

JUICE

by Peter Deadman

written for Noah Tilling for his eleventh birthday

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CHAPTER ONE

It was barely light, and bitterly cold, when Will set out. The blueish wood smoke from the breakfast fires already hung in the still air, mirroring his frosty breath. He stood on the pedals and worked the cart hard past the potholes. It was a fifteen minute ride to Walsall Crescent, where his uncle, Jerome, had already been working for an hour.

Most of the houses he passed had long ago been scavenged. Broken walls trailed shredded wallpaper, and gas and water pipes sprouted at odd angles. Gardens, which had disappeared under heaps of rubble, were now renewing into mounds of moss and weeds. In the distance he heard an explosion; an early gang working over towards the river.

Nobody lived in these outlying houses now; so many had died during the Changes and afterwards in the epidemic. Houses were too big - impossible to keep warm in the long frozen winters - and people had built small cabins, sometimes a whole family living in a single room. Most had settled round the old centre of the town.

The abandoned houses were still full of all kinds of things, but most of them were useless now. Jerome was always bringing back computers and electric kettles and food mixers and music players, though they just sat in a heap in his workshop, waiting for the day when there would be enough juice to get them going.

It wasn't all junk though. Jerome had found the fur coat that Olivia wore all through last winter when the temperature hit the minus twenties for days on end, as well as the bicycle he'd bolted

onto the cart, and, most precious of all, the solar panel which he'd discovered in the storeroom of an abandoned warehouse.

Jerome and Will had set the explosives at number forty two yesterday afternoon, and they'd blown the house just as it got dark. Then Jerome had come back before first light this morning to make sure no-one else got there first.

He was working the sledgehammer when Will arrived and had already made a sizeable pile of joists and flooring. Will nodded to him, put on his work gloves and started laying lengths of wood onto the cart. Any that were too long he sawed into two or three pieces and he was soon sweating.

It would be a hard day's work, but if they kept at it they would have wood for at least a month. In this weather the stove ran most of the day and ate up great quantities of the soft wood that had formed the skeletons of these houses. But now that the trees had gone, there was little in the way of slower burning hard wood, though once in a while they found a house with oak furniture or newel posts, or solid beech work tops. Then the stove would stay alight all night and the water in the indoor butt wouldn't freeze.

Will cycled three loads back home before they stopped for lunch. They sat by the cart to eat bread and cheese and wrinkled apples. Then Jerome closed his eyes. He'd been up all night, and by the sour alcohol smell of his breath, Will could guess where.

Will wandered round the back of the house to pee. As he stood by a holly tree, bright with berries, he caught a glimpse of movement at the edge of his vision. Very slowly he inched his catapult from his pocket, then one of the smooth stones he always kept ready. Two rabbits had ventured from the undergrowth onto a

small patch of grass to feed. A few moments later one had disappeared in a flash of white and the other lay bloody and twitching. Will wrung its neck.

Jerome had made the catapult for him when he was still small enough to find it hard to pull. The rubber, cut from tough lorry inner tubes, had been renewed many times since. Will was skilled with the weapon and he regularly brought back small game for the cooking pot.

Will dropped the rabbit on the ground next to Jerome. "Supper," he said. "With a bit of luck Olivia will be up for cooking it."

Will never knew what mood his mother would be in. She'd been going through one of her spells recently, with more bad days than good. Sometimes he would find her sitting alone in the dark, the cabin cold and the chickens unfed, but today when they got home she seemed happy to see them.

"I've got some water heated," she said. "You're both filthy. Wash up and I'll cook."

First Jerome, then Will, rinsed the dust and grime off behind the curtain that separated the washroom from the living space. Before he washed, Will skinned and gutted the rabbit. Then they just sat, comfortable and sleepy, while Olivia cooked. Will ate three bowlfuls of bean and rabbit stew and nearly half a warm loaf.

"I don't know where you put it Will," said Olivia. "One of these days you're going to burst."

"He's a teenager," said Jerome, "an eating machine. I swear he's growing in front of our eyes."

He was right, thought Olivia. In just a few months, Will's voice had deepened, his shoulders had begun to spread and his wiry muscles had filled out. He was a good-looking boy. He'd have girls looking at him soon, if he didn't already. Just like his father.

Will's father had been the love of Olivia's life. But he was a restless soul and had disappeared before Will was born. Nobody had heard from him for a long time and the last news of him was that he been caught up in a juice battle up at the border.

After supper Jerome fell on his bed. Olivia and Will read, but the light soon dimmed and then there was only sleep.

As long as the wood held out they could keep the stove fed, and that meant cooking and heating. But there was never enough juice in winter. For days on end the sun refused to appear, and though the dim winter light gave some charge to the solar panel, it was barely enough to run a single light for a couple of hours.

