

Four

I hardly slept that night. Every time I did drop off I saw him coming out of the garage door and coming through the wilderness to the house. I saw him in my bedroom. I saw him come right to the bed. He stood there all dusty and white with the dead bluebottles all over him.

'What do you want?' he whispered. 'I said, what do you want?'

I told myself I was stupid. I'd never seen him at all. That had all been part of a dream as well. I lay there in the dark. I heard Dad snoring and when I listened hard I could hear the baby breathing. Her breathing was cracked and hissy. In the middle of the night when it was pitch black I dropped off again but she started bawling. I heard Mum getting up to feed her. I heard Mum's voice cooing and comforting. Then there was just silence again, and Dad snoring again. I listened hard for the baby again and I couldn't hear her.

It was already getting light when I got up and tiptoed into their room. Her cot was beside their bed. They were lying fast asleep with their arms around each other. I looked down

at the baby. I slipped my hand under the covers and touched her. I could feel her heart beating fast. I could feel the thin rattle of her breath, and her chest rising and falling. I felt how hot it was in there, how soft her bones were, how tiny she was. There was a dribble of spit and milk on her neck. I wondered if she was going to die. They'd been scared about that in the hospital. Before they let her come home she'd been in a glass case with tubes and wires sticking in her and we'd stood around staring in like she was in a fish tank.

I took my hand away and tucked the covers around her again. Her face was dead white and her hair was dead black. They'd told me I had to keep praying for her but I didn't know what to pray.

'Hurry up and get strong if you're going to,' I whispered. Mum half woke up and saw me there.

'What d'you want, love?' she whispered.

She stretched her hand out of the bed towards me.

'Nothing,' I whispered, and tiptoed back to my room.

I looked down into the wilderness. There was a blackbird singing away on the garage roof. I thought of him lying behind the tea chests with the cobwebs in his hair. What was he doing there?

Five

I asked them at breakfast what was going to happen to the garage now.

'When they coming to clear it out?' I said.

Mum clicked her tongue and sighed and looked up at the ceiling.

'When we can get somebody to come,' said Dad. 'It's not important, son. Not now.'

'OK,' I said.

He was going to be off work today so he could get on with the house. Mum was taking the baby for more check-ups at the hospital.

'Should I stay off so I can help?' I said.

'Yes,' he said. 'You can take Ernie's toilet out and scrub the floorboards round it.'

'I'll go to school,' I said.

And I shoved my packed lunch into my sack and headed out.

Before we moved, they asked me if I wanted to move school

as well, but I didn't. I wanted to stay at Kenny Street High with Leakey and Coot. I didn't mind that I'd have to get the bus through town. That morning I told myself that it gave me time to think about what was going on. I tried to think about it but I couldn't think. I watched the people getting on and off. I looked at them reading their papers or picking their nails or looking dreamily out of the windows. I thought how you could never tell just by looking at them what they were thinking or what was happening in their lives. Even when you got daft people or drunk people on buses, people that went on stupid and shouted rubbish or tried to tell you all about themselves, you could never really tell about them either.

I wanted to stand up and say, 'There's a man in our garage and my sister is ill and it's the first day I've travelled from the new house to the old school.'

But I didn't. I just went on looking at all the faces and swinging back and forward when the bus swung round corners. I knew if somebody looked at me, they'd know nothing about me, either.

It was strange being at school again. Loads had happened to me, but school stayed just the same. Rasputin still asked us to lift up our hearts and voices and sing out loud in assembly. The Yeti yelled at us to keep to the left in the corridors. Monkey Mitford went red in the face and stamped his feet when we didn't know our fractions. Miss Clarts got tears in her eyes when she told us the story of Icarus, how his wings had melted when he flew too close to the sun, and how he

had dropped like a stone past his father Daedelus into the sea. At lunchtime, Leakey and Coot argued for ages about whether a shot had gone over the line.

I couldn't be bothered with it all.

I went to the fence at the edge of the field and stared over the town towards where I lived now.

While I was standing there, Mrs Dando, one of the auxiliaries, came over to me. She'd known my parents for years.

'You OK, Michael?' she said.

'Fine.'

'And the baby?'

'Fine, too.'

'Not footballing today?'

I shook my head.

'Tell your parents I was asking,' she said.

She took a fruit gum out of her pocket and held it out to me. A fruit gum. It was what she gave the new kids when they were sad or something.

'Just for you,' she whispered, and she winked.

'No,' I said. 'No, thanks.'

And I ran back and did a brilliant sliding tackle on Coot.

All day I wondered about telling somebody what I'd seen, but I told nobody. I said to myself it had just been a dream. It must have been.