



I Am David

By Anne Holm

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David's extraordinary odyssey is dramatically chronicled in Anne Holm's classic about the meaning of freedom and the power of hope.

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Editorial Review

Review

"The single finest novel ever written for children of about ages 9 to 13."

--*School Library Journal*

"Read it, read it!"--*The Horn Book*

"Extraordinary and unforgettable."--*Chicago Tribune*

About the Author

ANNE HOLM (1922-1998) was born in Denmark, and she began her writing career as a journalist. *I Am David* was originally published--under the title *David*--in Denmark, where it became a million-copy bestseller and received numerous awards.

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David lay quite still in the darkness, listening to the men's low muttering. But this evening he was aware of their voices only as a vague, meaningless noise in the distance, and he paid no attention to what they were saying.

"You must get away tonight," the man had told him. "Stay awake so that you're ready just before the guard's changed. When you see me strike a match, the current will be cut off and you can climb over--you'll have half a minute for it, no more."

In his mind's eye David saw once again the gray, bare room he knew so well. He saw the man and was conscious, somewhere in the pit of his stomach, of the hard knot of hate he always felt whenever he saw him. The man's eyes were small, repulsive, light in color, their expression never changing; his face was gross and fat, yet at the same time square and angular. David had known him all his life, but he never spoke to him more than was necessary to answer his questions; and though he had known his name for as long as he could remember, he never said anything but "the man" when he spoke about him or thought of him. Giving him a name would be like admitting that he knew him; it would place him on an equal footing with the others.

But that evening he had spoken to him. He had said, "And if I don't escape?"

The man had shrugged his shoulders. "That'll be none of my business. I have to leave here tomorrow, and whatever my successor may decide to do about you, I shan't be able to interfere. But you'll soon be a big lad, and there's need in a good many places for those strong enough to work. Of course he may think that you aren't yet big enough but that it's still worthwhile feeding you here."

David knew only too well that those other places would not be any better than the camp where he now was. "And if I get away without being caught, what then?" he had asked.

"Just by the big tree in the thicket that lies on the road out to the mines, you'll find a bottle of water and a compass. Follow the compass southward till you get to Salonika, and then when no one's looking, go on

board a ship and hide. You'll have to stay hidden while the ship's at sea, and you'll need the water then. Find a ship that's bound for Italy, and when you get there, go north till you come to a country called Denmark—you'll be safe there."

David had very nearly shown his astonishment, but he had controlled himself and, hiding his feelings, had merely said, "I don't know what a compass is."

The man had shown him one, telling him that the four letters indicated the four main points and that the needle, which was free to move, always pointed in the same direction. Then he had added, "The half minute the current's cut off is intended for you. If you try to take anyone with you, you can be sure that neither of you will get away. And now clear off before you're missed."

David did not know what had possessed him to say it. He had never asked the man for anything, partly because he knew it would be of no use, but chiefly because he would not—when you hated someone, you did not ask him for anything. But tonight he had done it: when he had reached the door, he had turned around and, looking straight into that coarse, heavy face, had said, "I'd like a piece of soap."

For a moment there had been complete silence in that bare, gray room. The man looked as if he were going to say something, but he did not, all the same. Instead, he picked up a cake of soap that lay by the side of the washbasin in the corner and threw it on the table. All he said was, "Now go."

So David had gone, as quickly as it was possible to go without appearing to be in a hurry.

The men's muttering was fainter now—some of them must have fallen asleep. The camp's latest arrival was still talking—David recognized his voice because it was less flat and grating than the others'. Whenever the newcomer dozed off to sleep, he was seized with a nightmare, and then they would all wake up again. The night before, this had happened just before the guard was changed, but if he took longer to fall asleep this evening, then it might be possible for David to slip out before the others were awakened again.

David was not yet sure whether he would make the attempt. He tried to figure out why the man had told him to do it. It was certainly a trap: just as he was climbing over, the searchlight would suddenly swing around and catch him in its beam, and then they would shoot. Perhaps something pleasant was going to happen tomorrow, and the man wanted him shot first. David had always known that the man hated him, just as much as David hated him in return. On the other hand, nothing pleasant had ever yet happened in the camp that David could remember, and he was now twelve years old—it said so on his identity card.