The precious panel on the roof was covered with a sheet of thick perspex screwed deep into the roof joists. It was secure enough, as you could only get to the roof with a ladder and then you'd have to make sure nobody saw you. Stealing juice, or anything for making juice, was one of the worst crimes a person could commit. When he was a kid Will had seen a juice thief dragged down the street by an angry crowd. They were rushing him so fast that the toes of his boots barely scuffed the ground. But Olivia had pulled him inside and he hadn't seen what happened next.

Will loved reading. Most of his books were written before the Changes. It was strange to read stories about kids the same age as him and see how different their lives had been. They didn't seem to have to do much work apart from school, and they travelled in cars

and trains and aeroplanes and had computers and watched TV in their bedrooms. And nobody said anything about being cold or having to sit in the dark. You could get juice whenever you wanted then. Will had seen the wires and sockets in the houses they worked on.

He'd often asked Olivia about life before the Changes. She'd been a child, a couple of years younger than Will now, when they started.

"It's really hard to explain. We had so much of everything ... food, clothes, juice. Just lots of stuff. I suppose we took it all for granted. There were people who warned that it couldn't last but it was hard to believe them. Then when things started to change, it happened so fast. I'm not sure we were any happier then than now though, despite all the things we had. Well, except when the Changes were actually happening. There was a lot of suffering then. So many died or lost everything they had." And that was when she usually stopped talking about it.

Olivia didn't seem happy now though. Will had slowly pieced together the story from bits and pieces that he'd heard over the years. Olivia and Jerome's parents had died during the Changes when Jerome was ten. Olivia had been older, nearly sixteen, and from then on she had taken care of her brother. He had lived with her ever since, though he was often away. "Exploring," he used to say.

"Exploring all the young women in the neighbourhood more like," said Olivia. She also said he was way too fond of the bottle, and it was true that Will had often seen Jerome hanging around with Mr Hudson and some of the other men in the afternoons. On drinking days he wouldn't come back at night and would slope in sometime the next day, slurring his speech and unsteady on his feet. But one

thing you had to say about Jerome was that he could make or fix just about anything.

That night Will lay a long time waiting for sleep. Mostly he was thinking about Olivia. She'd been looking so grey and exhausted and had been crying a lot. Winter was always a bad time for her, but this year she seemed worse.

"I can't stand it," she'd say when she was having one of her crying fits. "I can't bear that there's never any light or music or anything. How can we live like this?"

When he finally fell asleep, he dreamt of his father again. He had never seen him, or even a picture, and so there was no face, just a shape, a presence. Usually his father was trying to tell him something or take him somewhere, but just occasionally, and these were the best dreams, he folded Will in a warm embrace and Will felt completely safe and protected.

The next morning Will went to school. He tried to get there as often as he could as he loved learning things. They usually did some history, especially about the Changes and the time leading up to them, and a bit of geography, but most people didn't travel outside their own town or village nowadays, and it was hard to believe there were really places with lions and mountains and jungles.

A lot of the lessons were practical. They studied simple medicine, like which herbs were good for headaches or fevers, and how to set a broken bone. And they learnt how to make and store juice, and how to grow vegetables and beans and look after chickens and goats and pigs. Will already knew lots about chickens, more than Mrs Wilkins his teacher, and she would sometimes ask him to explain things to the other kids.

Raising chickens for eggs, and for eating, was what Olivia did, and Will helped out a lot. Now that she was having one of her bad times, Will did the morning feed. He'd carry out the big wet pot of scraps and grain that Olivia had cooked the night before. By the time he got to the chicken yard, the birds would be clustered noisily around the gate. They really were the most stupid animals. "Vegetables on legs", Jerome called them. The moment he started pouring their slop into the battered metal troughs, they would dive in so that the feed cascaded onto their heads, and the chickens behind them would start pecking it off in a great frenzy of squawking and fluttering wings.

Eggs and chicken meat were what they traded for grain, for flour for bread, for beans and extra vegetables, and sometimes a little mutton from Khan the butcher. That afternoon, after school, Will strung a couple of live chickens by their feet and carried them, hanging upside down and strangely docile.

Mr Khan was one of the only fat men Will knew. He stood in his shop all day in his woollen hat and his threadbare woollen sweater, his great belly swinging as he chopped meat and wrapped it in the cloths that his customers brought in with them, the blood soaking into the sawdust on the floor. Khan always asked after Olivia, and today Will told him how miserable she'd been getting in the dark evenings.

"Leave your beltie here a while," said Khan. "I'll give you some juice. Cheer her up tonight maybe."

Jerome had made them all belties - small portable batteries that held one or two units of juice. Most people had one - you never knew when you might get the chance to charge them up. Khan's offer

was generous but he was doing well and could afford it. And he was an old friend of Olivia's. In fact Will was pretty sure he'd been her boyfriend once, or perhaps he just wanted to be - the way he looked at her.

When he got home, Will downloaded the charge into their storage battery. That night the light stayed on. Olivia didn't seem to notice at first, but when Jerome connected the hi fi and the sound of swing jazz filled the cabin, she smiled and started dancing round the room. He resolved to find a way to get a regular supply of juice, whatever it took.

