

I stepped back through our gate and there was Dad, beyond the dining-room window, stretching up to paint the walls.

Fourteen

I didn't go to school next day.

I was having breakfast with Dad when I started trembling for no reason. He put his arm around me.

'What about working with me today?' he asked.

I nodded.

'We'll get it all done for them, eh?' he said. 'You and me together.'

I heard him on the phone in the hall, talking to school.

'His sister ...' I heard him say. 'Yes, so much all at once ... State of distress ... Yes, yes.'

I put some old jeans on. I stirred the green paint he was going to use on the dining-room walls. I laid old sheets on the floor.

'What should I do?' I asked, as he stepped up on to the stepladders.

He shrugged. He looked out through the window.

'How about getting some of that jungle cleared,' he said. He laughed. 'Get covered up first, though. And watch out for the tigers.'

I wore a pair of old gloves. I used an old pair of scissors to cut the stems that wouldn't snap. I dug down with a trowel to get at the roots. Thistle thorns stuck in my skin. There was green sap all over me. I made a big pile of weeds and a heap of stones against the house wall. I found spiders dangling from my hair and clothes. Shiny black beetles scurried away from me. Centipedes squirmed down into the loosened soil. As the morning went on I cleared a wider and wider space. Dad came out and we drank some juice together. We sat against the house wall, and watched blackbirds come to where I'd been working. They dug into the soil, collected worms and insects for their young, flew over the gardens and rooftops to their nests.

We talked about what we wanted to have out here: a pond, a fountain, a place Mum could sunbathe, somewhere to put the baby's playpen.

'We'll have to cover the pond once she's crawling,' he said. 'Don't want any dangers in her way.'

We went back to work again.

My arms were aching and my skin was stinging. Dust and pollen clogged my nose and throat. I crawled through the weeds, dug down into the earth, slashed and pulled at the stems. I dreamed of the baby crawling out here. She was strong and she kept on giggling and pointing at the birds. Then I saw how close to the garage I had crawled and I thought of the man in there, how he just sat there, how he seemed to be just waiting to die.

I stood up and went to the garage door. I stood listening.

There was nothing but the usual scuttling and scratching.

'You can't just sit there!' I called. 'You can't just sit like you're waiting to die!'

There was no answer. I stood listening.

'You can't!' I said.

No answer.

That afternoon, we went to the hospital. As we drove out of the street in the car, I saw Mina, sitting in the tree in her garden. She had a notebook in her lap and she was writing or drawing. She looked at us, and she waved, but she didn't smile.

'Strange one, that,' said Dad.

'Yes,' I murmured.

In the hospital, the baby was in a glass case again. There were wires and tubes going into her. She was fast asleep. Mum said everything was fine. The doctors had told her the baby could go home again in a day or two. We looked down through the glass and Mum put her arm around me. She saw the blotches on my skin. She asked the nurses for some cream and rubbed it gently into me.

The baby woke up and looked straight into my eyes and screwed up her face like she was smiling.

'See?' said Mum. 'She's going to get better for us. Aren't you, my little chick?'

She closed her eyes again. Mum said she would stay at the hospital tonight as well. Dad and I headed home.

'27 and 53 again?' he said as we drove through the traffic.

'Yes,' I said.

'Right,' he said. 'A bit more work, then you can go round to the Chinese later.'

We drove into the street. Mina was sitting on the low wall to her front garden, reading a book. She watched us as we drew up, as we walked towards our door. I waved at her and she smiled.

'Take a break,' said Dad. 'You can finish the garden tomorrow. Go on. Go and see Mina.'

Fifteen

'The baby might not die,' I said.

'That's good,' said Mina.

I sat on the wall a few feet away from her.

'You weren't at school today,' she said.

'I wasn't well.'

She nodded.

'Not surprising, considering what you've been through.'

'You weren't at school, either,' I said.

'I don't go to school.'

I stared at her.

'My mother educates me,' she said. 'We believe that schools inhibit the natural curiosity, creativity and intelligence of children. The mind needs to be opened out into the world, not shuttered down inside a gloomy classroom.'

'Oh,' I said.

'Don't you agree, Michael?'

I thought of dashing across the yard with Leakey and Coot. I thought of Monkey Mitford's temper. I thought of Miss Clart's stories.