

GRAHAM JOYCE

BLACK DUST

HALF HIDDEN BEHIND A thicket of hawthorn and holly bushes was a second cave. It astonished him to see it there. As a kid Andy had scrambled over every boulder, probed every fissure and crevice, and swung from the exposed roots of every tree clinging to the face of Corley Rocks. Yet here was a new cave, quite unlike the one in which he'd been holed up for the afternoon. After feeling the mild tremor, Andy needed to get home. But something in this new cave called to him.

Unlike the first cave, a mere split in the rock face that had always been there, this one was dome-shaped, with an arched chamber as an entrance. He drew closer. As he squeezed between the hawthorn and prickly holly to get into the cave, it became obvious to him that this second cave went back much deeper. He could see well enough for the first few yards, but after that the cave shadows set hard in a resinous black diamond.

Still it called.

He wanted to move deeper in, but his throat dried and his breathing came short. He rolled his foot in the blackness. A pebble crunched under his shoe.

There was a tiny light, no bigger than a glow-worm, swinging at the rear of the cave. It flickered and went out. Then it appeared again. The light shimmered, still swinging slightly from left to right. He heard footsteps shuffling toward him, and then there appeared in the gloom a second light, smaller than the first, and nearer the cave floor. The lights were approaching. Then there was a sound like the low growl of an animal, and it made him think of that dog.

That dog, slavering and throwing itself at the fence, chewing the thick wire mesh. A brute of an Alsatian, but the drooling jaws and yellow teeth had Andy convinced it was part wolf. Andy always kept one eye peeled for the dog while the other, of course, was alert for Bryn's father.

Bryn appeared in his socks. "It's all right," he said. "He's not here."

Andy crossed the swarthy yard and removed his shoes at the threshold of the kitchen. Shoes off at the door because of the coal dust. Everyone. The house and yard once belonged to a coal merchant who'd gone bust, and the cinder path leading to Bryn's house was black. The yard was black. The gate was black. The coal dust had even pointed up the cement between the black-red bricks. They had to take off their shoes so as not to trail black dust into the house. Bryn had developed a lazy habit of not bothering to put on his shoes merely to cross the yard, even though his father, with a bunched fist, had once made his ear bleed for this offense.

"Twenty minutes before he gets back."

The boys went through the kitchen. Bryn's mother Jean looked up from her ironing. "Still down there then, your dad."

"Yes," said Andy.

"Twenty-four hours now."

"Yes."

"They got oxygen. They got food to them. They'll get him out." She pressed her iron into a collar and a jet of steam wheezed into the air.

The two boys went upstairs to Bryn's room, where they got the rope, the water bottle, and the tiny brass compass. They didn't want to hang around. Important not to be there when Ike got back off shift. Sometimes when they played table football or lounged in Bryn's bedroom, the door would open quietly and Bryn's mother would whisper, "He's back. Make yourself scarce." And with that they always would.

Once when Andy awaited Bryn in the kitchen, Ike had come in from work and imposed himself in the doorway, glowering. Andy had felt compelled to look away. Without saying a word to Bryn's mum, the big man slumped in an armchair before the fire, and how the chair-springs had groaned. Ike's skin glowed pink with the scrubbing from a recent shower at the pit, but his body still leaked the odor of coal. A smell like a sulfurous gas, streaming off the man as he stared moodily into the fire. He snorted at the coal-dust irritating his sinuses, hawked and spat into the fire, and this movement released a fresh wave of hostile gas.

Andy had on that occasion feared that even breathing might cause offense. Finally Bryn appeared, beckoning him away. Outside the door they had both vented huge sighs.

OF COURSE THEY didn't need the compass to find their way to Corley Rocks. A matter of a mile and half from the mining estate, Corley Rocks was the highest natural point in the old county of Warwickshire. The ploughed earthworks of an Iron Age encampment moldered on the flat field above an outcrop of red sandstone rock, and from there you could take in the green belt of land all around. To the south stood the two giant wheels of the pit-head winding gear, and beyond that the spires and smoking chimneys of Coventry.