CHAPTER TWO

Everyone knew about the Factory and how you could earn juice there. Nobody liked to admit to it though; it meant you were desperate. Will knew Divvy and Mikey went most days.

The Hudsons were the poorest people he knew. The twins were small with pinched and pale faces and ragged clothes. Their Mum was sick all the time and spent most of the day in bed, and everyone said their Dad drank too much of the alcohol he distilled from potatoes in the yard outside their cabin. If it wasn't for Divvy and Mikey there'd be no juice in the family at all.

He caught up with them after school.

"Divvy, Mikey. I need some juice. Can you get me an in at the Factory?"

Divvy laughed. "A spoilt kid like you wouldn't last five minutes. It's too tough."

"I'm as tough as you," said Will. "Anyway I've got to, my mother's bad."

Divvy understood about mothers. "Alright, we're off there now. Come along if you want. I'm sure Mr Nabob would love to meet you."

"Who's he?" asked Will.

"It's his place," said Divvy. "He used to be a coal man. Then he took over the Factory."

Will had seen the coal men. When he was small, he and the other kids used to rush over to the tracks when they heard the train whistle. The great puffing loco pulled open wagons loaded high with coal, each guarded by two fierce-looking men carrying metal spikes or giant shovels, their faces and clothes blackened and shiny with coal dust.

The coal was shovelled onto the Factory's cart as the blinkered horse stood patiently, tail swishing, occasionally shifting on its great iron shod feet. Sometimes it would lift its tail and if one of the kids was quick enough they would scoop up the dung, almost before it hit the ground, and run off with it. The dung was a prized fertiliser. They had to be quick though, or else one of the men would grab it and then all the kid would get was a smack round the ear.

The Factory was over the other side of the old railway track, in a giant rusting shed. He could hear the noise before they'd even got to the track, and when they walked through the green door set in great sliding shutters, the noise hit Will like a blow.

The dim interior was lit with flashes of sparks and the glow of fires, and reeked of smoke and hot metal. It took a while for Will to make out the dark, sweating figures striking the glowing

metal with hammers or working the bellows that drove the fires. Two great steam driven machines were pile-driving white hot iron beams. The banging and grinding was so loud that shouting was the only way to make yourself heard and that made the noise even worse.

Mikey tapped Will on the shoulder and Will turned to see where he was pointing. All along one of the walls, fixed bikes were lined up and it was these that made the juice for the Factory lights and the grinding and cutting tools. Mikey had told him that the bikes were attached to generators and that all day, and most of the night, people worked them. As soon as one person finished a stint and wearily got off, someone else jumped on. 'Hot seating', they called it.

As Will stood in the doorway trying to take it all in, a bald-headed giant of a man came towards him. His great slablike face was pitted with scars impregnated with coal dust, like a crazy tattoo, and his hands and fingernails were black with grease. He wore a suit that was so filthy with caked dirt you could only tell from one or two patches that it had once been green.

"Mikey, Divvy!" he bellowed. "And who's this?"

"His name's Will, Mr Nabob," shouted Divvy. "He's looking for work."

Mr Nabob walked them outside. He turned to Will, looked him up and down and then squatted and squeezed his leg muscles with powerful hands.

"Can you work boy?"

"Yes I can," said Will. "I'm strong. I ride a bike cart all the time. And anyway I've got to."

"OK lad, I'm short at the moment. I'll give you a go. You get one unit for two hours work. There's a panel on the front of each bike. It shows you how fast you're going and how long you've been riding for. If the speed goes under twenty, that's it – you're out. Come along then, no time like the present," and he grabbed Will by the back of the neck and led him back into the chaos of the Factory to a free bike. "This one'll fit you. Give us your beltie lad. If you manage the two hours without going under twenty, you'll get it back charged. If not you get nothing and you don't come back."

Will got onto the bike. The frame was a bit too big for him and he had to rise out of the saddle and put all his weight on the pedals to get them moving, but it was no worse than the cart.

After an hour his legs were screaming, he was sweating all over and his head was banging with the noise, but he'd made up his mind that whatever happened he was going to do the two hours – even if he could never walk again. He closed his eyes and tried to think about nice things like summer, or Olivia laughing, or working in the woods with Sean, and finally it was over. He almost fell off the bike and could barely drag himself outside and drop onto a bench. Then he sat, staring at the ground, thinking nothing, just grateful to be off the bike.

He woke to a hand on his shoulder and opened his eyes. The first thing he saw was a pair of silver boots then, as he raised his head, a pair of baggy green trousers swathed in a rose flowered skirt, a strawberry coloured jacket, a fuzz of golden hair and the bluest eyes he had ever seen.

"I've been watching you. Will isn't it? I'm Mrs Nabob."

Will struggled to his feet and wiped his hand on his trouser leg, then reached forward and took hold of her rough, warm hand.

"You're a good worker Will. I expect we'll be seeing you tomorrow?" and she handed him his beltie and turned and walked away before he could say anything. Will sat down again and closed his eyes. Finally he got up and dragged himself home.

