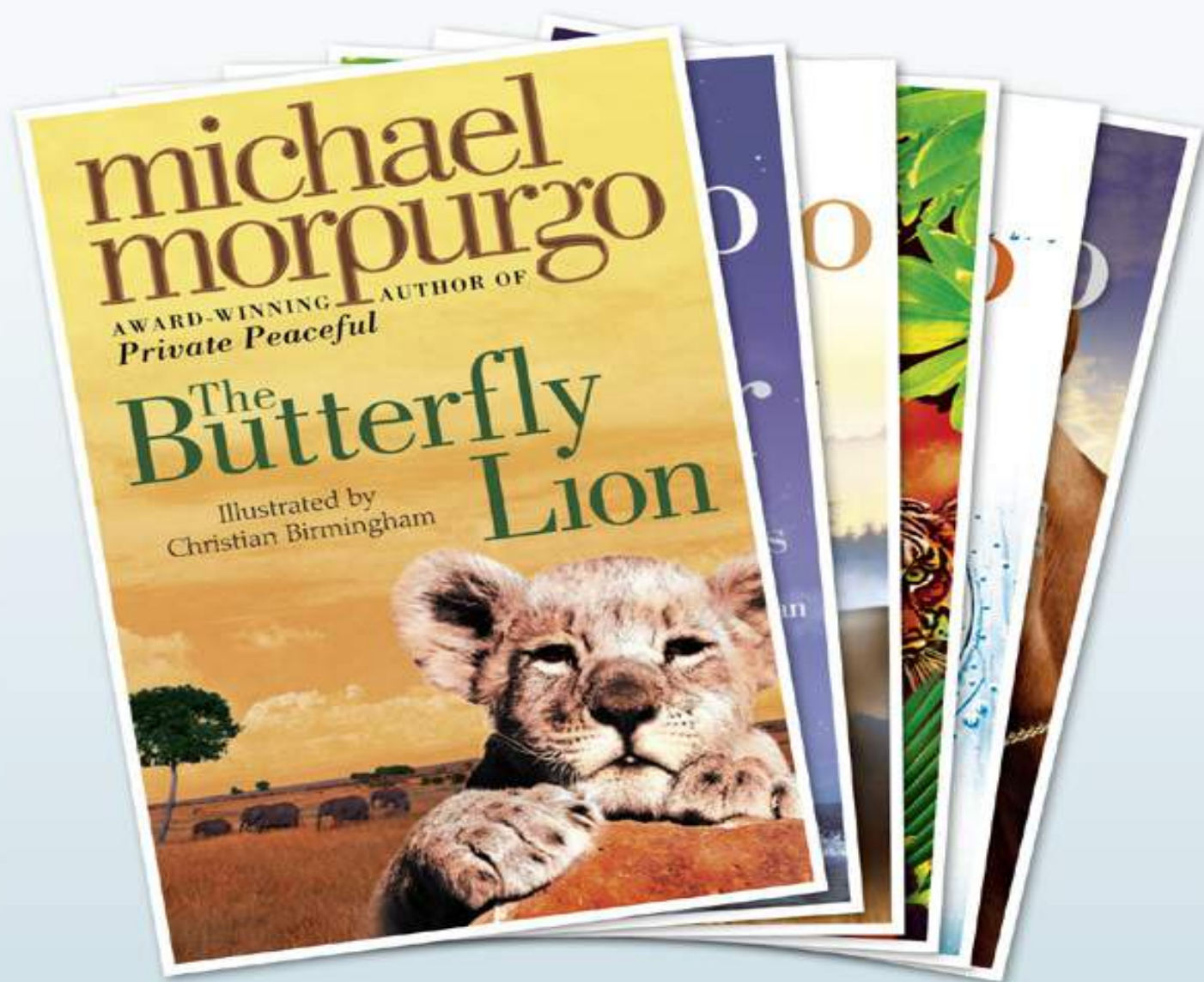


michael morpurgo

CLASSIC COLLECTION



6 BOOK COLLECTION

michael morpurgo

THE
BUTTERFLY
LION

[👑]**KASPAR** PRINCE
OF CATS

Born to Run

RUNNING WILD

*Alone on a Wide
Wide Sea*

Farm Boy



HarperCollins *Children's Books*

Contents

The Butterfly Lion
Kaspar - Prince of Cats
Born to Run
Running Wild
Alone on a Wide Wide Sea
Farm Boy