The dog started up again.

"Shut it," Bryn growled as they left the house. "Shut it." It was exactly the way Andy had heard Bryn's old man speak to the dog, half song, half warning, and it was always effective in subduing the animal. Except when Andy or anyone else tried, in which case the dog simply became more inflamed, hurling itself with stupid energy against the mesh fence.

"Do you think that dog is a killer?" Andy said as they walked up the black cinder path away from the house.

"Probably." Bryn hooped the rope across one shoulder. "You carry the water bottle."

The rope was usually for display only. They'd never done any real climbing at Corley Rocks. Everywhere was accessible by scrambling over the smooth, rounded edges of the sandstone. There was only one place where a rope might be helpful, at the sheer face of the rock above the cave, and Bryn was keen to try it. And it had to be admitted: looped across the torso from left collarbone to right hip, the rope looked a treat.

Andy was envious, because carrying the water bottle was shit. But the rope was Bryn's after all.

They had to pass the entrance to the mine, with its weighbridges and security gates. "Don't think about it," Bryn said. "They've got air. And food. They'll get him out."

It was a hot afternoon in August, and by the time they reached the rocks they were sweating and had drunk all of the water. The cave was merely a fissure, a crack opened in the rock face, but it could be reached by the means of small cavities scooped out of the soft stone,

ancient handholds and toegrips. They climbed up and retreated to the back of the cave, welcoming the shade.

Their schoolteacher had said that traces of prehistoric habitation had been found at the cave: flints, stone tools, bones. Someone had even unearthed a huge sabre-tooth, currently being examined by experts at Coventry museum. People had always lived there, it was said, and before that the rocks themselves had been pushed up by fault lines in the vast coal reservoirs under the ground: the very coal that Andy and Bryn's fathers now mined on a daily basis.

Bryn lifted the rope from his shoulders, causing his T-shirt to ride up. Andy saw below Bryn's ribcage the flowering of a huge blue and yellow bruise. It looked like one of the purple-leaf cabbages his own dad grew in the garden. He said nothing. He knew. Bryn knew he knew. And it was none of his business; that's what Andy's mother had said to his father.

"Not your business, Stan, to go getting tangled up in," Nina warned her husband. "Not your business at all."

Andy's father had wanted to go down to Bryn's house to have words. Bryn had turned up one afternoon while Andy's dad dribbled water from the garden hose on his prize-winning leeks. For the old giggle Andy's dad put his finger over the hose and jet-sprayed the two boys. The giggling stopped when the lads stripped off their wet T-shirts.

"Hell, you've been in the wars, haven't you?" Stan said, turning back to his leeks. Then he did a double-take, looked harder, and laid down the hose. Taking in the multiple bruises on the lad's body, he stepped closer. "Let's have a look at you, son."

Bryn danced away. "Nothing. Fell off a ladder."

"Come here, I said. Stand still. Christ, son! Hell's bells!" He brushed the wounds gently with his callused fingertips. Then he said, very quietly, "Must have been a good few times you fell off that ladder."

"Yeah," Bryn sniffed.

Andy's mother, who'd seen all of this, came out with a clean T-shirt apiece for the lads. Stan was already halfway down the path. She chased after him. "You're not going down there. Not your business!"

Stan had himself once clouted Andy with a closed fist, but only once, and some years ago. Not a single day had passed when he hadn't regretted it. "I'll be back sharpish."

"You're not going down there!"

Stan pulled up short. "I said I'll be back sharp," he whispered in a way that settled the argument. Andy's mum returned to the back garden, where the boys had their heads down and hose was still dribbling water onto the leek-bed.

WITH THE DOG going berserk behind the mesh fence Stan had knocked on the door and had taken a step back. It was some moments before Ike Thompson appeared blinking in the doorway, puff-eyed, looking like he'd just been disturbed from a nap. His eyes were lined with coal-dust like a woman's mascara. He sniffed. "Stall," he said.

