

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.'