**Nineteen**

  Her blanket and books were still on the lawn, but she wasn’t there. I looked up into the tree and she wasn’t there. I stepped over the wall, went to her front door, rang the doorbell. Her mother came.

 ‘Is Mina in?’ I asked.

  She had jet-black hair like Mina’s. She wore an apron covered in daubs of paint and clay.

  ‘She is,’ she said. She put her hand out. ‘You must be Michael. I’m Mrs McKee.’

  I shook her hand.

  ‘Mina!’ she shouted.

  ‘How’s the baby?’ she asked.

  ‘Very well. Well, we think she’ll be very well.’

  ‘Babies are stubborn things. Strugglers and fighters. Tell your parents I’m thinking of them.’

  ‘I will.’

  Mina came to the door. She had a paint-splashed apron on, too.

  ‘We’re modelling,’ she said. ‘Come and see.’

  She led us through to the kitchen. There were big balls of clay in plastic bags on the table. The table was covered in a plastic sheet. There were knives and wooden tools. Mina’s hook of bird drawings was open at the blackbird. She showed me the clay she was working with. It was just a lump, but I could see the outline of a bird: a broad body, a pointed bill, a flattened tail. She added more clay and pinched the body and began to draw out its wings.

  ‘Mina’s fixated on birds just now,’ said Mrs McKee.

  ‘Sometimes it’s things that swim, sometimes it’s things that slink through the night, sometimes it’s things that creep and crawl, but just now it’s things that fly.’

  I looked around. There was a shelf full of clay models: foxes, fish, lizards, hedgehogs, little mice. Then an owl, with its great round head, its pointed beak, its fierce claws.

  ‘Did you make those?’ I asked.

  Mina laughed.

  ‘They’re brilliant,’ I said.

  She showed me how the clay would be shaped if the bird were in flight, how she could mark the feathers in with a pointed knife.

  ‘Once it’s fired and glazed I’ll hang it from the ceiling.’ I picked up a piece of clay, rubbed it between my fingers, rolled it between my palms. It was cold and grainy. Mina licked her finger, rubbed the clay, showed how it could be made shiny smooth. I watched her, copied her. I worked the clay again, drew it into the shape of a snake, pushed it all together again and made the shape of a human head.

  I thought of the baby. I started to shape her, her thin delicate form, her arms and legs, her head.

  ‘Like magic, eh?’ said Mina.

  ‘Like magic, yes.’

  'Sometimes I dream I make them so real they walk away or fly out of my hands. You use clay at school?’

  ‘We do sometimes. We did in one class I was in.’

  ‘Michael could come and work with us sometimes,’ said Mina.

  Mrs McKee looked at me. Her eyes were as piercing as Mina’s, but more gentle.

  ‘He could,’ she said.

  ‘I’ve told him what we think of schools,’ said Mina.

  Mrs McKee laughed.

  ‘And I’ve told him about William Blake.’

  I went on making the baby. I tried to form the features of her face. The clay started to dry out in the heat of my fingers. It started to crumble. I caught Mina’s eye. I tried to tell her with my eyes that we had to go.

  ‘Can I go for a walk with Michael? she said immediately.

  ‘Yes. Wrap your clay in plastic and you can get on with it when you come back.’

  **Twenty**

  I led her quickly along the front street, then I turned into the back lane. I led her past the high back garden walls.

  ‘Where we going?’ she said.

  ‘Not far.’

  I looked at her yellow top and blue jeans.

  ‘The place is filthy,’ I said. ‘And it’s dangerous.’

  She buttoned the blouse to her throat. She clenched her fists.

  ‘Good!’ she said. ‘Keep going, Michael!’

  I opened our back garden gate.

  ‘Here?’ she said.

  She stared at me.

  ‘Yes. Yes!’

  I stood at the garage door with her. She peered into the gloom. I picked up the beer and the torch.

  ‘We’ll need these,’ I said. I took the capsules from my pocket. ‘And these as well.’

  Her eyes narrowed and she looked right into me.

  ‘Trust me,’ I said.

  I hesitated.

  ‘It’s not just that it’s dangerous,’ I said. 'I’m worried that you won’t see what I think I see.’

  She took my hand and squeezed it.

  ‘I’ll see whatever’s there,’ she whispered. ‘Take me in.’