"A word in the yard, Ike?" Stan turned his back and walked into the open expanse of the disused coal merchant's yard.

Ike shuffled in the doorway, slipped on his boots without lacing them, and followed Stan across the yard.

The men knew each other well enough. They'd mined the same districts, notably the 42s and the 56s; they nodded to each other whenever their paths crossed; they'd even once been part of the same Mine Rescue Team; and they knew that their boys were good pals. They just didn't like each other.

The two miners stood in the cinder-black yard at a distance of about five paces. The dog was barking mad, flinging itself at the fence. "Your Bryn's up at our house just now."

Ike was a big man. His grizzled face bore the blue signature scars of coal mining, like someone had scribbled on his face with a ballpoint pen. He stood a head taller than Stan. But Stan was trunk-necked with a barrel of a chest and muscle packed like coiled wire. He had his own mining scar, a blue and white star right in the middle of his forehead, like a bullet-wound.

Ike lifted a hand to his mouth, squeezing his bottom lip between a coal-ingrained thumb and a coal-ingrained forefinger. "Yup."

"Says he fell off of a ladder."

Ike let his hand drop now he knew what this was about. He glanced to the side, and then back at Stan. "Yup."

The Alsatian barked, and slavered, and seemed to try to chew its way through the mesh fence. "He won't be falling off that ladder again, now will he, Ike?"

Ike turned to the dog, and in a low, throaty voice, almost a hiss, said, "Shut iiiiiiiiiitttttttt." The dog lowered its head and crept back into its kennel. "That it?" said Ike.

"That's about it."

"Right. You can go now."

"Happen I will go. But if that lad should fall off another ladder, then I'll come down here again. And we'll have another talk. More serious."

"Oh aye?"

"Too right, we will. Too right."

The two men stood off each other for another minute. Then Stan said, "I'll be seeing you, Ike."

Stan retraced his steps along the cinder path. He felt Ike's gaze drilling into him at every step.

"Stop thinking about it," Bryn said. "They'll get him out. My old man will get him out."

Andy knew they would get his dad out all right. He just wished everyone would stop telling him. He hadn't been allowed to go up to the pit-head, where the wives and grown-up sons and daughters and the rescue teams and the camera crews all congregated, waiting. It had been twenty-four hours since a roof had collapsed half a mile underground, trapping seven miners, one of whom was Stan. The rescue teams had made an early breakthrough, piping air and passing food through to the trapped men, but the rescue efforts had hit a snag when

a second roof-fall had threatened. Ike was on one of the rescue teams.

"They're right under here," Bryn said. "Right under this spot."

"How do you know that?"

"My old man told me. He said the seam runs north and under these rocks."

Andy thought about his own dad half a mile directly below him, waiting.

"You're not crying are you?" Bryn said. "Not crying."

"Dust in my eye. Dust." Andy's fingers found a flake of red stone. He flung it from the back of the cave into the crack of light, and it dropped, skittering down the slope. "Anyway you wouldn't care if anything happened to your old man."

Andy wished he hadn't said that. Bryn started whipping the end of his rope. "He might be a shit but at least he. ..."

"At least he what?"

"Nah. Come on. Let's climb the Edge." The boys scrambled out of the cave and walked up to an outcrop of red stone known as the Witch's Face. Bryn hoisted himself over the chin and nose of the Face and wanted to use the rope to get Andy up. Andy objected on grounds of pointlessness. From there they proceeded to the Edge, a cliff overhang directly above the cave.

At least he what? Andy thought as they clambered up the steep sandstone slopes, between ragged clumps of hawthorn and holly. One day Stan had brought home a second-hand guitar. Andy had pestered Stan for this guitar, but when it arrived he soon found out that the strings cut his fingers to shreds. He'd taken the guitar down to Bryn's house, and he was exhibiting it to Bryn when Ike appeared unexpectedly, standing in the kitchen doorway, sniffing back coal-dust. His eyes fell on the guitar.