When he got out of bed the next morning his legs felt as though they'd been beaten with one of the Factory's steam hammers and he could hardly walk. Olivia asked him if he was ill but he just told her he had a bruise from a fall. He'd decided not to tell her about the Factory and said he was staying late at school to catch up on reading. Anyway, when Olivia was unhappy, she didn't notice much that was going on around her and he could do more or less what he wanted. She hadn't even said anything about the light staying on yesterday evening.

With his leg muscles burning before he started, his second stint at the Factory was even harder, but it got easier after that. Mr Nabob seemed to have taken a liking to him and would sometimes sit and talk when he was resting before setting off home. He hadn't seen Mrs Nabob again though he wanted to.

It was during one of their chats that Will asked Mr Nabob about his time as a coal man.

"It's probably the hardest job a man can do, Will. First you have to dig deep into the earth and then build long sloping tunnels to get to the coal seams. That's all got to be done by hand. And when you're down there it's pitch black, and hot, and there's only a little stuffy air. And then, hour after hour - and remember it's too low to stand up straight - you have to hack the coal out of the

seams with pickaxes and shovels and load it onto carts to be pulled up to the top by the pit ponies. But it's worth it. Coal's precious and even the average coal man does pretty well, let alone the bosses."

"Were you a boss?" asked Will.

"Yes I was a boss. I had my own little mine and around twenty men working for me. But then it got so I'd had enough. I wanted more daylight and I sold up and took on the Factory."

Then he told Will how he'd found the bikes in an old gym. "It's hard to believe but there was a time when people would ride these bikes just to lose weight because they had too much to eat. But they didn't even go anywhere. They stayed in the gym, in front of screens, watching film of roads and the countryside and pretending they were riding down them. How bloody stupid can you get?"

At that moment they heard a train whistle and Mr Nabob got up and stretched. "Coal train," he said.

They strolled over to the tracks and Will first heard, and then saw, the great train, puffing towards them. It pulled up just before the buffers with a long squeal of iron brakes straining to grip iron tracks, and a hissing and venting of steam. Before the train came to a halt, a figure jumped off, obscured for a moment by the steam and the smoke.

Will's first impression was of metal - ears and nose studded with silver, bright chains round the neck and wrist, and silver clasps tight around tattooed upper arms, bare despite the cold. There was a long knife at his belt.

He walked up to Mr Nabob with a swagger. As they stood in front of each other, Will could see that he was quite a bit smaller than Mr Nabob, but he was lithe with sinew and muscle where Mr Nabob was just big, like a slab of meat.

"Nabob," the stranger said and his teeth flashed gold.

"Lurch," replied Mr Nabob, no expression on his face.

"Thought I'd come and see what you got here, Nabob, heard so much about it from the boys. They told me you'd set yourself up nicely. Left all your old friends a long way behind."

"Nothing special, Lurch. Getting old, needed a bit of a quiet life," said Mr Nabob as Lurch turned and made for the Factory.

"Very nice, very nice," he kept saying as he poked his head through the door, saw the blacksmiths at work, noted the juice cycles humming. "You've done yourself proud, Nabob, you certainly have. Of course with a set up like this, you've got to be careful. People might get jealous, want to take it away from you."

A woman's voice broke in. "Up to your nasty old tricks Lurch?" and Will saw Mrs Nabob walk up and stand foursquare in front of him. "We can take good care of what's ours. Don't ever forget it. And now you'd better see about unloading that coal. We've got work to do and you've got a long journey back," and she beckoned the horse cart forwards.

Lurch laughed. "I always did like your style, Laura, you know that. But we'll see, yes we'll see," and he turned and saw to the unloading.

CHAPTER THREE

After a while Will's life settled into a new routine. He'd get up as dawn was breaking, feed the chickens if Olivia wasn't up, and fetch water from the stand pipe. That took precious time as there was always a queue. People were sleepy in the early morning, and the silence was only broken by mumbled greetings and coughing. Then he'd light the fire and make a pot of wheat or oat porridge for himself and Olivia. Jerome was rarely up for breakfast. Most days Will went to school, at least for a bit, then on to the Factory. One way or another there was always too much to do.

On Sunday mornings, Will went tree planting. Everyone over the age of twelve had to put in what they called common time. The town parliament decided what needed to be done and assigned people to the different jobs, though you could usually manage to work on something that you especially liked. Will liked trees.

Nearly all the trees had been cut down for firewood in the years after the Changes, and it was obvious that the wood from scavenged houses wouldn't last forever. The parliament had decided that planting for future fuel was their biggest need.

Will enjoyed the work. He loved being outside, loved the smell of the earth as he dug holes for the young trees, loved the idea that even if he lived to be an old man, these trees he was planting would still be growing.

