

A Mother's Joy by Vanessa King

“Oh he’s no problem,” the teacher continued. The exercise books revealed misshapen letters and artwork, mostly black with occasional splashes of red.

On the way home, the mother thought sadly of her enigmatic son who was often sullen and spent most of his time alone in his room. She didn’t understand his angry outbursts when he might pound her with his small fists.

At school the next day the child went straight to his usual place at the railings and stared out like a captive animal. He was fascinated by the trees at the entrance to a small dense wood. In a moment of impulse, he hid among the bicycles as he watched his classmates line up. When all backs were turned upon him this invisible child slid, ghost-like, through the gate and bolted towards the wood.

The height of the trees astonished him, but he was not intimidated. As the decision to run away had been impulsive, the boy had no clear plan of what he might do but he certainly did not want to be dragged back to the drudgery of the classroom. The child decided to build a den and hide himself. He set about searching for fallen branches. Some of the branches were heavy but the boy was happy in his work. He lifted and hauled branch after branch against the base of a tree. Inside his bolt-hole the fugitive felt safe. He settled himself on the baked earth.

The boy suddenly became aware that he was not alone. Tiny creatures crawled over his pale skin. He was surprised at how many legs each revealed. The dark insects amused the boy. These were his friends. The child lay on his back and listened. He heard birds chirping. Some sounded shrill while others made deeper cooing noises. Unaware of the boy’s presence they flew close and he saw their green and blue feathers. Blackbirds searched for worms under the moss. The boy was totally absorbed. Sometimes a butterfly flew into his den. He was fascinated by the fragility of their wings and by their colours.

All too soon, the child heard the school bell announce the end of the day and he realised his adventure would soon be over. When he heard his mother anxiously calling his name, the boy revealed himself. She scolded him with happy tears and took him home.

During the short journey, the mother was astonished to hear her son chatting excitedly. He ran into the house and climbed onto a chair to remove his paintbox from a kitchen cupboard. His mother fetched him paper and a jar of water and started preparing their meal. When he had finished, Jake showed his mother his painting and she marvelled at the splashes of blue, green and brown. She smiled at Jake and he smiled back. There were no tantrums that night. Her child was at peace and when she put him to bed, Jake hugged her.