

THE DIG

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They staked the dogs some way from the sett and poured them water and took a drink themselves. The boy had a queer feeling about the man's mouth being on the water and still did not want to drink it.

The trees had opened up a little and you could see the light finally coming through. There was a moment of greater coldness, like a draught through a door, and the boy felt an unnerving, as if something had acknowledged them arriving there. They had made a lot of noise moving through the wood and when they stopped they heard the birdsong and the early loud vibrancy of the place.

First dig? said the man.

The boy nodded, with that hesitancy. They could hear the dogs lapping and drinking at the water bowls.

The main hole's up there. The big man gestured up the slope. We'll put in the dog, he said. He meant Jip, the big Patterdale.

The big man's own bitch was by his feet, with her distant, composed look against the other dogs.

I want to put her in next. He indicated. Better be a dog goes in first. The big man was thinking of the big tracks

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and the possibility of the big boar. A bigger dog would have more chance up front. They knew if you put a bitch down after a bitch, or a dog down after a dog, there were problems most times; but if you changed the sex the other usually came out with no trouble.

The boy's father nodded agreement. He was checking the locator, checking the box with the handset.

The boy was thirsty and looking at the water, not wanting to open the other tub in front of the man.

Take him round and block up the other holes. I'll do the other side.

The big gypsy brought out the map he'd drawn of the holes and went over it with the boy's father. The gypsy asked the boy if he understood and the redness came to his throat under the zipped-up coat collar; but he was feeling the rich beginning of adrenalin now. He was dry and thirsty and had a big sick hole of adolescent hunger but he could feel his nerves warming at the new thing and began to feel a comradeship of usefulness to the man.

They unwound the sheets of thick plastic and went off and systematically blocked the holes with stones and sheets of plastic and laid blocks across the obvious runs with heavy timber and then went back to the dogs. Then

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they went up the slope with the two first dogs and gathered around the main entrance and stood the tools up in the ground.

There was old bedding around the hole, the strange skeletal bracken starting to articulate its colour in the grey light. Jip started to bounce on the lead and strain for the hole as if he could sense the badgers. The strewn bracken might have meant the badgers had gone overnight, but from the way the dog was behaving there was a fresh, present scent.

The boy looked at the dog straining on the lead and could feel the same feeling in his guts. He felt the feeling he did before the first rats raced out and the dogs went into them.

The boy's father knelt with the excited dog and checked the box and collar over again and Jip let his enthusiasm solidify into a determined, pointed thing and stood stockily facing the hole, a determined tremble going through him.

The boy's father studied the locator once more and checked the signal, then they sent the dog in.

The boy was not expecting the delay of listening for the dog. He could feel his stomach roll though. He could feel a slow soupy excitement. This was a new thing. Then

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deep in the earth the dog yelped. Then again; and his father was instantly by the hole, prone, calling to the dog, calling with strange excitement into the tunnel.

Stay at him, boy. Good Jip. Good Jippo.

The boy glanced at the man as his father called this out, as if it had revealed what he was thinking about the way the man looked. But the big gypsy seemed to be rapt, a pasty violence setting in his eyes as he listened and watched Messie, his bitch, solidify, focus. Finally, the dog let out a low whimper of desire.

You could hear the barks moving through the ground now and they came alternately sharp and muffled until they seemed to regulate and come with a faraway percussive sound.

The big man moved across the slope. He seemed to swirl in some eddy, then came to a halt, as if caught up on something.

The big man moved again, listening, and the boy's father tracked across with the locator until the two men stood in the same place, confirming the big man's judgement.

Here, he said.

They brought up the tools and they started to dig.



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It was very early spring and the bluebells were not out but made a thick carpet that looked newly washed and slick after the rain. They cut through this carpet and cleared the mess of thin sycamore from the place and the big gypsy cut a switch and bent it into a sack mouth and laid the sack down by where they would dig.

The ground was sodden with rain and sticky and they worked with the sharp foldaway spades, cutting through the thread roots. The smell of rotted leaves and dug-up soil strengthened. When they came to a thicker root, they let the boy in with the saw. Then they started to dig for real.



The big man swung the pick and the father and boy shovelled. Within minutes the boy was parched with thirst and hunger and could not shout properly when they called constantly to the dog below. He was dizzy with effort. He was afraid of not being able to keep up with the men. As the hole deepened they shored up the sides of the hole with the plastic sheeting and the work steadied to a persistent rhythm.



The badger was going nowhere and it was not about speed but persistence now.

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