He worked with Sean, grey-haired and mostly silent, who had worked as a woodman all his life. Sean was always there early, cooking up something over a small fire that he kept going throughout the morning. They usually had some kind of tea before they started work, and if Sean had found anything in the snares he set the night

before, or if Will was lucky with his catapult, there'd be rabbit or squirrel, or sometimes pigeon. Sean would cook it up in a pot with any wild roots and leaves that he'd found, and they'd sit round at the end of the morning and eat.

Will learnt masses of useful stuff from Sean. It was Sean who showed him how to get a rabbit ready for the pot. As soon as you killed it, you squeezed down its belly to get any urine out, so that it wouldn't contaminate the meat when you were gutting it. Then it was best to let it cool so that it didn't bleed too much. Gutting was a bit messy. You had to make a small slit over the belly and then stick your fingers in and tear the hole bigger to make sure you didn't cut into the entrails by mistake. But skinning was neat and Will had done it so many times now that he didn't give it a second thought.

Sean knew all kinds of things, like moving so slowly and quietly that not even the woodland animals noticed, and how to make a fire with a kind of wooden drill. Will had only managed it once, after a whole morning trying, and was glad to get back to using his striking iron.

The first row came out of the blue one Sunday after he got back from the woods. Olivia had hardly spoken the last couple of days, but when Jerome finally appeared after one of his nights out and asked if there was any food, she turned on him.

"You're a useless waste of space, Jerome. You're a drunk. You're just using this place to eat and sleep and you're not doing any work. I'm sick of you."

Jerome didn't say anything. He just looked at Olivia and went through into his workshop. Will could hear him rummaging around and then he came out carrying his travelling bag, ruffled Will's hair and went out.

Olivia was better that evening. She was chatty and talked about her plans for the business. If she got another chicken run she could increase production she said. "Then we'll be able to get more stuff we need. Like juice."

Olivia didn't seem to have noticed that they had light all evening now, nor that Will was doing most of the chicken work.

Will couldn't sleep for a long time that night. He felt churned up inside. When he finally drifted off he dreamt about his father again, although this time he had lost him somewhere. He'd catch a glimpse of his back in a crowd and chase after him, but he was always turning corners unexpectedly and ducking through doorways and Will could never get any closer.

He slept later than usual, and when he woke Olivia was sitting at the table, staring into space, her face full of sleep. It took her a moment to notice him and then she said, "Do the chickens Will, I'm tired this morning."

The chickens were clustered around the gate as usual. Will banged the pail to drive them off, then started driving them away from the gate with his feet. He wanted to kick the stupid animals.

When he went back into the kitchen, Olivia hadn't budged. Will lit the fire and put the porridge on to cook. When it was ready he took a bowl and sat to eat.

"Where's mine?" asked Olivia. Will carried on eating.

"Where's mine; my breakfast?" said Olivia. "Will, I'm talking to you. Look don't you start, Jerome was bad enough."

A feeling was building in Will's chest. Suddenly he heard himself shouting. "What did you have to drive him away for? He was the only fun thing around here. You got rid of my Dad and now you've got rid of my uncle. You just sit there all the time feeling sorry for yourself and I do all the work. I've had enough."

Olivia's face was white with shock but Will was getting up, and like Jerome yesterday he walked out slamming the door. He jumped on the bike cart and cycled off furiously with no thought to where he was going.

He ended up by the river, watching the muddy waters swirl past. He saw no-one, just a few gulls wheeling and crying over the opposite bank. After a while the cold wind started to cut through his sweater. He hadn't even stopped long enough to take his coat when he ran out. Will realised he couldn't stay where he was but he couldn't go home either. Not now, not for a long while. In the end, there was only one place to go.

The Factory worked seven days a week. Will chained up the bike cart but then hesitated; it wasn't his usual time for working and he'd never been there before on a Sunday. In the end, the cold drove him inside.

Mr Nabob saw him and walked over. "Didn't expect to see you here. Not one of your usual days is it? Still, I can probably find you a bike."

"That's OK, I didn't really want work today. I just wondered if I could sit here in the warm for a bit."

Mr Nabob laughed. "You want to sit here in the middle of all this noise?" then looked at him more carefully. "Sure you can, lad. But come and sit in my office, it's quieter there and no-one'll bother you."

Will followed Mr Nabob over the grease-stained floor, past the thudding steam engines and the grinning blacksmiths, their teeth blazing in blackened faces. Mr Nabob climbed an iron staircase and opened a heavy door at the top and when Will was inside, closed the door. The din immediately quietened. There was one small window and Will stood for a moment looking down over the Factory floor.

"Make yourself comfortable lad," said Mr Nabob, pointing at the oldest sofa Will had ever seen, its stuffing pouring out of great ragged tears in the worn fabric. "I've just got to ... well, I'd better ... that is to say I've got things to do," and he started backing towards the door. Somewhere, under the ingrained coal dust and scars on his face, a blush was beginning to show.

Will sat. He suddenly felt incredibly weary, heavy like a log of sodden wood. He closed his eyes.

Maybe he dozed for a moment, but the sound of the door opening and the noise of the Factory flooding in jerked his eyes open. It was Mrs Nabob.

