



**AFTER
DAVY**

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Since Davy died, I'd got good at running. And climbing. And hiding. I was particularly good at hiding. There were, after all, some advantages in being small for my age, and skinny. I could stay still for hours, pressed in the small dark space behind the Bakers' garden shed, or lying invisible along the bough of the big oak tree in the park, or once, even, in desperation, burrowed into the middle of the compost heap at the back of the allotment.

Eventually they'd give up and go home for tea, and I'd come out, brush myself off and go home too. And my mam would first scold me for getting yet another detention, then pull me into a hug which those days was always just a bit too tight. She had a grip like steel, my mam – surprisingly strong for someone as thin and frail-looking as she was. I let her hug me though – I could feel her fear, even now, and somehow her grip made me feel better too.

I knew in her head she was still saying it. "Thank God. Thank God." She'd said it over and over out loud that night, and every time she hugged me now, I knew she was still saying it.

That night, she'd sent me upstairs when the police arrived. But I didn't need to hear. I'd felt it, earlier, when Davy hadn't come back. I knew what the police would say. I could hear them already, sounding sorry, but unsurprised underneath.

"Joyriding, I'm afraid, Mrs Gilpin."

But I knew it wasn't true. They'd said they'd get him, and they had. I don't know how, I don't know how anyone could make it seem like joyriding, but somehow they had. Somehow they'd done it. They'd done Davy, and they'd made it look like his fault.

But I didn't tell my mam. Maybe it was better for her to think it was his fault after all. At least she wouldn't be scared they'd get me too.

That night, when my mam sent me upstairs, I crawled under my bedclothes, shutting my eyes, putting my hands over my ears, even though there was nothing to see, nothing to hear. Sometime later, I felt her sit down on my bed. I could feel her shaking. I crawled out, into her lap, and she held me like I was a little boy again. I was a little boy again, with Davy gone. She crushed me to her and I put my arms round her waist, buried my face in the soft wool of her dress and I clung back.

“Thank God. Thank God.”

I knew what she meant. She meant: “Thank God you weren't out with Davy this time. Thank God I still have one son left.”

But I couldn't think that. I had nothing to be thankful for. All I could think was that if I'd been there, maybe it wouldn't have happened. Maybe if I hadn't had that detention that day he'd have been safe. He wouldn't have been waiting out there, wouldn't have got caught by himself, finally run to earth, one against five or six. I had nothing to be thankful for.

And now, with Davy gone, I was alone. The others were terrified by what had happened to him, it was like I was infected, and they wanted nothing to do with me, in case it rubbed off on them.

It was alright for a few months – because everyone was watching, I suppose. The teachers, the other kids' parents, Mr Unwin the newsagent, who turned a blind eye to school uniforms as long as they weren't underage. I couldn't go anywhere without those pitying

looks, those hushed voices. I hated them, but they kept me safe. But then people started to forget, and so, slowly but surely, it began. A few stares. Then a bit of jostling in the playground. Then the footsteps behind me on the way home.

After a while my mam asked me if I'd like her to get rid of Davy's bed – make a bit more space for me in my room, she said. I knew she was trying to help. But I also knew she still went in there by herself sometimes, lay down on Davy's bed and cried. I could tell. I never saw her do it, but I could tell. Once I went in just after she came out with some washing or something, and I saw the wet marks where the pillow would have been. So I said no thanks – and I knew she was glad. It was safer with his bed where it'd always been.

But out there, outside, there was no one to watch out for me, no one to stick up for me. I was left to face them by myself.

And so I ran. And I climbed. And I hid.

On Saturdays, when the coast was clear, I went to the hut. Davy's hut. But he shared it with me – most of the time, anyway.

No one at school knew about it. Or maybe it was just that, being in a clearing in the woods on Farmer Andrews' land, no one wanted to go there. People said Farmer Andrews would go out into the woods with his gun, and shoot anything – or anyone – that annoyed him. I don't know if it was true – I'd never heard of anyone getting shot, and I'd never seen him in the woods with his gun. I'd never seen him close to at all, actually. But Davy said Farmer Andrews and Dad had got on alright when Dad was alive. Well, they

must have done, I suppose, or Dad wouldn't have used the hut. And we wouldn't have gone there.

Davy said that Dad built it, but I didn't believe him. It looked way too old. He said a lot of things about Dad that I didn't believe – but I was too small to remember, while Davy had six years on me, so I could never win that argument.