Ike walked across the kitchen without removing his boots, gently lifting the guitar from the lad. "What you got here then, lovely boy? Let's have a look, then."

Ike sat, effeminately crossed his legs, positioned the guitar across his thigh, and gently thumbed the strings. He played a chord or two and the dog in the yard howled. Ike laughed. "Hear that?" He strummed a few more chords and then picked out a tune. "Christ, these strings stand too high off the frets. You'll never play this, lovely boy. Nice tone, but it's a piece of rubbish."

"My dad got it for me," Andy said, meaning to sound defensive.

Ike laid the guitar down. "Come on lads, get in the car."

"Where you going?" Jean had protested.

"Get in the car, boys!"

Where they went, in Ike's beat-up old Ford Zephyr, was Chaplin's music store. Ike spent most of the journey explaining to Andy how he used to have a guitar -- two guitars, even -- but when Bryn and his sister had come along, why, there was no time, no bloody time to play them, and he'd always regretted selling the instruments, and now he was going to put that right. He talked like that all the way round the music shop, non-stop; he insulted the shop

manager; tried out every second-hand guitar in the store; crooned passionately to other customers; purchased right off two decent instruments for the boys; and had a twenty-minute bash on a Premiere Drum Kit before leaving.

"Where's the swining money coming for those, then?" Jean shouted when they got back.

Ike was all sweetness. He squeezed his wife and kissed her angry mouth. "Music before butter," he said. "Remember that, lovely boys. Music before butter."

Stan and Nina had something to say about it, too. They made Andy take his guitar back. Stan went with him. Stan and Andy stood in the kitchen, with their shoes on this time.

"Why can't I buy the lads an instrument apiece?" Ike said. "Why can't I?"

"It's too generous," Stan said.

"Rubbish. How's that anybody's concern but mine?"

"It's my swining-well concern, too," said Jean. "Where's the money coming from?"

The lads watched all this intently. "Boys, sod off into the other room, will you?" Stan said. Bryn and Andy filed out, both still clutching the new guitars by the necks, and closed the door behind them. "Look, Ike, you can't make up for things by throwing money at them."

"What's that? You've lost me."

"The guitars. You can't make other things right."

Ike suddenly understood Stan's point. His face clouded. "I see. I see what this is about, and I don't like it. Tell me, how does one thing touch the other?"

"I'm just saying."

"How the bloody hell does one thing touch the other? If I want to buy the boys instruments apiece, I buy the bloody instruments apiece! Christ, man!"

Stan was man enough to sense he might have made a mistake. "I don't know, Ike, it's too much."

But Ike had soured now. He called the boys back, and while he waited for them, he said, "Your lad can carry his guitar home with him or I'll take it in the yard and split it into matchwood, now!"

"He will, as well," Jean put in.

Stan sighed. "Come on," he said to the bewildered Andy. "Bring your guitar."

Ike followed them out. The dog growled from its kennel but Ike silenced it with a thunderous look. "One thing does not touch another," he said, almost in a whisper. "You should know that, Stan. One thing does not touch another."

"Happen."

They'd not gone twelve yards before Ike softly called to Andy. "Practice every day, mind," he said softly, and with a terrifying squint to his eye. "Practice every day."

"I will," said Andy.

ON THE TOP of the Edge Bryn fumbled with the rope, securing a Pig's Ear knot as he looped it round a spindly clump of rooted hawthorn. Andy was supposed then to loop the rope around his own waist while Bryn lowered himself over the Edge, preparing to descend to the cave that way -- a mere matter of nine or ten feet below the lip of the Edge.