"Hello Will, I always seem to be waking you up. You don't mind if I sit here, do you?" and she plumped herself down on the sofa which gave a creak of protest, as though, at its advanced age, it was more than could reasonably be expected to have to bear the weight of two people.

"It's not like you to be here on a Sunday, Will"

"No, well ... "

"Maybe you needed to get away for a bit?"

Will nodded. He couldn't say anything. He couldn't even look at her.

"We all get upset sometimes. It's normal," and she reached out a hand and stroked his hair.

Will tried as hard as he could to hold it back, but he couldn't, and suddenly he was crying hot tears and pouring out his misery. How he'd never known his Dad, and how depressed Olivia was, and how he'd done everything he could but she hadn't noticed, and how Jerome had gone away again, and then Mrs Nabob's arms were round him and he was sobbing and snivelling into her chest.

After a while the sobbing calmed. He hadn't cried like that since he was a child. He didn't want to move. He felt too embarrassed to look at her and at the same time he felt safe, and warm and sleepy. They sat for a long time, with Mrs Nabob holding him and rocking slightly.

Then she spoke. "Look at me Will."

Reluctantly Will pulled away and looked into her eyes. What a beautiful blue they were. Then he noticed her own cheeks were wet. Suddenly he wasn't embarrassed anymore. He knew his face was all swollen from crying, and his eyes were probably red, but he didn't mind. The noise from the Factory seemed to recede into the background.

"You're a lovely boy Will," said Mrs Nabob. "Well, you're a young man, not a boy. Your Mum should be proud of you. She probably is, deep down, but she's unhappy and sometimes that means people can't see what's in front of their noses. I know she went through hard times - lots of people did - and it affects some more than

others. But it's not your fault she's unhappy. You've done your best. I'd be proud to have a son like you. Now, are you hungry?"

When he thought about it, Will realised he was, very hungry. He nodded, and maybe it was the enthusiastic way he did it, or something about his face, but first Mrs Nabob, then Will, started laughing, and the more they looked at each other the more helplessly they laughed.

Finally, Mrs Nabob was able to speak. "Shall we go and see if we can find some food then?"

"Yes Mrs Nabob. Yes please," said Will.

"It's Laura," said Mrs Nabob. "You should call me that. And Mr Nabob is Henry."

CHAPTER FOUR

Mr and Mrs Nabob lived in a hut built into one side of the Factory, close to the blacksmith's fires. As she was preparing food, Mrs Nabob told Will how it was noisy and hot in the summer, but it made up for it in the winter when the cabin was warmed night and day by the heat that came through the walls. And anyway, in the summer they could sit outside, and even sleep out if the nights were warm.

When Mr Nabob came in he looked pleased to see Will sitting there.

"Alright lad?" he said.

"Yes thanks Mr Nabob," said Will.

"Henry," said Mrs Nabob. "Remember?"

"Yes thanks Henry," said Will.

When Mr Nabob had done his best to scrub the grease off his hands and had changed out of his Factory suit, the three of them ate around the small wooden table. It was one of the best meals Will had ever had. There was real meat - lamb stew with lots of vegetables - and a pudding with cream. As they sat, full and comfortable, Mrs Nabob turned to her husband.

"Why don't we send someone to Will's place. Tell his Mum that he's OK and that he just needs a day or two to sort himself out. He can sleep here."

"Right, Laura, I'll do that. Good thinking lass," and Mr Nabob got up heavily and made for the door.

Will got up too and started clearing the plates, but Mrs Nabob reached out a hand and stopped him.

"Any other day, Will. Everyone does their share around here, but I reckon you need a bit of time off. Just doing nothing. Don't suppose that happens much, does it? Anyway, why don't I show you to your room, where you'll be sleeping, and you can have a rest if you want to."

It was a strange idea to Will, that someone might have their own room. But then the Nabobs weren't like most people. Mrs Nabob opened a door and gently pushed Will forward. He saw a bed, a chest with drawers in it, shelves of books, a football and some roller boots on the floor. It was like a room out of one of the stories he'd read from before the Changes, a boy's room. He wanted to ask whose it was and he turned to Mrs Nabob but hesitated a moment, and before he could speak she said, "Make yourself at home, just like it's your own," and went out and closed the door.

Will looked at the shelves first. There were books he'd read, but more that he wanted to, some by his favourite authors. Then, feeling that he shouldn't, he started opening the drawers. It was mostly clothes, but kid-sized, too small for him now; they would have fitted him a couple of years ago. Then the attraction of the bed was too great. He plucked a book from the shelf and went over and got under the covers and started reading.

He didn't know how long he'd been asleep. He lay there for a while, listening to the muffled thuds from the Factory, warm and comfortable and full of the pleasure of knowing there was nothing he had to do.

He found Mr Nabob sitting at the table alone, reading a book. He put it down when Will came in, but seeing Will looking at it curiously, picked it up again. Will could see the title, 'Collapse'.

