

## Six

At home, there was a hole in the floor where Ernie's toilet had been. It was filled with new cement. The plywood screen had gone. Ernie's old gas fire had been taken away and there was just a square black gap behind the hearth. The floor was soaking wet and it stank of disinfectant. Dad was filthy and wet and grinning. He took me into the wilderness. The toilet was standing there in the middle of the thistles and weeds.

'Thought it'd make a nice garden seat for us,' he said.

The gas fire and the plywood were down by the garage door, but they hadn't been taken inside.

He looked at me and winked. 'Come and see what I found.'

He led me down to the garage door.

'Hold your nose,' he said. He bent down and started to open a newspaper parcel. 'Ready?'

It was a parcel of birds. Four of them.

'Found them behind the fire,' he said. 'Must have got stuck in the chimney and couldn't get out again.'

You could make out that three of them were pigeons because of their grey and white feathers. The last one was

pigeon-shaped, but it was all black.

'This was the last one I found,' he said. 'It was under a heap of soot and dust that had fallen down the chimney.'

'Is it a pigeon as well?'

'Yes. Been there a long, long time, that's all.'

He took my hand.

'Touch it,' he said. 'Feel it. Go on, it's OK.'

I let him hold my fingers against the bird. It was hard as stone. Even the feathers were hard as stone.

'Been there so long it's nearly a fossil,' he said.

'It's hard as stone,' I said.

'That's right. Hard as stone.'

I went and washed my hands in the kitchen.

'Today was OK?' he said.

'Yes. Leakey and Coot said they might come over on Sunday.'

'That's good. You managed the buses OK, then?'

I nodded.

'Might be able to drive you there next week,' he said.

'Once we're sorted out a bit.'

'It's OK,' I said. 'Mrs Dando asked about the baby.'

'You told her she was fine?'

'Yes,' I said.

'Good. Get some Coke and a sandwich or something. I'll make tea when the others come home.'

Then he went upstairs to have a bath.

I looked down through the wilderness. I waited for ages, listening to Dad's bathwater banging its way through the

pipes. I got my torch off the kitchen shelf. My hands were trembling. I went out, past Ernie's toilet, the fire, and the dead pigeons. I stood at the garage door and switched the torch on. I took a deep breath and tiptoed inside. I felt the cobwebs and the dust and I imagined that the whole thing would collapse. I heard things scuttling and scratching. I edged past the rubbish and the ancient furniture and my heart was thudding and thundering. I told myself I was stupid. I told myself I'd been dreaming. I told myself I wouldn't see him again.

But I did.

## Seven

I leaned over the tea chests and shone the torch and there he was. He hadn't moved. He opened his eyes and closed them again.

'You again,' he said, in his cracked, squeaky voice.

'What you doing there?' I whispered.

He sighed, like he was sick to death of everything.

'Nothing,' he squeaked. 'Nothing, nothing, and nothing.'

I watched a spider scrambling across his face. He caught it in his fingers and popped it in his mouth.

'They're coming to clear the rubbish out,' I said. 'And the whole place could collapse.'

He sighed again.

'Got an aspirin?'

'An aspirin?'

'Never mind.'

His face was pale as dry plaster. His black suit hung like a sack on his thin bones.

My heart pounded. The dust was clogging my nostrils and throat. I chewed my lips and watched him.

'You're not Ernie Myers, are you?' I said.

'That old git? Coughing his guts and spewing everywhere?'

'Sorry,' I whispered.

'What do you want?' he said.

'Nothing.'

'You got an aspirin?'

'No.'

'Thanks very much.'

'What will you do?' I said. 'They'll clear the place out. It'll all collapse. What'll...'

'Nothing. Go away.'

I listened for noises from outside, for them calling me.

'You could come inside,' I said.

He laughed, but he didn't smile.

'Go away,' he whispered.

He picked a bluebottle from the front of his suit and popped it in his mouth.

'Is there something I could bring you?' I said.

'An aspirin,' he squeaked.

'Something you'd like to eat?' I said.

'27 and 53.'

'What?'

'Nothing. Go away. Go away.'

I backed away, out into the light. I brushed the dust and bluebottles and cobwebs off. I looked up and saw Dad through the frosted glass of the bathroom window. I could just hear him singing 'The Black Hills of Dakota'.

'Are you the new boy here?' said somebody.

