**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.

**Thirteen**

  ‘You’re unhappy,’ she said.

  I stood there looking up at her.

  ‘The baby’s back in hospital,’ I said.

  She sighed. She gazed at a bird that was wheeling high above.

  ‘It looks like she’s going to bloody die,’ I said.

  She sighed again.

  ‘Would you like me to take you somewhere? she said.

  ‘Somewhere?’

  ‘Somewhere secret. Somewhere nobody knows about.’

  I looked back at the house and saw Dad through the dining-room window. I looked at Mina and her eyes went right through me.

  ‘Five minutes,’ she said. ‘He won’t even know you’re gone.’

  I crossed my fingers.

  ‘Come on,’ she whispered, and I opened the gate and slipped out into the lane.

  ‘Quickly,’ she whispered, and she bent low and started to run.

  At the end of the street she turned into another back lane. The houses behind the walls here were bigger and higher and older. The back gardens were longer and had tall trees in them. It was Crow Road.

  She stopped outside a dark-green gate. She took a key from somewhere, unlocked it, slipped inside. I followed her in. Something brushed against my leg. I looked down and saw a cat that had come in through the gate with us.

  ‘Whisper!’ said Mina, and she grinned.

  ‘What?’

  ‘The cat’s c

alled Whisper. You’ll see him everywhere.’

  The house was blackened stone. The windows were boarded up. Mina ran to the door and opened it. There was a painted red sign over the door: DANGER.

  ‘Take no notice,’ she said. ‘It’s just to keep the vandals out.’

  She stepped inside.

  ‘Come on,’ she whispered. ‘Quickly!’

  I went in, and Whisper entered at my side.

  It was pitch black in there. I could see nothing. Mina took my hand.

  ‘Don’t stop,’ she said, and she led me forward.

  She led me up some wide stairs. As my eyes got used to the gloom I made out the shapes of the boarded windows, of dark doorways and broad landings. We ascended three stairways, passed three landings. Then the stairs narrowed and we came to a final narrow doorway.

  ‘The attic,’ she whispered. ‘Stay very still in there. They might not want you to be there. They might attack you!’

  ‘What might?

  ‘How brave are you? They know me and they know Whisper but they don’t know you. How brave are you? As brave as me?’

  I stared at her. How could I know?

  ‘You are,’ she said. ‘You have to be.’

  She turned the handle. She held her breath. She took my hand again, led me inside, closed the door behind us. She hunched down on the floor. She pulled me down as well. The cat lay quietly at our side.

  ‘Stay very still,’ she whispered. ‘Stay very quiet. Just watch.’

  We were right inside the roof It was a wide room with a sloping ceiling. The floorboards were split and uneven. Plaster had fallen from the walls. Light came in through an arched window that jutted out through the roof. Glass was scattered on the floor below the window. You could see the rooftops and steeples of the town through it, and the clouds, turning red as the day began to close.

  I held my breath.

  The room darkened and reddened as the sun went down.

  ‘What will happen?’ I whispered.

  ‘Shh. Just watch. Wait and watch.’

  Then she trembled.

  ‘Look! Look!’

  A pale bird rose from some corner of the room and flew silently to the window. It stood there, looking out. Then another came, wheeling once around the room, its wings beating within inches of our faces before it, too, settled before the window.

  I didn’t breathe. Mina gripped my hand. I watched the birds, the way their broad round faces turned to each other, the way their claws gripped the window frame. Then they went, flying silently out into the red dusk.

  ‘Owls,’ whispered Mina. ‘Tawny owls!’

  And she looked right into me again and laughed.

  ‘Sometimes they’ll attack intruders. But they saw you were with me. They knew you were OK.’

  She pointed to the back wall, a gaping hole where some plaster and bricks had fallen in.

  ‘That’s the nest,’ she said. ‘There’s chicks in there. Don’t go near. They’ll defend them to the death.’

  She laughed at my stunned silence.

  ‘Come on,’ she whispered. ‘Be quick!’

  And we left the attic and ran down the broad stairs and out of the house and into the garden. She locked the door and the garden gate and we ran through the lanes to our wilderness.