  I switched on the torch and stepped inside. Things scratched and scuttled across the floor. I felt Mina tremble. Her palms began to sweat.

  I held her hand tight.

  ‘It’s all right,’ I said. Just keep close to me.’

  We squeezed between the rubbish and the broken furniture. Cobwebs snapped on our clothes and skin. Dead bluebottles attached themselves to us. The ceiling creaked and dust fell from the rotten timbers. As we approached the tea chests I started to shake. Maybe Mina would see nothing. Maybe I’d been wrong all along. Maybe dreams and truth were just a useless muddle in my mind.

  I leaned forward, shone the light into the gap behind the tea chests.

  ‘Again?’ he squeaked.

  I heard Mina stifle a cry. I felt her hand stiffen. I pulled her closer.

  ‘It’s all right,’ I whispered.

  ‘I brought my friend,’ I said. ‘Like I said I would. This is Mina.’

  He turned his eyes towards her, then lowered them again.

  I showed him the brown ale.

  ‘I brought this as well.’

  He laughed but he didn’t smile.

  I squeezed through to him. I snapped the cap off the bottle with the opener on the knife and crouched beside him. He tipped his head back and let me pour some of the beer into his mouth. He swall

owed. Some of it trickled from his mouth on to his black suit.

  ‘Nectar,’ he sighed. ‘Drink of the gods.’

  He tipped his head back again, and I poured again.

  I looked back at Mina’s dark form looking down at us, her pale face, her mouth and eyes gaping in astonishment.

  ‘Who are you?’ she whispered.

  ‘Mr Had Enough Of You,’ he squeaked.

  ‘I saw a doctor,’ I said. ‘Not Doctor Death. One that could fix you.’

  ‘No doctors. Nobody. Nothing. Let me be.’

  ‘You’ll die. You’ll crumble away and die.’

  ‘Crumble crumble.’ He tipped his head back. ‘More beer.’

  I poured more beer.

  ‘I brought these as well,’ I said.

  I held a cod liver oil capsule out to him.

  ‘Some people swear by them,’ I said.

  He sniffed.

  ‘Stink of fish,’ he squeaked. ‘Slimy slithery swimming things.’

  There were tears in my eyes.

  ‘He just sits here,’ I said. ‘He doesn’t care. It’s like he’s waiting to die. I don’t know what to do.’

  `Do nothing,’ he squeaked.

  He closed his eyes, lowered his head.

  Mina came in beside us. She crouched, stared at his face as dry and pale as plaster, at the dead bluebottles and cobwebs, at the spiders and beetles that scuttled across him. She took the torch from me. She shone it on his thin body in the dark suit, on the long legs stretched out on the floor, on the swollen hands that rested at his side. She picked up one of the dark furry balls from beside him.

  ‘Who are you?’ she whispered.

  ‘Nobody.’

  She reached out and touched his cheek.

  ‘Dry and cold,’ she whispered. ‘How long have you been here?’

  ‘Long enough.’

  ‘Are you dead?’

  He groaned.

  ‘Kids’ questions. Always the same.’

  ‘Tell her things,’ I said. ‘She’s clever. She’ll know what to do.’

  He laughed but he didn’t smile.

  ‘Let me see her,’ he said.

  Mina turned the torch to her face, and it was brilliant white, with pitch dark gaps where her mouth and eyes were.

  ‘I’m called Mina,’ she said.

  She sighed.

  ‘I’m Mina,’ she said. ‘You’re…?’

  ‘You’re Mina,’ he said. ‘I’m sick to death.’

  She touched his hands. She lifted his filthy cuff and touched his scrawny twisted wrists.

  ‘Calcification,’ she said. ‘The process by which the bone hardens, becomes inflexible. The process by which the body turns to stone.’

  ‘Not as stupid as she looks,’ he squeaked.

  ‘It is linked to another process,’ she said, ‘by which the mind, too, becomes inflexible. It stops thinking and imagining. It becomes hard as bone. It is no longer a mind. It is a lump of bone wrapped in a wall of stone. This process is ossification.’

  He sighed.

  ‘More beer,’ he said.

  I poured more beer into his mouth.

  ‘Take her away,’ he whispered.

  The roof trembled in the breeze. Dust fell on us.