I turned round. There was a girl's head sticking up over the top of the wall into the back lane.

'Are you the new boy?' she repeated.

'Yes.'

'I'm Mina.'

I stared at her.

'Well?' she said.

'What?'

She clicked her tongue and shook her head and said in a bored-sounding singsong voice, 'I'm Mina. You're ...'

'Michael,' I said.

'Good.'

Then she jumped back and I heard her land in the lane.

'Nice to meet you, Michael,' she said through the wall, then she ran away.

## *Eight*

When he came down from his bath, Dad started moaning that there was no bread and there were no eggs, and in the end he said,

'I know. Let's have a takeaway, eh?'

It was like a light went on in my head.

He had the menu from the Chinese round the corner in his hand.

'We'll get it in for when your mum gets back,' he said.

'What d'you fancy?'

'27 and 53,' I said.

'That's clever,' he said. 'You did that without looking. What's your next trick?'

He wrote it all down.

'Special chow mein for Mum, spring rolls and pork char sui for you, beef and mushroom for me, crispy seaweed and prawn crackers for the baby. And if she won't eat them, we will and serve her right, eh? She'll be back on boring mother's milk again.'

He phoned the Chinese, gave me the cash, and I ran round

to collect it all. By the time I got back again, Mum and the baby were there. She tried to make a fuss of me and kept asking me about the journey and about school. Then the baby puked over her shoulder and she had to get cleaned up.

Dad belted through his beef and mushroom and the seaweed and prawn crackers. He said he was all clogged up with Ernie's dust and he swigged off a bottle of beer. When he saw I was leaving half of mine, he reached over with his fork.

I covered it with my arm.

'You'll get fat,' I said.

Mum laughed.

'Fatter!' she said.

'I'm famished,' he said. 'Worked like a bloomin' slave for you lot today.'

He reached out and tickled the baby's chin and kissed her.

'Specially for you, little chick.'

I kept my arm in front of the food.

'Fatso,' I said.

He lifted his shirt and grabbed his belly with his fingers.

'See?' said Mum.

He looked at us.

He dipped his finger into the sauce at the edge of my plate.

'Delicious,' he said. 'But enough's enough. I've had an ample sufficiency, thank you.'

Then he went to the fridge and got another beer and a great big lump of cheese.

I tipped what was left of 27 and 53 into the takeaway tin and put it in the outside bin.

## Nine

I saw Mina again later that evening. I was in the little front garden with Dad. We stood there in the thistles and dandelions. He was telling me as usual how wonderful it would be – flowers here and a tree there and a bench under the front window. I saw her further along the street. She was in a tree in another front garden on the same side of the street as us. She was sitting on a fat branch. She had a book and a pencil in her hand. She kept sticking the pencil in her mouth and staring up into the tree.

‘Wonder who that is.’

‘She’s called Mina.’

‘Ah.’

She must have seen us looking at her but she didn’t move.

Dad went in to check the cement in the dining room.

I went out the gate and along the street and looked up at Mina in the tree.

‘What you doing up there?’ I said.

She clicked her tongue.

‘Silly you,’ she said. ‘You’ve scared it away. Typical.’

‘Scared what away?’

‘The blackbird.’

She put the book and the pencil in her mouth. She swung over the branch and dropped into the garden. She stood looking at me. She was little and she had hair as black as coal and the kind of eyes you think can see right through you.

‘Never mind,’ she said. ‘It’ll come again.’

She pointed up to the rooftop. The blackbird was up there, tipping its tail back and forward, and squawking.

‘That’s its warning call,’ she said. ‘It’s telling its family there’s danger near. Danger. That’s you.’

She pointed up into the tree.

‘If you climb up where I was and look along that branch there you’ll see its nest. There’s three tiny ones. But don’t you dare go any nearer.’

She sat on the garden wall and faced me.

‘This is where I live,’ she said. ‘Number Seven. You’ve got a baby sister.’

‘Yes.’

‘What’s her name?’

‘We haven’t decided yet.’

She clicked her tongue and rolled her eyes towards the sky.

She opened her book.

‘Look at this,’ she said.

It was full of birds. Pencil drawings, lots of them coloured in blues and greens and reds.

‘This is the blackbird,’ she said. ‘They’re common, but nevertheless very beautiful. A sparrow. These are tits. And

lovely chaffinches. And look, this is the goldfinch that visited last Thursday.'

