Seventeen

  At lunchtime I went to her front garden. She was sitting there on the lawn, on a spread-out blanket beneath the tree. She had her books, her pencils, her paints scattered around her. I was off school again. All morning I’d been clearing the wilderness again. Dad had been working in the front room, painting, stripping the walls, getting ready to hang wallpaper. ‘The mystery man,’ she said. ‘Hello again.’

  She had a book open at a skeleton of a bird. She’d been copying this into her sketch book.

  ‘You’re doing science?’ I said.

  She laughed.

  ‘See how school shutters you,’ she said. ‘I’m drawing, painting, reading, looking. I’m feeling the sun and the air on my skin. I’m listening to the blackbird’s song. I’m opening my mind. Ha! School!’

  She picked up a book of poems from her blanket.

  ‘Listen,’ she said.

  She sat up straight, coughed to clear her throat, held the opened book before her.

  ‘To go to school in a summer morn,

  O! it drives all joy away;

  Under a cruel eye outworn,

  The little ones spend the day

  In sighing and dismay.’

  She closed the book.

  ‘William Blake again. You’ve heard of William Blake?’

  ‘No.’

  ‘He painted pictures and wrote poems. Much of the time he wore no clothes. He saw angels in his garden.’

  She beckoned me. I stepped over the wall, sat on the blanket by her.

  ‘Be quiet,’ she whispered. ‘Be very, very quiet. Listen.’

  ‘Listen to what?’

  'Just listen.’

  I listened. I heard the traffic on Crow Road and the roads beyond. I heard birds singing. I heard the breeze in the trees.

  I heard my own breath.

  ‘What can you hear?’

  I told her.

  ‘Listen deeper,’ she said. ‘Listen harder. Listen for the tiniest sweetest noise.’

  I closed my eyes and listened again.

  ‘What am I listening for?’ I said.

  ‘It comes from above you, from inside the tree.’

  ‘Inside the tree?’

  ‘Just do it, Michael.’

  I tried to concentrate on the tree, on the branches and leaves, on the tiny shoots that grew out from the branches. I heard the shoots and leaves moving in the breeze.

  ‘It comes from the nest,’ she said. ‘Just listen.’

  I listened, and at last I heard it: a tiny squeaking sound, far off, like it was coming from another world.

  I caught my breath.

  ‘Yes!’ I whispered.

  ‘The chicks,’ she said.

  Once I’d found it, and knew what it was and where it was, I could hear it along with all the other, stronger noises. I could open my eyes. I could look at Mina. Then I could close my eyes again and hear the blackbird chicks cheeping in the nest. I could imagine them there, packed close together in the nest.

  ‘Their bones are more delicate than ours,’ she said.

  I opened my eyes. She was copying the skeleton again.

  ‘Their bones are almost hollow. Did you know that?’

  ‘Yes, I think so.’

  She picked up a bone that was lying beside her books.

  ‘This is from a pigeon, we believe,’ she said. She snapped the bone and it splintered. She showed me that it wasn’t solid inside, but was a mesh of needle—thin, bony struts.

  ‘The presence of air cavities within the bone is known as pneumatisation,’ she said. ‘Feel it.’

  I rested the bone on my palm. I looked at the spaces inside, felt the splinters.

  ‘This too is the result of evolution,’ she said. ‘The bone is light but strong. It is adapted so that the bird can fly. Over millions of years, the bird has developed an anatomy that enables it to fly. As you know from the skeleton drawings you did the other day, we have not.’

  She looked at me.

  ‘You understand? You’ve covered this at school?’

  ‘I think so.’

  She watched me.

  ‘One day I’ll tell you about a being called the archaeopteryx,’ she said. ‘How’s the baby today?’

  ‘We’ll see this afternoon. But I think she’ll be OK.’

  ‘Good.’

  She put her hands together, blew between her thumbs, and made the owl sound.

  ‘Brilliant!’ she said. ‘Brilliant!’

  ‘I made the hooting noise last night,’ I said. ‘Just after dawn, very early in the morning.’

  ‘Did you?’

  ‘Were you looking out then? Did you make the hooting sound?’

  ‘I can’t be certain.’

  ‘Can’t?’

  ‘I dream. I walk in my sleep. Sometimes I do things really and I think they were just dreams. Sometimes I dream them and think they were real.’

  She stared at me.

  ‘I dreamed about you last night,’ she said.

  ‘Did you?’

  ‘Yes, but it’s not important. You said you had a mystery. Something to show me.’

  ‘I have.’

  ‘Then show me.’

  ‘Not now. This afternoon, maybe.’

  She gazed into me.

  ‘You were outside,’ she said. ‘There was an eerie light. You were very pale. There were cobwebs and flies all over you. You were hooting, just like an owl.’

  We stared at each other.

  Dad started calling.

  ‘Michael! Michael!’

  ‘See you later this afternoon,’ I whispered.

  **Eighteen**

  ‘Mrs Dando was on the phone,’ said Dad, on the way to the hospital. ‘She was asking about you.’

  ‘That’s nice.’

  ‘She said your mates want you back.’

  ‘I’ll see them Sunday.’

  ‘Not missing school, then?’

  I shrugged.

  ‘Don’t know.’

  ‘Maybe you could go back soon, eh? Don’t want to miss out on too much.’

  ‘I learn a lot from Mina. She knows about lots of things, like birds and evolution.’

  ‘Aye, there’s that. And of course you’ve learned the Chinese menu off by heart.’

  At the hospital the baby was still in the glass case, but the wires and tubes weren’t in her. Mum lifted the lid back and I held the baby on my knee. I tried to feel if she was getting bigger and stronger. She squirmed, and I felt the long thin muscles in her back as she stretched. She took my finger in her fist and tried to squeeze it tight. She opened her eyes wide.

