Tell Me Your Story, Jim

Jim Jarvis. Want to know who that is? It's me! That's my name. Only thing I've got, is my name. And I've give it away to this man. Barnie, his name is, or something like that. He told me once, only I forgot it, see, and I don't like to ask him again. "Mister," I call him, to his face, that is. But there's a little space in my head where his name is Barnie.

He keeps asking me things. He wants to know my story, that's what he tells me. My story, mister? What d'you want to know that for? Ain't much of a story, mine ain't. And he looks at me, all quiet.

"It is, Jim," he says. "It's a very special story. It changed my life, child, meeting you."

Funny that, ain't it? Because he changed my life, Barnie did.

I can't believe my luck, and that's a fact. Here I am with food in my belly, and good hot food at that, and plenty more where that came from, he says. I'm wearing clothes that smell nice and that don't have no holes in, neither. And I'm in this room where there's a great big fire burning, and plenty more logs to put on it so it won't just die off. There's just me and him. The other boys are upstairs in their hammocks, all cosy in the big room we sleep in. and downstairs there's just me and him, special.

I want to laugh. I'm so full of something that I want to laugh out loud, and I stuff my fist in my mouth to stop myself.

Barnie gives me that look, all quiet. "Just tell me your story."

My story! Well. I creep back to the fire for this. I hug my knees. I close my eyes, to shut out the way the flames dance about and the way his shadow and mine climb up and down the walls. I shut out the sound of the fire sniffing like a dog at a rat-hole. And I think I can hear someone talking, very softly. It's a woman's voice, talking to a child. I think she's talking to me.

"Mister," I says, just whispering so's I don't chase the voice away. "Can I tell you about my ma?"