  Mina and I crouched close together, our knees almost resting on him. She twisted her face as she caught the stench of his breath. I took her hand and guided it to his shoulder blades. I pressed her fingertips against the bulge beneath his jacket. She leaned across him, felt his other shoulder blade. When she looked at me her eyes in the torchlight were shining bright.

  Her face was almost touching his. Their pale skin bloomed in the torchlight.

  ‘What are you?’ she whispered.

  No answer.

  He sat there with his head lowered, his eyes closed.

  ‘We can help you,’ she whispered.

  No answer.

  I felt the tears running from my eyes.

  ‘There’s somewhere we could take you,’ said Mina. ‘It’s safer there. Nobody would know. You could just sit there dying, too, if that’s really what you want.’

  Something brushed past us. I shone the torch down, saw Whisper entering the space behind the tea chests.

  ‘Whisper!’ said Mina.

  The cat moved to his side, pressed itself against his damaged hands. He sighed.

  ‘Smooth and soft,’ he whispered.

  His knuckles moved against the cat’s soft fur.

  ‘Sweet thing,’ he whispered.

  Whisper purred.

  The timbers creaked. Dust fell on us again.

  ‘Please let us take you somewhere else,’ I said.

  ‘More beer,’ he whispered.

  I held out a cod liver oil capsule.

  ‘Take one of these as well,’ I said.

  He tipped his head back. I poured the beer in. I dropped the capsule on to his pale tongue.

  He opened his eyes. He looked deep into Mina. She looked deep into him.

  ‘You must let us help you,’ she said.

  He was silent for a long time.

  ‘Do what you want,’ he sighed.

  **Twenty-one**

  We stood in the wilderness. Whisper sat beneath us. We picked the bluebottles and webs out of each other’s clothes and hair. Her eyes were burning bright.

  ‘He’s an extraordinary being,’ she said.

  The breeze blew and the garage creaked.

  ‘We’ll take him out tonight,’ she said.

  ‘At dawn,’ I said.

  ‘We’ll call each other. We’ll hoot like owls. We’ll make sure we wake.’

  We stared into each other.

  ‘An extraordinary being,’ she whispered.

  She opened her hand and showed me the dark ball of congealed skin and bone she had brought out with her.

  ‘What is it?’ I said.

  She bit her lip.

  ‘It can’t be what I think it is,’ she said. ‘It can’t be.’

  Dad came to the back window. He stood there watching us.

  ‘I’ll go back now,’ I said. ‘I’ll carry on doing the garden.’

  ‘I’ll go back to making the blackbird.’

  ‘I’ll see you at dawn.’

  ‘At dawn. I won’t sleep.’

  She squeezed my hand, slipped out through the gate with Whisper at her heels.

  I turned back into the wilderness. I waved at Dad. My heart was thundering. I knelt in the soil, wrenched at the weeds, sent black beetles scattering.

  ‘He won’t die,’ I whispered. ‘He won’t just die.’

  Later, Dad came out. We drank orange juice together and sat against the house wall.

  He grinned.

  ‘You like Mina, then,’ he said.

  I shrugged.

  ‘You do,’ he said.

  ‘She’s extraordinary,’ I said.

**Twenty-two**

  I was with the baby. We were tucked up together in the blackbird’s nest. Her body was covered in feathers and she was soft and warm. The blackbird was on the house roof; flapping its wings, squawking. Doctor MacNabola and Doctor Death were beneath us in the garden. They had a table filled with knives and scissors and saws. Doctor Death had a great syringe in his fist.

  ‘Bring her down!’ he yelled. ‘We’ll make her good as new!’

  The baby squeaked and squealed in fright. She stood at the edge of the nest, flapping her wings, trying for the first time to fly. I saw the great bare patches on her skin: she didn’t have enough feathers yet, her wings weren’t strong enough yet. I tried to reach for her but my arms were hard and stiff as stone.

  ‘Go on!’ the doctors yelled. They laughed. ‘Go on, baby! Fly!’

  Doctor MacNabola lifted a shining saw.

  She teetered on the brink.

  Then I heard the hooting of an owl. I opened my eyes. Pale light was glowing at my window. I looked down, saw Mina in the wilderness with her hands against her face.

  Hoot. Hoot hoot hoot.