She showed me the goldfinch, the greens and reds and bright yellows in it.

'My favourite,' she said.

She slapped the book shut.

'Do you like birds?' she said, and she looked at me as if something I'd done had made her cross.

'I don't know,' I said.

'Typical. Do you like drawing?'

'Sometimes.'

'Drawing makes you look at the world more closely. It helps you to see what you're looking at more clearly. Did you know that?'

I said nothing.

'What colour's a blackbird?' she said.

'Black.'

'Typical!'

She swung round into the garden.

'I'm going in,' she said. 'I look forward to seeing you again. I'd also like to see your baby sister if that can be arranged.'

## Ten

I tried to stay awake that night, but it was hopeless. I was dreaming straight away. I dreamed that the baby was in the blackbird's nest in Mina's garden. The blackbird fed her on flies and spiders and she got stronger and stronger until she flew out of the tree and over the rooftops and on to the garage roof. Mina sat on the back wall drawing her. When I went closer, Mina whispered, 'Stay away. You're danger!'

Then the baby was bawling in the room next door and I woke up.

I lay listening to Mum cooing and comforting and the baby squeaking and hissing. The birds were singing outside. When the feed was over and I was sure everyone was asleep, I crept out of bed, got my torch, pulled some clothes on and tiptoed past their room. I took a jar of aspirin from the bathroom. I went downstairs, opened the back door and tiptoed into the wilderness.

The takeaway trays were down under newspapers and a heap of weeds. They'd tilted over and lots of the sauce had run out. When I looked inside the char sui was all gluey and red

and cold. I dropped the soggy spring rolls into the same tray and went down towards the garage.

'You must be stupid,' I told myself. 'You must be going round the stupid bend.'

I looked up at the blackbird on the garage roof and saw how it opened its yellow beak so wide as it sang. I saw the sheens of gold and blue where the early light shone on its black.

I switched on the torch, took a deep breath, and stepped inside.

The scuttling and scratching started. Something skittered across my foot and I nearly dropped the food. I came to the tea chests and shone the torch behind.

'You again?' he squeaked. 'Thought you'd gone away.'

'I've brought something,' I said.

He opened his eyes and looked at me.

'Aspirin,' I said. 'And number 27 and 53. Spring rolls and pork char sui.'

He laughed but he didn't smile.

'Not as stupid as you look,' he squeaked.

I held the takeaway tray across the tea chests towards him. He took it in his hand but he started to wobble and I had to take it back again.

'No strength,' he squeaked.

I squeezed between the tea chests. I squatted down beside him. I held the tray up and shone the torch on to the food. He dipped his finger in. He licked his finger and groaned. He stuck his finger in again and hooked a long slimy string of beansprouts and sauce. He stuck his tongue out and licked. He

slurped out pieces of pork and mushrooms. He shoved the spring rolls into his mouth. The red sauce trickled down from his lips, down over his chin on to his black jacket.

'Aaaah,' he said. 'Ooooooh.'

He sounded like he was loving it, or he was in pain, or both those things together. I held the tray closer to his chin. He dipped and licked and groaned.

His fingers were twisted and stunted. His knuckles were swollen.

'Put the aspirin in,' he said.

I put two aspirin in the sauce and he picked them out and swallowed them.

He belched and belched. His hand slipped to his side again. His head slumped back against the wall.

'Food of the gods,' he whispered. '27 and 53.'

I put the tray down on the floor beside him and shone the torch on him. There were hundreds of tiny creases and cracks all over his pale face. A few fine colourless hairs grew on his chin. The red sauce below his lips was like congealed blood. When he opened his eyes again, I saw the tiny red veins like a dark net across the whites of his eyes. There was a smell of dust, old clothes, dry sweat.

'Had a good look?' he whispered.

'Where you from?'

'Nowhere.'

'They'll clear all this out. What will you do?'

'Nothing.'

'What will you—'

'Nothing, nothing and nothing.'

He closed his eyes again.

'Leave the aspirin,' he said.

I took the top off, and put the jar on the floor. I had to push aside a little heap of hard furry balls. I held one up to the torchlight, and saw it was made of tiny bones glued together with fur and skin.

'What you looking at, eh?' he said.

I put it on the floor again.

'Nothing.'

The blackbird on the roof sang louder and louder.

'There's a doctor comes to see my sister,' I said. 'I could bring him here to see you.'