"It's a sort of history book, Will. It's about other times when people got it wrong. When they used up too much of what was available to them, or cut down all the trees, or poisoned the soil. And they kept on ignoring the warning signs until one day their societies just collapsed and they couldn't go on living where they were. It was all small stuff compared to the Changes, but I'm trying to see if it's got any answers to what happened to us, where we went so badly wrong. Greed and ignorance, I reckon. Yes greed and ignorance."

"But never mind that now. Time for supper. My turn to cook, Laura's on duty in the Factory. One of my famous soups tonight. Want to help?"

And together they chopped potatoes and carrots and turnips, and boiled the bones from the lamb they'd had for lunch, and added dried wild herbs that Mr Nabob had collected from behind the factory in the summer. And after a while Mr Nabob started talking about his and Mrs Nabob's son, Zac, who had died a couple of years ago of a fever, and how Mrs Nabob had kept his room just like it had been when he'd died, and how Will was the first person who'd slept in it, but not to worry as he could see that it made Laura happy to have Will staying.

The next day, Will didn't go to school and he didn't work the juice bike. He felt guilty for a moment when he thought of Olivia, having to sit in the dark yesterday and again this evening, but then he pushed the thought aside. Instead, he helped Mr Nabob around the Factory, or rather followed him around while he explained to Will how the different bits of the Factory worked, and the different metal products they made. The train brought the metal in from the smelters in the form of great heavy beams. It was heated to white hot in the coal furnaces and then the steam engines pounded it into sheets and the blacksmiths cut it with electric saws and beat it with hammers to make iron cart wheels, and cooking pots and tools of all kinds.

Late in the afternoon, they heard the familiar whistle of the train. "It's the coal," said Mr Nabob. "Let's go and see if the lovely Lurch has decided to pay us another visit," and they walked down to the track, arriving as the train was screeching and hissing to a halt.

And there Lurch was, jumping down from the cab. He was grinning, but not in a pleasant way.

"Well if it's not the great Mr Nabob," he said and he turned for a moment, back towards the train. As the steam drifted away, Will could see the coal men getting down from the wagons and gathering behind Lurch, each holding an evil looking metal spike.

"Thought he was too good for the coal trade, lads," said Lurch. "Thought he'd retire to run the Factory, leave us to do all the hard dirty work. That don't seem right, does it?"

There was a murmur from the coal men. Lurch spoke louder now.

"Well I'd say he's had his turn. Should all be one business anyway, coal and the Factory, goes together like bread and cheese, makes more sense like that. Tell you what, Nabob, if you pack up and go quietly, we won't do you no harm. Now that's fair, ain't it?" and he gave a nod to the coal men who started to move towards Mr Nabob.

Nobody noticed as Will slipped quietly away. When he was sure he hadn't been seen he ran like the wind back to the Factory, burst through the door and up the iron stairs.

Mrs Nabob jumped up as the heavy door was flung open.

"Lurch," gasped Will, but he didn't have to say any more. Mrs Nabob thrust past him. Standing at the top of the stairs she put the thumb and forefinger of one hand to her mouth and came out with a piercing whistle that cut through the clashing hammers on the Factory floor. Suddenly there was silence.

"We're needed, lads. Henry's in trouble. Bring your tools," and she strode down the stairs and out of the Factory, not even looking behind her to see if they were following.

When she reached the track, Mrs Nabob took in the situation at a glance. She pushed past her husband, right up to Lurch and thrust her face into his.

"Lurch, I don't know what you've got in mind but you always were a despicable creature. Nasty, greedy and evil. I told you that when you were trying to steal me away from Henry. You could never keep your slimy hands off me, and now it looks like you're trying to get those same hands on what's ours."

Lurch looked past her and saw the Factory smiths standing side by side with Mr Nabob. They were carrying weapons of various kinds and someone had brought Mr Nabob his heavy sledgehammer. There weren't as many defenders as there were coal men, but the blacksmiths were tough, their muscles hardened from wielding hammers all day long. Lurch knew that and suddenly he didn't seem to fancy the odds.

"OK," he said, "maybe I made a mistake, misunderstood the situation. Easily done. We'll unload and get out of here. No hard feelings, eh?" and he made as if to turn away, but then in one swift movement he had his arm round Mrs Nabob's neck and had turned her. His other hand held a long thin knife to her throat.

"Now this changes things a bit," said Lurch, the sinews on his bare arm straining as Mrs Nabob tried to squirm away. "What do you want to save most Nabob, your wife or your Factory?"

"Don't give him anything Henry," gasped Mrs Nabob at the same moment as her husband dropped the hammer he was holding.

"Let her be, Lurch, you can have whatever you want. But if you do her the slightest harm I'll find a way to kill you. There's no need for any of that though. Just let her go," and turning to the smiths behind him, he said, "Back off lads, easy now."