; ‘I didn’t sleep all night,’ I said, once I’d tiptoed out to her. ‘Then at the very last minute when the night was ending I did.’

  ‘But you’re awake now?’ she said.

  ‘Yes.’

  ‘We’re not dreaming this?’

  ‘We’re not dreaming it.’

  ‘We’re not dreaming it together?

  ‘Even if we were we wouldn’t know.’

  The blackbird flew to the garage roof; began its morning song.

  ‘No time to waste,’ I said.

  We went to the door, stepped inside. We moved swiftly through the furniture. I shone the torch on his face.

  ‘You have to come with us,’ said Mina.

  He sighed, groaned.

  ‘I’m ill,’ he said.

  He didn’t look at us.

  ‘I’m sick to death,’ he said.

  We squeezed through the gap between the tea chests and crouched before him.

  ‘You have to come,’ she said again.

  ‘I’m weak as a baby,’ he said.

  ‘Babies aren’t weak,’ she whispered. ‘Have you seen a baby screaming for its food or struggling to crawl? Have you seen a blackbird chick daring its first flight?’

  She put her hand beneath his armpit. She tugged at him.

  ‘Please,’ she whispered.

  I held him, too. I tugged. We felt him beginning to relax, to give himself up to us.

  ‘I’m frightened,’ he squeaked.

  Mina bent close to him. She kissed his pale cheek.

  ‘Don’t be frightened. We’re taking you to safety.’

  His joints creaked as he struggled to rise from the floor. He whimpered in pain. He leaned against us. He tottered and wobbled as he rose. He was taller than us, tall as Dad. We felt how thin he was, how extraordinarily light he was. We had our arms around him. Our fingers touched behind his back. We explored the growths upon his shoulder blades. We felt them folded up like arms. We felt their soft coverings. We stared into each other’s eyes and didn’t dare to tell each other what we thought we felt.

  ‘Extraordinary, extraordinary being,’ whispered Mina.

  ‘Can you walk?’ I said.

  He whimpered, squeaked.

  ‘Move slowly,’ I said. ‘Hold on to us.’

  I moved backwards, between the tea chests. Mina supported him from behind. His feet dragged across the ruined floor. Things scuttled across us. The garage creaked. Dust fell. His breathing was hoarse, uneven. His body shuddered. He whimpered with pain. At the door he closed his eyes, turned his head away from the intensifying light. Then he turned again and faced the daylight. Through narrowed veiny eyes he looked out through the door. Mina and I gazed at his face, so pale and plaster dry. His skin was cracked and crazed. His black hair was a tangle of knots. Dust, cobwebs, bluebottles, spiders, beetles clung to him and fell from him. We saw for the first time that he wasn’t old. He seemed like a young man. Mina whispered it:

‘You’re beautiful!’

  I peeped out across the wilderness towards the house, saw nobody at the window.

  ‘Keep moving.’

  I opened the gate, drew him by the hand. He leaned on Mina, shuffled out after me into the lane.

  I closed the gate.

  Already traffic could be heard in the city, on nearby Crimdon Road. The birds in the gardens and on the rooftops yelled their songs. Whisper appeared at our side.

  ‘We’ll carry him,’ I said.

  ‘Yes,’ said Mina.

  I stood behind him and he leaned back into my arms. Mina took his feet.

  We caught our breath at our ability to do this thing, at the extraordinary lightness of our load. I closed my eyes for a moment. I imagined that this was a dream. I told myself that anything was possible in a dream. I felt the great bulges at his back bundled up against my arms. We started to move.

We walked through the back lane, turned into another back lane, hurried to the green gate of the boarded house. Mina opened it with her key. We went through. We hurried to the door with the red sign: DANGER. Mina opened it with her key. We moved through into the darkness, then into the first room and we laid him on the floor.

  We trembled and gasped. He whimpered with pain. We touched him gently.

  ‘You’re safe,’ said Mina.

  She took off her cardigan. She folded it and lay it beneath his head.

  ‘We’ll bring you more things to make you comfortable,’ she said.

  ‘We’ll make you well. Is there anything you would like?’

  I smiled.

  ‘27 and 53,’ I said.

‘27 and 53,’ he whimpered.

  ‘I’ll have to go back,’ I said. ‘My Dad’ll wake up soon.’

