READING PASSAGE

Ed was homeless and cold to his bones.

The air and the ground stood at freezing point, and a heavy layer of yellowish snow-cloud hung like a threat over the afternoon. Black boughs of stark trees creaked in the wind, and the rutted fields lay bare and dark, waiting.

Shambling down a narrow road, Ed was cold and hungry and filled with an intense unfocused resentment. By this stage of the winter he liked to be deep in a nest, sheltered in a hollow in the ground in the lee of a wooded hill, roofed by a lavish thatch of criss-crossed branches and thick brown cardboard, lying on a warm comfortable bed of dry dead leaves and polythene sheeting and sacks. He liked to have his wood fire burning all day near his threshold, with the ashes glowing red all night. He liked to live snug through the frost and the snows and the driving rains, and kick the whole thing to pieces when he moved on in the spring.

What he did not like was having someone else kick his nest in as they had done on that morning. Three of them – Mr DuPont, the man who owned the land where he had settled, and two people from the local council, Mr Frost, a hard-eyed middle-aged man, and Miss Roberts, a prim bossy woman with a clipboard. Their loud voices, their stupid remarks, echoed and fed the anger in his mind.

'I've told him every day for the past week that I want him off my land …'

'This structure constitutes a permanent dwelling and as such requires planning permission …'

'In the town there is a hostel where vagrants can sleep in a dormitory on a one-night basis …'

Mr Frost had begun pulling his branch-and-cardboard roof to pieces, and the other two had joined in. Ed saw from their faces that his smell offended them, and he saw from the finicky picking of their fingers that they didn't like touching what he had touched. The slow burning anger had begun in his mind then, but as he detested contact with other humans and never spoke if he could avoid it, he had merely turned and walked away, shapeless in his bundled clothes, shuffling in his too-big boots, bearded and resentful and smelly.

He had walked six miles since then, slowly.

He needed food and somewhere to shelter from the coming snow. He needed a nest, and fire. His rage against mankind deepened with every leaden step.

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Mr DuPont spent the afternoon regretting what he'd done in the morning. It was not a good day, he belatedly realised, for turning a man out of his home, even if his home was a hole in the ground.

When they'd pulled the nest to pieces, the two council workers and himself, he had found in the ruins a bag full of precious cigarette ends. He wasn't an imaginative man, but it came to him that everything Ed had, his home and his comforts, he had taken away. He had looked up at the sullen sky, and shivered.

During the afternoon he walked lengthily round his land, half looking for Ed, to quieten his own conscience; but it was almost with surprise that he finally saw him walking towards him along one of his boundary roads.

Ed shambled slowly, and he was not alone. At his shoulder, as slowly following, came a horse.

Ed stopped, and the horse also. Ed held out a horse cube on a grimy palm, and the horse ate it.

Mr DuPont looked in puzzlement at the two of them, the filthy man and the well-groomed horse in its tidy rug.

'Where did you get that?' said Mr DuPont, pointing.

'Found it. In the road.' Ed's voice was hoarse from disuse, but the words were clear. They were also not true.

'Look,' said Mr DuPont awkwardly, 'you can build that house of yours again, if you like. Stay for a few days. How's that?'

Ed considered it but shook his head, knowing that he couldn't stay, because of the horse. He had freed the horse from its stable and taken it with him. They would call him a thief and arrest him. In his past he had run away from schools, from children's homes and then the army, and if he couldn't face the walls of a hostel, still less could he face a prison cell. Cold and hunger and freedom, yes. Warmth and food and a locked door, no.

He turned away, gesturing unmistakably to Mr DuPont to take the horse, to put his hand on its head-collar and do what was right. Automatically, almost, Mr DuPont did so.

'Wait,' he said, as Ed retreated. 'Look … take these.' He pulled from his pocket a packet of cigarettes and held them out. 'Take them … please.'

Hesitating, Ed went back and accepted the gift, nodding his acknowledgement of something given, something received. Then again he turned away and set off down the road, and the long-threatened snow began to fall in big single floating flakes, obliterating his shaggy outline in the dying afternoon.

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