I did believe him about the pipe though. Davy said it was Dad's pipe – and in the photo my mam has on her bedside table, Dad's smoking it. Or one very like it, anyway. Davy would sit in the armchair – there was only one, in the corner; the other chair, by the rickety table, was a wooden one, and you got splinters in your bum if you weren't careful sitting down. He'd sit in the armchair, chewing the pipe more than smoking it. He'd spend ages stuffing it with tobacco, lighting it, taking a few puffs, then lighting it again. I couldn't see the point, really. But I think he just liked fiddling with it, I suppose. He let me try it once – it was disgusting. And made me feel sick for ages afterwards. I didn't fancy fags after that either.

The pipe was Grandad's before Dad's, Davy said, which, I suppose, would explain the tobacco tins full of old coins, screws and the odd-shaped keys that never seemed to fit any lock. I loved those keys. I used to imagine the doors they might open, and what might be locked away behind them. I'd draw them sometimes, too, on the scrap paper that sat on a shelf above the table. Davy gave me a tin to keep my pencils in for my ninth birthday – it wasn't an old tobacco one like the others, but I liked it anyway.

With Davy gone, that's what I did most of the time at the hut. Draw. I'd moved on a bit from keys and doors, but I still got them out and sketched them sometimes.

That Saturday I was careful as usual. I was always careful now – when I went to the hut I'd take a bus out of the town in the wrong direction, get off when I knew there was no one to see me, then cut back through the woods. And I'd vary my route every time. Just in case.

They say you're supposed to feel a sense of warning. That when something bad's about to happen you get a bad feeling. But I didn't. I felt fine. Happy, even. It was just an ordinary Saturday, a sunny autumn Saturday – cold, but bright. And for once I wasn't thinking about them. I was enjoying being on my own, free, scuffing the leaves with my feet, hearing the rustling sound they made, thinking about what I was going to draw when I got to the hut.

I raised my face so I could feel the sun on the end of my nose, and breathed deeply to smell that typical bonfire smell that warms you from inside and makes you want to run around and huddle up all at the same time.

Then it struck me. Bonfire smell? In a wood? That didn't seem quite right. What idiot would light a bonfire in a wood? A small knot of fear gripped my stomach. I started walking more quickly. Then, as the smell got stronger, I broke into a run along the familiar path.

I reached the edge of the clearing, and stopped. Just stopped, my jaw slack, my hands hanging by my side. My hut – Davy's hut – my Dad's hut – was a smouldering wreck. No flames – they must have died down ages ago – but plenty of wisps of smoke from where there should have been solid wooden walls, a square window, a slatted door.

I don't know how long I stood there – it seemed like forever and no time at all. Then I ran forward to see what I could save, what I could rescue of Davy, of my Dad. The front of the hut was a blackened mess – they must have forced the door then set it on fire from the inside. I picked up a stick and started poking through the ashes. I found one tobacco tin – open, empty, not too hot to pick up. They must have pulled everything out, chucked them about, then set the hut on fire.

The end of my stick unearthed something round, the bowl of Dad's pipe. Or what was left of it – they must have stamped on it.

I began to shake. My breath started coming in great heaving gasps, and I was seized with a fury beyond anything I'd ever felt.

“You fucking arseholes! You bastards! I'll fucking kill you, you fucking fucking shitting bastard shithead...” and I began to thrash around at the wreckage using my stick to finish what they'd started. I smashed, I whacked, I shouted, and finally, exhausted, I fell down in the mess of blackened wood and ashes and cried, great heaving gasps that made my chest feel as if I was exploding.

How had they found it? How did they know? I had been so careful. But now I was defenceless. I had nowhere to go, nowhere to be safe. They'd beaten me. They'd won. And they'd taken Davy away from me again.

I don't know how long it was I lay there, but the light was beginning to go, and I knew my mam would worry if I wasn't home by dark.

My mam. Davy gone and my mam left with a skinny little runt like me who couldn't even keep the hut a secret. I was pathetic, scared,

hopeless, useless – worse than useless. It should have been me, not Davy. I got up, and, snivelling, started to walk home. And as I walked I thought about all the times he'd walked me home, my big brother.

Slowly, the anger that had seized me when I found the pipe started to well up in me again. They should pay. They must pay. They would pay. They would pay for it. For making my mam cry. For destroying our hut. For taking Davy away from us.

Davy – I owed it to Davy. All my life he'd looked after me. I couldn't let him down now, let them get me, let them win. They mustn't win. They wouldn't win. I wouldn't let them win.

And I started to think. They knew I was scared of them. They had no reason to be scared of me. And right now, I'd be more scared than ever.

Wouldn't I?

An idea began to form in my mind.

“Joyriding, I'm afraid, Mrs Gilpin.”

Oh no. Not Mrs Gilpin. Not this time.