  ‘Tell nobody,’ she whispered.

  ‘No,’ I said.

  ‘Hope to die,’ she said.

  ‘What?’

  ‘Cross your heart and hope to die.’

  ‘Cross my heart and hope to die.’

  ‘Good,’ she said, and she ran away with Whisper at her heels.

  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.

  ‘Don’t know,’ I said.

  ‘Our motto is on the wall by my bed,’ she said. ‘ “How can a bird that is born for joy/Sit in a cage and sing?” William Blake.’ She pointed up into the tree. ‘The chicks in the nest won’t need a classroom to make them fly. Will they?’

  I shook my head.

  ‘Well, then,’ she said. ‘My father believed this, too.’

  ‘Your father?’

  ‘Yes. He was a wonderful man. He died before I was born. We often think of him, watching us from Heaven.’

  She watched me, with those eyes that seemed to get right inside.

  ‘You’re a quiet person,’ she said.

  I didn’t know what to say. She began reading again.

  ‘Do you believe we’re descended from apes?’ I said.

  ‘Not a matter of belief,’ she said. ‘It’s a proven fact. It’s called evolution. You must know that. Yes, we are.’

  She looked up from her book.

  ‘I would hope, though,’ she went on, ‘that we also have some rather more beautiful ancestors. Don’t you?’

  She watched me again.

  ‘Yes,’ I said.

  She read again. I watched the blackbird flying into the tree with worms drooping from its beak.

  ‘It was great to see the owls,’ I said.

  She smiled.

  ‘Yes. They’re wild things, of course. Killers, savages. They’re wonderful.’

‘I kept dreaming I heard them, all through the night.’

  ‘I listen for them, too. Sometimes in the dead of night when all the traffic’s gone I hear them calling to each other.’

  I joined my hands together tight with a space between my palms and a gap between my thumbs.

  ‘Listen,’ I said.

  I blew softly into the gap and made the noise an owl makes.

  ‘That’s brilliant!’ said Mina. ‘Show me.’

  I showed her how to put her hands together, how to blow. At first she couldn’t do it, then she could. She hooted and grinned.

  ‘Brilliant,’ she said. ‘So brilliant.’

  ‘Leakey showed me,’ I said. ‘My mate at school.’

  ‘I wonder if you did it at night if the owls would come.’

 ‘Maybe. Maybe you should try it.’

  ‘I will. Tonight I will.’

  Hoot, she went. Hoot hoot hoot.

  ‘Brilliant!’ she said, and she clapped her hands.

  ‘There’s something I could show you as well,’ I said. ‘Like you showed me the owls.’

  ‘What is it?’

  ‘l don’t know. I don’t even know if it’s true or if it’s a dream.’

  ‘That’s all right. Truth and dreams are always getting muddled.’

  ‘I’d have to take you there and show you.’

  She opened her eyes wide and grinned, like she was ready to go right now.

  ‘Can’t go now,’ I said.

Along the street, Dad opened the front door and waved.

  ‘I’ve got to go,’ I said. ‘I’ve got to go and get 27 and 53.’

  She raised her eyes.

  ‘Mystery man,’ she said. ‘That’s you.’

  The blackbird flew out of the tree again.

  I stood up to go.

  I said, ‘Do you know what shoulder blades are for?’

  She giggled.

  ‘Do you not even know that?’ she said.

  ‘Do you?’

 ‘It’s a proven fact, common knowledge. They’re where your wings were, and where they’ll grow again.’

  She laughed again.

  ‘Go on, then, mystery man. Go and get your mysterious numbers.’

  **Sixteen**

  Just before dawn, next morning.

  I shone the torch on his white face.

  ‘You again,’ he squeaked.

  ‘More 27 and 53,’ I said.

  ‘Food of the gods,’ he said.

  I squeezed through the tea chests to his side, held the tray for him and he hooked the food out with his finger. He slurped and licked and chewed.

  ‘Nectar,’ he whispered.

  ‘How do you know about 27 and 53?’ I said.

  ‘Ernie’s favourite. Used to hear him on the phone. 27 and 53, he used to say. Bring it round. Bring it quick.’

