be the Man Who Was come to take me away. Right until darkness I waited, growing cold enough to shiver. The Man never came, but the shoes he gave me, held tight to my chest, as tight as tight could be, were a comfort all the same.

He was the one who gave me the shoes.

I know he did.

I know it was him. I can remember that.

Even in Darktime that was one thing that never left me.

Sitting there shivering, I made a wish for him to come to get me one day.

I made a wish to feel his hand holding mine again.

I made a wish that one day I would be allowed to show him how clever I was to be able to tie my laces all by myself.

I fell asleep whispering those wishes, not knowing that wishes are never granted when you expect or how you expect.

I fell asleep locked out by Ma, not knowing that there was a long road to travel between the wishing and the granting: there was

Darktime to get through, and long times alone, and the only way to reach the end of the road and still be alive was to find others to help you along. Nobody can travel so far alone, not without dying first.

That night, when I fell asleep in the cold outside No 15, when I was five and Ma forgot I was still out there because she was so busy with the man inside, I didn't know anything, or hardly anything at all.

But I did know this: I had the shoes and they were mine and so long as I could wear them or hold them close I would never be completely alone, not ever, and I would always be safe.

I knew that; and I knew as well that I couldn't remember anything about the man who gave me the shoes except the feel of his hand in mine and that big place of boxes and sun and the rising dust caught in light; and that once upon a time in the time long ago I was loved enough to be given some shoes that were mine alone and all for me.

# 2

# DARKTIME

Darktime never goes away. It is always waiting to summon me back into its terrible depth.

That's why it is 'is' and never 'was'.

Darktime is the void between the Man Who Was and my Ma not wanting me, the place of being lost in the dark, the place of me being no one, where even the memory of the Man Who Was and the shoes he gave me begins to slip away, slips fast away into the spiralling darkness around me, where I may never be able to find it again and I am left alone for ever.

Jimmy Rova, who I was once, was a skinny boy in khaki shorts and a striped T-shirt and a short-back-and-sides, hardly noticeable at all: you wouldn't have seen what was inside his head; you would never have guessed in a month of Sundays that Darktime was there.

Darktime was the dying place where I couldn't remember that my name was once Jimmy Rova.

It was the vast and limitless agony of knowing I once lost something, something I needed, but not being able to remember what it was and so never knowing where to find it again. Darktime was knowing for ever the feeling of loss, and it was a place of terrible loneliness.

I started falling into that place when I was five, more than a year after the Rainday, when the rain drummed down on my head and froze my mind and limbs, putting into me the fear that the Man would leave and never come back.

* * *