'No doctors. Nobody.'

'Who are you?'

'Nobody.'

'What can I do?'

'Nothing.'

'My baby sister's very ill.'

'Babies!'

'Is there anything you can do for her?'

'Babies! Spittle, muck, spew and tears.'

I sighed. It was hopeless.

'My name's Michael. I'm going now. Is there anything else I can bring you?'

'Nothing. 27 and 53.'

He belched again. His breath stank. Not just the Chinese food, but the stench of the other dead things he ate: the

bluebottles, the spiders. He made a gag noise in his throat and he leaned away from the wall like he was going to be sick. I put my hand beneath his shoulder to steady him. I felt something there, something held in by his jacket. He retched. I tried not to breathe, not to smell him. I reached across his back and felt something beneath his other shoulder as well. Like thin arms, folded up. Springy and flexible.

He retched, but he wasn't sick. He leaned back against the wall and I took my hand away.

'Who are you?' I said.

The blackbird sang and sang.

'I wouldn't tell anybody,' I said.

He lifted his hand and looked at it in the torchlight.

'I'm nearly nobody,' he said. 'Most of me is Arthur.'

He laughed but he didn't smile.

'Arthur Itis,' he squeaked. 'He's the one that's ruining me bones. Turns you to stone then crumbles you away.'

I touched his swollen knuckles.

'What's on your back?' I said.

'A jacket, then a bit of me, then lots and lots of Arthur.'

I tried to slip my hand beneath his shoulder again.

'No good,' he squeaked. 'Nothing there's no good no more.'

'I'm going,' I said. 'I'll keep them from clearing the place out. I'll bring you more. I won't bring Doctor Death.'

He licked the dry sauce from below his lips.

'27 and 53,' he said. '27 and 53.'

I left him, backed away towards the door, went out into the

light. The blackbird flew away over the gardens, squawking. I tiptoed into the house. I stood for a minute at the baby's cot. I put my hand beneath the blankets and felt the rattling of her breath and how soft and warm she was. I felt how tender her bones were.

Mum looked up at me and I could tell she was still asleep.

'Hello,' she whispered.

I tiptoed back to bed.

When I slept, I dreamed that my bed was all twigs and leaves and feathers, just like a nest.

## *Eleven*

Next morning, Dad said he could hardly move. He was all bent over. He said his back was killing him. He was stiff as a blinking board.

'Where's those aspirin?' he yelled down the stairs.

Mum laughed.

'All this exercise'll do him good,' she said. 'It'll get that fat off him.'

He yelled again:

'I said, where's those blooming aspirin?'

I kissed the baby and ran to catch the bus to school.

That morning, we had science with Rasputin. He showed us a poster of our ancestors, of the endless shape-changing that had led to us. There were monkeys and apes, the long line of ape-like creatures in between, then us. It showed how we began to stand straighter, how we lost most of our hair, how we began to use tools, how our heads changed shape to hold our big brains. Coot whispered it was all a load of rubbish. His Dad had told him there was no way that monkeys could turn into men. Just had to look at them. Stands to reason.

I asked Rasputin if we'd keep on changing shape and he said, 'Who knows, Michael? Maybe evolution will go on for ever. Maybe we'll go on changing for ever.'

'Bollocks,' whispered Coot.

We drew the skeleton of an ape and the skeleton of a man. I remembered what Mina had said and I looked really closely at the poster. I put my hand up and said, 'What are shoulder blades for, sir?'

Rasputin crinkled his face up. He reached behind his back and felt his shoulder blades and smiled.

'I know what my mother used to tell me,' he said. 'But to be honest, I really haven't got a clue.'

Afterwards, Coot hunched his shoulders up and lowered his head and stuck his chin out. He lurched through the corridor, grunting and running at the girls.

Lucy Carr started screaming.

'Stop it, you pig!' she said.

Coot just laughed.

'Pig?' said Coot. 'I'm not a pig. I'm a gorilla.'

And he ran at her again.

In the yard when I played football, I realised how tired I was with being awake so much during the night. Leakey kept asking what was the matter with me. I was playing crap. Mrs Dando came again when I was standing by myself at the side of the field.

'What's up?' she said.

'Nothing.'

'And how's the little one.'

'Fine.'

I looked at the ground.

'Sometimes I think she stops breathing,' I said. 'Then I look at her and she's fine.'