Bryn duly disappeared over the lip, negotiating toeholds and finger-grips, grunting occasionally and chattering happily. Andy meanwhile stood with his hands in his pockets, anxiously gazing across at the twin wheels of the pit-head winding gear, wondering how the rescue was proceeding. It was possible to superimpose on the landscape the giant ghost of an old lady crouched at those black wheels, spinning away with some dark and concealed purpose. And it was while Andy gazed across the fields to the distant mineworks that he heard a yelp and felt the rope tighten round his waist.

Andy grabbed the branch of a nearby tree. The rope jagged against the feeble hawthorn, lifting it out by its roots. Bryn yelped again as the rope dropped him another six feet. Then the hawthorn root popped out of the sandy soil, like a pulled tooth. The rope whiplashed at Andy, turning him in a complete circle, losing its purchase on his body. The bush lashed at Andy's face as it went past him. It snagged on two fingers of exposed tree-root, and Bryn was dumped another six feet. Then the bush tore free and whistled as it went over the Edge.

Andy didn't stop to look over. Instead he hurried down past the Witch's Face and round to the slope in front of the cave, where Bryn lay in a crumpled heap. Blood bubbled at the corner of his mouth.

"Yawright?" Andy said.

"Of course I'm not all right."

"You're all right."

Bryn groaned. He'd been badly winded by the fall, and he'd scraped his hands and his knees. He'd also bitten his tongue, which accounted for the blood. In the end he'd fallen no more than about twelve feet, and had bounced down the sandstone slope beneath the cave mouth. He sat up, holding his head.

"Hey," said Andy. "Not crying are you."

"You shit. Why didn't you hold on to me?"

"You must be joking. You were gone before I knew it."

"Useless. You're useless." Bryn was on his feet.

"It was your stupid idea. Tying the rope to that bush. Stupid. Where are you going?"

"I'm going home."

"Wait. I'll come with you."

"Sod off."

Bryn shrugged off his friend's advances and limped away. Within a minute he was out of sight. "Wasn't my fault," Andy shouted. He slumped onto the slope beneath the cave, knowing he should have gone home with Bryn. While Andy's mother was spending every anxious moment waiting at the pit-head for news of the rescue, Bryn's mother had told him to

come for tea. Just as he'd done the previous night, munching on sardine sandwiches when Ike had turned up.

Ike had broken shifts to be part of the rescue team. He'd stood in the doorway, kicking his boots off, all-in. He drew a chair to the table where the boys sat, and without a word to anyone laid his head down by the plates and the butter, leaking the odor of coal and exhaustion. The boys munched on their sandwiches, looking at him. After a while Jean placed a steaming mug of tea on the table and Ike lifted his head. He blinked sleepily at the boys.

"Well," Jean had said.

"Not much," Ike said. He slurped his tea noisily. Then he turned to Andy. "Thing is, lovely boy, he's in a corner with the other blokes and the ceiling is pressed down on 'em, see. And we can't get."

A flat, opened sardine can lay on the table, next to the butter. He picked up the can. "See how you get this bit of fish stuck in the corner and you can't get your knife into it? Well, that bit of sardine's your dad. In there, look? And the top of this tin is the roof come down on him. Now if we pull out what's holding up the roof, see?" He pressed down a huge, coal-ingrained thumb, crumpling the flimsy metal sheet of the sardine can. Tomato sauce and fish oil bubbled around the scythed edges of the can. "Well. There you are."

Ike carefully replaced the sardine can next to the butter. "Don't you worry, lovely boy. Ike will get him out." Then he put his head back on the table and closed his eyes.

Jean had made a silent gesture that they should leave the table.

Recalling all of this, Andy felt a sob break free deep in his chest and force its way into his throat. He wiped his eyes and tossed another pebble down the sandstone slope. There was nothing he could do. They wouldn't let him wait up at the pit-head and there was no one at home.

Then the ground shook. Very slightly. The mild tremor made him grab at the earth, and he thought he heard a muffled thump. Just for a second he'd felt the shock of earth dislodging, and he knew he hadn't imagined it because a couple of tiny pebbles broke loose from the cave and went bouncing down the slope. He wondered if it had anything to do with the pit rescue.