  ‘Me, too,’ said Mina.

  We smiled at each other. We looked at him, lying beside us.

  ‘We won’t be long,’ I said.

  Mina kissed his pale cracked cheek. She stretched her arms once more around his back. Her eyes burned with astonishment and joy.

  ‘Who are you?’ she whispered.

  He winced with pain.

  ‘My name is Skellig,’ he said.
 **Twenty-three**

Mrs Dando called that morning just after breakfast. She came on her bike on her way to school. She said my mates were looking forward to getting me back again.

  ‘They say you’re the best tackler in the school,’ she said. Dad showed her all the work we’d done on the house. We showed her the wilderness. She said everything would be bright and new for when the baby came home. She took her bag off her back. She took out a little cuddly black bear for Dad to give to the baby.

  ‘And there’s this for you,’ she laughed. ‘Sorry!’

  It was a folder of homework from Rasputin and Monkey: worksheets with gaps to fill in and questions to answer. There was a note from Miss Clarts: No real homework. Write a story. Get well soon! There were sheets of maths problems and a book called Julius And The Wilderness with a red sticker on the back.

  Dad laughed as we watched her cycle away.

  ‘No rest for the wicked, eh, son?’ he said. ‘I’ll do the decorating. You get on with your work.’

  I got a biro and took the work along the street to Mina’s front garden. She was sitting with her mum on the blanket undemeath the tree. Her mum was reading, Mina was scribbling fast in a black book. She grinned, and beckoned me over the wall when she saw me standing there.

  Mina looked at the worksheets.

  It is thought that Man is d\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ from the apes.

  This is the Theory E\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.

  This theory was developed by Charles D\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.

  There was sentence after sentence like that.

  Mina read the sentences out loud.

  She said, ‘Blank blank blank,’ in a singsong voice when she came to the dashes.

  She stopped after the first three sentences and just looked at me.

  ‘Is this really the kind of thing you do all day?’ she said.

  ‘Mina,’ said her mum.

  Mina giggled. She flicked through the book. It was about a boy who tells magical tales that turn out to be true.

  ‘Yeah, looks good,’ she said. ‘But what’s the red sticker for?’

  ‘It’s for confident readers,’ I said. ‘It’s to do with reading age.’

  ‘And what if other readers want to read it?’

  ‘Mina,’ said her mum.

  ‘And where would William Blake fit in?’ said Mina.

  ‘ “Tyger! Tyger! burning bright/In the forests of the night”. Is that for the best readers or the worst readers? Does that need a good reading age?

  I stared back at her. I didn’t know what to say. I wanted to get back over the wall and go home again.

  ‘And if it was for the worst readers would the best readers not bother with it because it would be too stupid for them? she said.

  ‘Mina,’ said her mum. She was smiling gently at me. ‘Take no notice,’ she said. ‘She’s a madam sometimes.’

  ‘Well,’ said Mina.

  She went back to scribbling in the black book again.

  She looked up at me.

  ‘Go on, then,’ she said. ‘Do your homework, like a good schoolboy.’

  Her mum smiled again.

  ‘I’ll get on inside,’ she said. ‘You tell her to shut up if she starts getting at you again. OK?

  ‘OK,’ I said.

  After she’d gone we said nothing for ages. I pretended to read Julius And The Wilderness, but it was like the words were dead and meaningless.

  ‘What you writing? I said at last.

  ‘My diary. About me and you and Skellig,’ she said.

  She didn’t look up.

  ‘What if somebody reads it? I said.

  ‘Why would they read it? They know it’s mine and it’s private.’

  She scribbled again.

  I thought about our diaries at school. We filled them in every week. Every so often, Miss Clarts checked that they were neat and the punctuation was right and the spellings were right. She gave us marks for them, just like we got marks for attendance and punctuality and attitude and everything else we did. I said nothing about this to Mina. I went on pretending to read the book. I felt tears in my eyes. That made me think about the baby and doing that just made the tears worse.

  ‘I’m sorry,’ said Mina. ‘I really am. One of the things we hate about schools is the sarcasm that’s in them. And I’m being sarcastic.’

  She squeezed my hand.

  ‘It’s so exciting,’ she whispered. ‘You, me, Skellig. We’ll have to go to him. He’ll be waiting for us. What shall we take for him?’