'She will be fine,' she said. 'You'll see. Babies so often bring worry with them into the world, but you'll be wrestling with her before you know where you are.'

She touched me on the shoulder. For a moment. I wondered about telling her about the man in the garage. Then I saw Leakey looking so I shrugged her off and I ran back, yelling,

'On me head! On me head!'

It was a dozy afternoon. Some easy Maths, then Miss Clarts reading us another story, this time about Ulysses and his men trapped in the cave with the one-eyed monster Polyphemus. I was nearly asleep as she told us how they had escaped by pretending to be sheep.

I took my skeleton picture home. I kept looking at it on the bus. There was an old bloke sitting beside me with a Jack Russell on his knee. He smelt of pee and pipesmoke.

'What's that?' he said.

'Picture of what we used to be like long ago,' I said.

'Can't say I remember that,' he said. 'And I'm pretty ancient.'

He started going on about how he'd seen a monkey in a circus in his young days. They'd trained it to make tea but it was nothing like a person, really. But maybe it had just been practising. There was spit dribbling at the side of his

mouth. I could see he wasn't all there.

'There's a man in our garage,' I said when he'd shut up.

'Aye?' he said.

The Jack Russell yapped. He put his hand around its mouth. He seemed to be thinking hard.

'Aye,' he said again. 'And there was the loveliest lass on the trapeze. You could swear she could nearly fly.'

## *Twelve*

Doctor Death was there when I got home. He was in the kitchen with Mum and Dad. He had the baby on his knee and he was fastening her vest up. He winked at me when I came in. Dad poked me in the ribs. I saw how flat Mum's face was.

'It's this damn place!' she said when Doctor Death had gone. 'How can she thrive when it's all so dirty and all in such a mess?'

She pointed out of the window.

'See what I mean?' she said. 'Bloody stupid toilet. Bloody ruins. A bloody stupid wilderness.'

She started crying. She said we should never have left Random Road. We should never have come to this stinking derelict place. She walked back and forward in the kitchen with the baby in her arms.

'My little girl,' she murmured. 'My poor little girl.'

'The baby has to go back to hospital,' Dad whispered. 'Just for a while. So the doctors can keep an eye on her. That's all. She'll be fine.'

He stared out of the window into the wilderness.

'I'll work harder,' he said. 'I'll get it all ready for when she comes back again.'

'I'll help,' I said, but he didn't seem to hear.

We had bread and cheese and tea. The baby lay there in a little carry cot beside us. Mum went upstairs to put together the things the baby would need in hospital. I put the skeleton picture on the table and looked at it but couldn't concentrate on it.

'That's good,' Dad said, but he wasn't looking at it properly, either.

I went up and sat on the landing. I watched Mum throwing vests and nappies and cardigans into a little case. She kept clicking her tongue, and going, 'Agh! Agh!' like she was mad at everything. She saw me there and tried to smile but started to click her tongue again.

When she was finished, she said, 'Don't worry. It won't be for long.'

She leaned down and put her hand on my head.

'What are shoulder blades for?' I said.

'Oh, Michael!' she said.

She shoved past me like I was really getting on her nerves. But when she was halfway down the stairs she stopped and came back to me. She slipped her fingers under my shoulder blades.

'They say that shoulder blades are where your wings were, when you were an angel,' she said. 'They say they're where your wings will grow again one day.'

'It's just a story, though,' I said. 'A fairy tale for little kids. Isn't it?'

'Who knows? But maybe one day we all had wings and one day we'll all have wings again.'

'D'you think the baby had wings?'

'Oh, I'm sure that one had wings. Just got to take one look at her. Sometimes I think she's never quite left Heaven and never quite made it all the way here to Earth.'

She smiled, but there were tears in her eyes.

'Maybe that's why she has such trouble staying here,' she said.

I watched her, wondered what she'd say if I told her now about the man in the garage. I didn't tell her.

Before she went away, I held the baby for a while. I touched her skin and her tiny soft bones. I felt the place where her wings had been. Then we went in the car to the hospital. We went to the baby's ward and left Mum and the baby there. Dad and I drove back to Falconer Road. We sat in the big empty house and looked at each other. Then he went back to painting the dining-room walls.

I drew a skeleton with wings rising from the shoulder blades.

I looked out of the window and saw Mina sitting high up, on top of the back wall.