Once again, nobody was paying any attention to Will. Barely breathing, moving as though he was not moving, just as Sean had

taught him over and over in the woods, he was reaching into his pocket for his catapult and one of the stones he always kept ready. Then in a blur of movement, stretching the tough rubber as far as his ear, he fired. His aim, practised from early childhood, was true and the stone struck Lurch just behind the right ear, and like a sack of coal he fell to the ground as if dead.

For a moment nobody moved. Then Mr Nabob bent and picked up his hammer and advanced towards the shocked looking coal men. The smiths were close behind him.

"Now then lads," he said to the coal men, who were shifting uneasily, "what was it you wanted?"

But with Lurch down, it seemed none of them had the stomach for a fight. One by one they lay down their spikes, and without a word slowly retreated to the train and started unloading the coal.

Mr Nabob bent down and held his hand to Lurch's neck for a long moment then looked up into Will's worried face.

"It's OK, you didn't kill him, though it was damn near. Not that he didn't deserve it. Where did you learn to shoot like that?", but before Will could say anything, Mrs Nabob was by him and she swept him up in one of her all-encompassing hugs and once again Will felt that everything was alright.

Later that day Will went home. He felt nervous. Olivia was out the back feeding the chickens. She looked up and saw him standing by the back door, but she didn't say anything. He went back inside.

He heard her come into the cabin, heard her bang the feed bucket down. Then she came over to him.

"Will, I'm sorry," and then she stopped. "Will, look at me please."

He looked up. Olivia's hair hung bedraggled over her forehead. She looked exhausted. He suddenly felt terribly sad.

"Will, I'm really sorry. I've not been fair to you. I've been ... well I've been lost in myself. I've not thought enough about you, I can see that now. And your friend, Mrs Nabob isn't it, said a few things to me. I didn't like hearing them but she was right."

When had Mrs Nabob had time to talk to Olivia, wondered Will. It must have been last night, after he went to bed.

"What did she say?" he asked.

"Well that's between me and her," said Olivia, "but some of it hit home. I want things to be different. Alright?"

Will nodded.

"Come here then," said Olivia, and reached out her arms. It wasn't the same as being hugged by Mrs Nabob. Olivia was thinner, more bony, and she seemed to be half hugging him to her and half trying to pull away from him all at the same time, but it was the closest they'd been for a long time.

The following Sunday, Will was in the woods again with Sean. They were coppicing some of the young ash trees. Sean told Will that people had been coppicing trees for as far back as humans had lived settled lives.

"It's like milking the trees," he said. "Cut the main trunk down near the ground like this," and Sean bent down and carefully sawed through the trunk, still no thicker than Will's wrist, close to the ground. "Cut it at a slant, see, so the rain runs off it and it doesn't rot. Then it'll sprout and in a few years, it'll have grown half a dozen lovely straight branches. We'll come back and cut

them, and a few years later it'll have grown another crop and we can do it again. You can use good ash coppice poles for almost anything. Broom and tool handles, fences, steam bent furniture, all sorts. If you look after them, they'll go on producing for hundreds of years. In fact the trees will live a lot longer like this than if they were just left to grow normally. Humans and nature in harmony, you see?"

It was the longest speech Will had ever heard Sean make.

As they were packing up the tools, carefully wrapping the saw and knife blades in cloth to protect their edges and keep them dry, Sean said, "Right, well I'll be seeing you later."

"What do you mean, later?" asked Will.

"Oh sorry," said Sean, "I meant next week. OK?"

"Yes, I'll be here," said Will.

The roads were quiet as Will made his way home. As he got close to the cabin he saw a note pinned to the door. It was from Olivia.

'Had to go to the Factory, urgent. Come quick,' it said.

Will suddenly felt anxious. What if Lurch had come back, this time with more men? He jumped on the bike cart and rode as fast as he could.

The Factory was silent when he got there. Where was everyone? He pushed open the door. It seemed darker than usual and for a moment he couldn't see anything. Then there was a click and suddenly lights blazed from all round the walls and Will saw a great empty space where the smiths' forges and anvils used to be, and then from the back of the Factory a crowd of people coming forward and they were all looking at him and smiling. He saw Mr and Mrs Nabob, and Olivia, and then he saw Jerome, and Mikey and Divvy, and Mr Khan,

and all the blacksmiths, almost unrecognisable with their clean shirts and faces, and there was Sean, how had he got here so fast, and Mrs Wilkins his teacher, and loads more people, some of them he recognised from around the town and some he'd never seen before. And what was amazing was that they were all clapping and cheering and it seemed to be for him.

Then Mr Nabob raised his hands and everyone fell silent.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said. "We've invited you all here to honour a brave young man who saved the Factory and more importantly saved my precious Laura. So let's hear it for Will," and the clapping started up again and Will didn't know where to look or what to do with his face.

"Now, it's time to celebrate," said Mr Nabob. "We've got food aplenty, we've got a barrel full of beer courtesy of Mr Hudson, we've got light for as long as we want it, and music from this sound system that Will's uncle has kindly set up. So let's have a proper feast, a proper party with real dancing, and hang the juice."