And then quite suddenly David decided he would do it. He had turned it over in his mind until his head was in a whirl, and he still could not understand why the man had told him to escape. David had no wish to make the attempt: it would only be a question of time before he was caught. But suppose it were a trap and they shot him—it would all be over quickly anyway. If you were fired at while trying to escape, you would be dead within a minute. Yes, David decided to try.

There could not be many minutes left now. Over in the guardroom he could hear the men moving about and getting dressed, and he could hear the guard yawning as his pace grew slower. Then came the sound of new steps, and David pressed himself even more closely against the wall. It was the man: the faint, sleepy yellow light from the guardroom shone for a moment on his face as he passed the window. He went up to the guard, and David suddenly felt quite empty inside. He was sure that he would be unable to move when the time came. Then he saw before him the endless succession of days, months, and years that would pass if he did not. The waiting would kill him in the end, but it might take a long time unless you were old, it might take

years, as he had seen with all of them. And it would grow worse and worse, all the time; David clenched his teeth so hard that he felt the muscles of his throat grow taut. Then the man struck a match.

Nineteen, twenty . . . the half minute would be up when he had counted slowly to thirty . . . David set his foot in a gap higher up the barbed wire . . . When would the searchlight come? They could not be certain of hitting him in the dark . . . and if they did not hurry, he would be over.

A moment later he had touched the ground on the other side, and as he ran, he said angrily to himself, "What a fool you are! There's plenty of ground to cover yet-all this great flat stretch without so much as the stump of a tree for shelter. They'll wait till you've nearly reached the thicket . . . they'll think it more amusing if you believe you've almost gotten to safety."

Why didn't they hurry up? The thought pounded through his head as every moment he expected to see the ground lit up in front of him. Then he stopped. He would run no more. When the beam of light caught him, they should see him walking away quite calmly. Then they would not enjoy it so much; they would feel cheated. The thought filled David with triumph.

When he was little, it had been his most burning desire to get the better of them, especially of the man. And now he would! They would be forced to shoot him at the very moment when he was walking quietly away and taking no notice of them!

David was so taken up with his victory over them that he had gone a dozen yards past the spot where the thicket hid him from the camp before he realized that no one had fired. He stopped short. What could have happened? He turned, found a place where the thicket was thin enough to peer through, and looked across at the low buildings outlined against the dark sky, like an even darker smudge of blackness. He could faintly hear the tread of the guard, but it came no nearer and sounded no different from usual, only farther off. Nothing at all appeared different; there was no sign of anything afoot.

David frowned in the darkness and stood for a moment undecided; it couldn't possibly . . . ? He trotted on, following the edge of the thicket toward the big tree, running faster the nearer he got, and when he reached the tree, he threw himself down on the ground, searching frantically around the trunk with his hands.

There was the bundle. David leaned up against the tree shivering with cold, although it was not cold at all. The bundle was a piece of cloth wrapped around something and tied in a knot. He fumbled with the knot, but his fingers were clumsy and would not respond-and then he suddenly realized that he dared not undo it. There would be something dangerous inside the bundle . . . He tried to gather his thoughts together sufficiently to think what it might be, but his imagination did not get beyond a bomb.

It would make little difference, he thought desperately-a bullet or a bomb-it would soon be over, either way. Frantically, his fingers awkward, he struggled with the cloth.

But there was no bomb in the cloth. It was a square handkerchief tied crosswise over a bottle of water and a compass, just as the man had said.

The thought now occurred to David for the first time that he might simply have walked past the bundle. He was quite alone: nobody was there to make him pick it up . . . He barely managed to turn aside before he was sick.

Afterward he felt carefully all around the square-shaped bundle. A bottle, a compass-there was something

else. David's eyes had grown accustomed to the darkness; in the bundle there were also a box of matches, a large loaf of bread, and a pocketknife.

So the man had intended him to escape after all! He would send out a search party in the morning, but not before . . . The night was his, and it was up to him to make the most of it.

All this had taken only a few minutes, but to David it felt like hours. His hand closed tightly around the soap—he had not let go of it for a moment since he first got it. He recalled the hours he had...

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