

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.