  ‘You were in the house?’

  ‘In the garden. Used to watch him through the windows. Used to listen to him. He was never very well. Couldn’t eat it all. Used to find his leavings in the bin next morning. 27 and 53. Sweetest of nectars. Lovely change from spiders and mice.’

  ‘Did he see you? Did he know you were there?’

  ‘Never could tell. Used to look at me, but look right through me like I wasn’t there. Miserable old toot. Maybe thought I was a figment.’

  He dropped a long sticky string of pork and beansprouts on to his pale tongue.

  He looked at me with his veiny eyes.

  ‘You think I’m a figment?

  ‘Don’t know what you are.’

  ‘That’s all right, then.’

  ‘Are you dead?’

  ‘Ha!’

  ‘Are you?’

  ‘Yes. The dead are often known to eat 27 and 53 and to suffer from Arthur Itis.’

  ‘You need more aspirin?’

  ‘Not yet.’

  ‘Anything else?’

  ‘27 and 53.’

  He ran his finger around the tray and caught the final globs of sauce. He licked his pale lips with his pale tongue.

  ‘The baby’s in hospital,’ I said.

  ‘Some brown,’ he said.

  ‘Brown?’

  ‘Brown ale. Something else Ernie used to have. Something else he couldn’t finish. Eyes bigger than his belly. Something else I used to dig out of the bin, long as the bottle hadn’t tipped over and spilt everything.’

  ‘OK,’ l said.

  ‘Brown ale. Sweetest of nectars.’

  He belched, retched, leaned forward. I shone the torch on to the great bulges on his back, beneath his jacket.

  ‘There’s someone I’d like to bring to see you,’ I said when he’d settled.

  ‘Someone to tell you I’m really here?’

  ‘She’s nice.’

  ‘No.’

  ‘She’s clever.’

  ‘Nobody.’

  ‘She’ll know how to help you.’

  ‘Ha!’

  He laughed but he didn’t smile.

  I didn’t know why, but I started to tremble again.

  He clicked his tongue and his breath rattled and sighed.

  ‘I don’t know what to do,’ I said. ‘The garage is going to bloody collapse. You’re ill with bloody arthritis. You don’t eat properly. I wake up and think of you and there’s other things I need to think about. The baby’s ill and we hope she won’t die but she might. She really might.’

  He tapped his fingers on the garage floor, ran his fingers through the furry balls that lay there.

  ‘She’s nice,’ I told him. ‘She’ll tell nobody else. She’s clever. She’ll know how to help you.’

  He shook his head.

  ‘Damn kids,’ he said.

  ‘She’s called Mina,’ I said.

  ‘Bring the street,’ he said. ‘Bring the whole damn town.'

  ‘Just Mina. And me.’

  ‘Kids.’

  ‘What should I call you?’

  ‘Eh?’

  ‘What should I tell her you’re called?’

  ‘Nobody. Mr Nobody. Mr Bones and Mr Had Enough and Mr Arthur Itis. Now get out and leave me alone.’

  ‘OK,’ I said.

  I stood up and started to back out between the tea chests.

  I hesitated.

  ‘Will you think about the baby?’ I said.

  ‘Eh?’

  ‘Will you think about her in hospital? Will you think about her getting better?’

  He clicked his tongue.

  ‘Please,’ I said.

  ‘Yes. Blinking yes.’

  I moved towards the door.

  ‘Yes,’ I heard him say again. ‘Yes, I will.’

  Outside, night had almost given way to day. The blackbird was on the garage roof; belting out its song. Black and pink and blue were mingling in the sky. I picked the cobwebs and bluebottles off myself I heard the hooting as I turned back towards the house.

  Hoot. Hoot hoot hoot.

  I looked into the sky over the gardens and saw the owls heading homeward on great silent wings. I put my hands together and blew into the gap between my thumbs.

  Hoot. Hoot hoot hoot.

  Then I seemed to see a face, round and pale inside the darkness of an upstairs window in Mina’s house. I put my hands together again.

  Hoot. Hoot hoot hoot.

  Something answered.

  Hoot. Hoot hoot hoot.