

The Dog in the Wood

Jane Read

Tyler and Kevin find the dog half-hidden under the autumn leaves. They'd sneaked out of school at break-time and made their way into the narrow stretch of woodland between the council houses and the school. It is a dank place, full of brambles and litter. Even the trees look sickly. The houses backing onto the wood use it as a dumping ground for rubbish too big for the bin men to take away. The dog is stretched out under its brown and orange blanket, as though asleep, but its eyes have been eaten away by crows or insects.

The boys edge closer. Tyler grabs a stick and pokes the dog to see if it is still alive. Some of the leaves shift to reveal a black studded collar. 'That's Troy's dog, that is,' he says. 'Troy bought him that collar. Said he wanted him to look mean.'

'What's he doing here,' says Kevin.

'Dunno,' says Tyler. 'We need to tell his Dad.' He gives the dog another poke then the boys zigzag back to the main road.

Troy's house is at the end of a shabby terrace. It is the most neglected looking of the houses with waist-high weeds in the garden. An upstairs window is broken and has been mended with a piece of cardboard that flaps in the wind.

Tyler marches up to the door and bangs on it. Kevin hangs back by the gate.

Silence.

'Maybe he's not in,' says Kevin. 'Let's go.' Tyler bangs again, this time louder. They can hear swearing and shuffling and then the door is flung open so abruptly that it bangs off the wall.

Troy's father is unshaven and there is a dark stain on his trousers. He squints at Tyler and Kevin through bloodshot eyes. 'What you doin' out of school? What d'you want? I'll report you, I will.' he says.

'We've found your dog in the woods. He's dead.' says Tyler.

The man shakes his head as though trying to clear fog from his brain. 'What? Whadyou say?'

'We found your dog in the woods,' repeats Tyler. 'He's dead. We can show you if you want.'

Troy's father scowls. 'I'll find him. Now, bugger off the pair of you. Get.' He swings his fist and Tyler backs away until he and Kevin have put the garden fence between themselves and Troy's father.

Just as the man is turning to go back inside, Tyler yells, 'When's Troy coming back to school?'

'He's living with his Gran. He's not coming back,' shouts Troy's father and he slams the door shut.

Back in the woods, a crow flies down from her perch in a sycamore to a hollow a few yards from where the dog is lying. She hops closer to a thicket of brambles with her head tilted to one side looking at the curled fingers of the small hand that rests palm upwards in the dirt.