  ‘Look,’ said Dad. ‘She’s smiling at you.’

  But it didn’t seem like a smile to me.

  A doctor came to see us. Doctor Bloom.

  ‘She’s coming on, then?’ said Dad.

  ‘Flying,’ said the doctor.

  ‘We’ll have her back soon, then?’

  Doctor Bloom shrugged. He touched the baby’s cheek.

  ‘We’ll need to keep an eye on her,’ he said. ‘A few days, maybe.’

  He smiled at me.

  ‘Try not to worry, lad,’ he said.

  I touched the baby’s shoulder blades, felt how tiny and flexible they were. I felt the thin rattle of her breath.

  ‘She’ll be running in the garden soon,’ Mum said.

  She laughed, but there were tears in her eyes.

  She took the baby from me and rubbed cream on my skin again.

  ‘You look tired,’ she said. She looked at Dad. ‘You two been staying up too late?’

  ‘Dead right we have,’ said Dad. ‘It’s been videos and Chinese takeaways all night, every night. Hasn’t it, son?’

  I nodded.

  ‘Yes, it has.’

  I went out into the corridor. I asked a nurse if she knew where the people with arthritis went. She said lots of them went to Ward 34 on the top floor. She said she thought that was a silly place to put people with bad bones who had such trouble walking and climbing stairs. I jumped into a lift and went up.

  I stepped out of the lift and a woman came past me pushing a zimmer frame. She rested, puffing and grinning.

  ‘Knackered,’ she panted. ‘Once up and down the ward and three times round the landing! Absolutely knackered!’

  She leaned on the frame and looked me in the eye.

  ‘But I’ll be dancing soon.’

  Her hands were twisted and her knuckles were swollen.

  ‘Arthritis,’ I said.

  ‘That’s right. Arthur. But I’ve got two new hips and I’ll be dancing soon and that’ll show him who’s the boss. For a

while at least.’

  ‘I’ve got a friend with arthritis,’ I said.

  ‘Poor soul.’

  ‘What’ll help him?’

  ‘Well, Arthur usually ends up winning in the end. But in the meantime some folk swear by cod liver oil and a positive mind. For me it’s prayers to Our Lady, and Doctor MacNabola with his scissors and his saw and his plastic bits and pieces and his glue.’

  She winked at me.

  ‘Keep on moving. That’s the thing. Keep the old bones moving. Don’t let everything seize up.’

  She shuffled on, humming ‘Lord of the Dance’.

  I followed the signs to Ward 34.

  I looked inside. There were dozens of beds, facing each other across the room. There were people practising moving on zimmer frames. Some lay in bed, smiling and knitting, wincing as they called across the ward to each other. Some lay exhausted, filled with pain. At the far end, a cluster of doctors and students in white coats gathered around a man in black. He spoke, and they scribbled in notebooks. He strode through the ward and they followed. He pointed at patients and they nodded and waved. He stopped at several of the beds and smiled for a moment as he listened to the patients. He shook hands with a nurse and headed quickly for the door. I stood there as the cluster approached me.

  ‘Excuse me,’ I said.

  The man in black strode on.

  ‘Doctor MacNabola,’ I said.

  He stopped and looked down at me. The doctors and students came to a halt around me.

  ‘What’s good for arthritis? I said.

  He blinked and grinned.

  ‘The needle,’ he said.

  He pretended to squeeze a great syringe.

  ‘Deep injections right into the joint.’

  He winced, pretending to be in pain, and the doctors and students sniggered.

  ‘Then the saw,’ he said.

  He made sawing movements with his arm and he gasped and twisted his face in agony.

  ‘Bits cut out and new bits put in,’ he said.

  He pretended to thread a needle, then to sew.

  ‘Stitch it up, good as new,’ he said.

  He sighed with relief; as if all his pain had gone.

  He leaned towards me.

  ‘Are you a sufferer, young man?

  I shook my head.

  ‘A friend.’

  The doctor stood up very straight.

  ‘Then tell your friend to come to me. I’ll needle him, saw him, fix him up and send him home nearly as good as new.’

 The doctors sniggered again.

  ‘Failing that,’ he said, ‘the advice is simple. Keep cheerful. Don’t give up. Most of all, remain active. Take cod liver oil. Don’t allow those joints to grind to a halt.’

  He clasped his hands behind his back.

  ‘Anything else?

  I shook my head.

  He looked at the doctors around me.

  ‘Any other advice for the young man’s friend?

  They shook their heads.

  ‘Then let us carry on,’ he said, and he strode into the corridor.

  I stood there thinking.

  ‘You looking for someone? said a nurse.

‘No.’

  She smiled.

  ‘He’s a good doctor, really,’ she said. ‘But he does like to show off. You tell your friend: keep moving, and try to smile. Don’t make it easy for Arthur.’

  I ran back to the lift and back to the baby’s ward.

  Mum and Dad were sitting holding hands, gazing down at the baby.

  ‘Hello,’ said Mum.

  She tried to smile, but her voice was flat and I could see she’d been crying.

  ‘Hello.’

  ‘You’ve been a while.’

  ‘All those Chinese takeaways,’ said Dad, trying to get us to laugh.

 ‘Cod liver oil,’ she said. ‘That’ll sort you out.’

  She held me tight.

  ‘You’re my best boy,’ she whispered. ‘Whatever happens, you’ll always be my best boy.’

  At home, as Dad prepared to get started again in the front room, I took a bottle of brown ale from the fridge and hid it with my torch just inside the garage door. I got my Swiss Army knife from my room. I took a handful of cod liver oil capsules from the bathroom and put them in my pocket.

  I asked if it was OK if I went to see Mina again.

  ‘Don’t worry about me,’ Dad said. ‘I’ll do all the dirty work. You just run around and have a good time.’