He decided to hurry home. He got up and picked his way down the slope, barely keeping his footing. He knew that if he went back up to the Edge he could cut across fields and get home faster. His hands trembled. He was clambering between boulders, over the exposed roots of trees, when he stumbled. That's when he saw the second cave.

INSIDE THE CAVE, the dog-like growl subsided. Then it came again, only this time it sounded like a man trying to clear his throat of coal-dust. The two tiny lights continued to swing from side to side. Another distressed throaty growl made Andy want to get out.

But as the lights floated toward him out of the gloom he recognized the bowl of a miner's helmet. The upper light was a helmet lamp. A miner, face blackened with coal-dust, approached him from the dark end of the cave. Hanging from the miner's belt was a Davey lamp, with its tiny flame alive.

The miner stopped, and leaned against the wall. Breathing heavily, he tried to clear his throat again. He was struggling. "Hello Andy. Where's my lovely boy, then?"

Ike blinked at him in the darkness, his face caked with sweat and black dust. All Andy could see of his features were his teeth and the whites of his eyes. Ike had a rope looped over his shoulder; identical to the one he and Bryn had played with earlier. "Bryn went home."

Ike seemed confused. He closed his eyes and leaned his head against the cave wall. Ike was breathing asthmatically. He seemed to have trouble getting his words out. "Oh. Came to have a word with him, I did. See."

Now Andy could see and hear industrious activity taking place deeper in the cave behind Ike. He tried to look beyond the miner. "Where's my Dad?"

"Your old man's all right. I got him out." Ike unhooked the rope from his shoulder and flung it to the cave entrance. "Told you I would."

Andy tried to push past Ike, to get to his Dad. "Let me through."

Ike stopped him. Struggling to draw himself up to his full height, he placed a big blackened paw on Andy's shoulder. "No, no, no. That's not for you back there. Nothing to concern you back there. I just came to see my lovely boy. But you say he's not here, then?"

"No. He went home."

Ike slowly lifted a sooty hand to wipe back the sweat from his brow. Even in the darkness Andy could see it bubbling black and coursing dust into Ike's eyes. He was out of breath. "Tell him I came. Now you run along home, son. Go and see your old man." Andy nodded as the miner turned and retreated, with slow heavy steps, the lamp swinging at his side, deeper into the blackness of the cave. "And tell your old man," Ike called softly.

"Tell him what?"

"Just tell him."

Andy escaped from the cave into the bright summer light. There, lying on the floor was the rope Ike had flung at the cave entrance. Andy picked it up. It was black from the coal, and the gritty dust immediately transferred itself to the boy's hands. He was already blackened from the paw print Ike had left on his shirt, so he hooked the rope over his shoulder and hastened home.

When Andy persuaded the gatekeeper to let him through to the pithead, he found his mother there, and his father. Stan had already been brought up with the other rescued men. They were all in good shape, but there was no celebration and no rejoicing because one of the rescue team had been killed in the effort of getting the men out.

Andy didn't see Bryn for some weeks afterward. His mother had taken him, along with his sister, to stay with her family in Wales. When Bryn did return Andy tried to pass on the message Ike had given him.

"What?"

"He came looking for you. Up at the rocks. Your old man."

"What?"

"He left the rope. Do you want it? The rope?"

Bryn wrinkled his nose in contempt. "No."

"But you must."

"Shut it, will you? Shut it."

Eventually, Bryn and his mother and sister moved permanently to Wales.

Andy never said anything about it to his own father. One afternoon he said to Stan, "So Bryn's dad saved your life then, didn't he?"

"That's what they say, son. That's what they say."

That was the closest they ever got to discussing the matter.

More than once Andy went back up to Corley Rocks to try to find the second cave. He looked hard for it. He never did find it. Though he did have the rope. He hung it on a nail in the garden shed, where it remained untouched for many years, black with coal-dust.