About the Author
Also by Michael Morpurgo
Copyright
About the Publisher

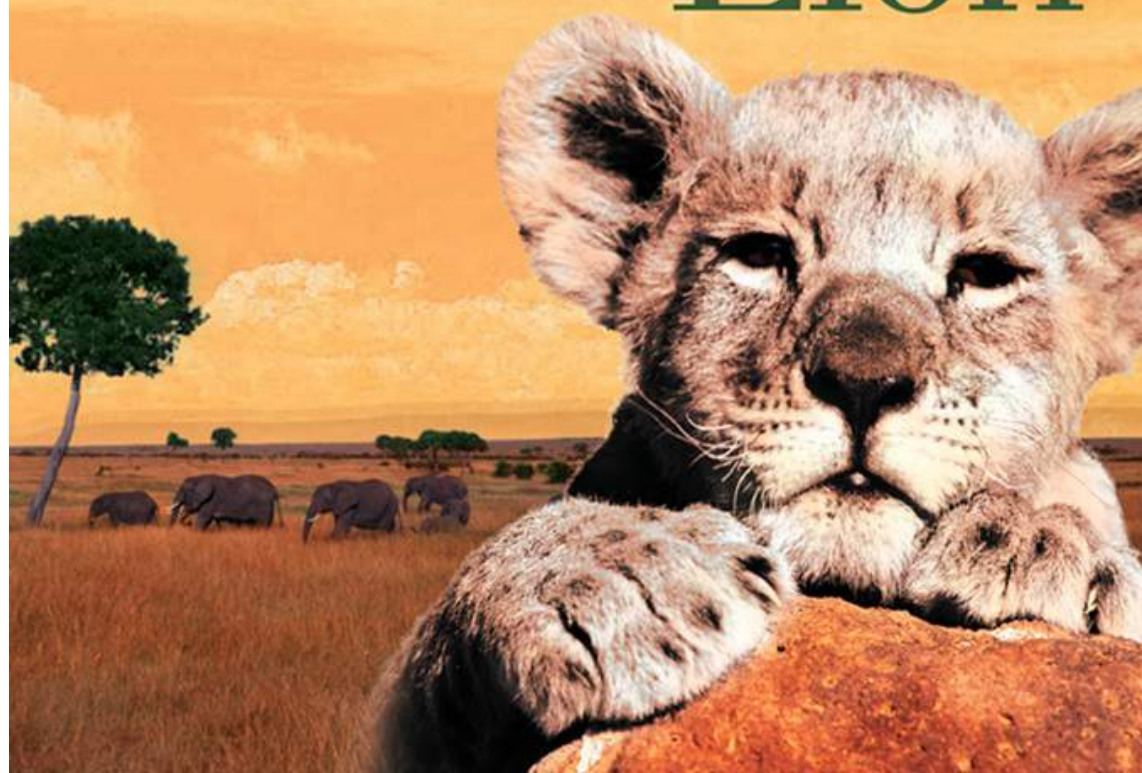
michael
morpurgo

AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR OF

Private Peaceful

The
Butterfly
Lion

Illustrated by
Christian Birmingham



michael morpurgo

THE
BUTTERFLY
LION



Illustrated by
CHRISTIAN BIRMINGHAM



HarperCollins *Children's Books*

For Virginia McKenna

Table of Contents

Dedication

Preface

Chilblains and Semolina Pudding

Strange Meeting

Timbavati

Bertie and the Lion

Running Free

The Frenchman

Strawbridge

And All's Well

A Lot of Old Codswallop

The White Prince

A Miracle, A Miracle!

The Butterfly Lion

And the Lion Shall Lie Down with the Lamb

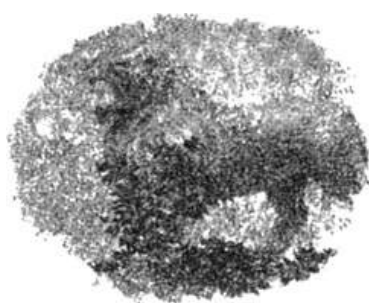
Adonis Blues

Preface

The Butterfly Lion grew from several magical roots: the memories of a small boy who tried to run away from school a long time ago; a book about a pride of white lions discovered by Chris McBride; a chance meeting in a lift with Virginia McKenna, actress and champion of lions and all creatures born free; a true story of a soldier of the First World War who rescued some circus animals in France from certain death; and the sighting from a train of a white horse carved out on a chalky hillside near Westbury in Wiltshire.

To Chris McBride, to Virginia McKenna and to Gina Pollinger – many, many thanks. And to you the reader – enjoy it!

MICHAEL MORPURGO
February 1996



Chilblains and Semolina Pudding

Butterflies live only short lives. They flower and flutter for just a few glorious weeks, and then they die. To see them, you have to be in the right place at the right time. And that's how it was when I saw the butterfly lion – I happened to be in just the right place, at just the right time. I didn't dream him. I didn't dream any of it. I saw him, blue and shimmering in the sun, one afternoon in June when I was young. A long time ago. But I don't forget. I mustn't forget. I promised them I wouldn't.

I was ten, and away at boarding school in deepest Wiltshire. I was far from home and I didn't want to be. It was a diet of Latin and stew and rugby and detentions and cross-country runs and chilblains and marks and squeaky beds and semolina pudding. And then there was Basher Beaumont who terrorised and tormented me, so that I lived every waking moment of my life in dread of him. I had often thought of running away, but only once ever plucked up the courage to do it.

I was homesick after a letter from my mother. Basher Beaumont had cornered me in the bootroom and smeared black shoe-polish in my hair. I had done badly in a spelling test, and Mr Carter had stood me in the corner with a book on my head all through the lesson – his favourite torture. I was more miserable than I had ever been before. I picked at the plaster in the wall, and determined there and then that I would run away.

I took off the next Sunday afternoon. With any luck I wouldn't be missed till supper, and by that time I'd be home, home and free. I climbed the fence at the bottom of the school park, behind the trees where I couldn't be seen. Then I ran for it. I ran as if bloodhounds were after me, not stopping till I was through Innocents Breach and out onto the road beyond. I had my escape all planned. I would walk to the station – it was only five miles or so – and catch the train to London. Then I'd take the underground home. I'd just walk in and tell them that I was never, ever going back.

There wasn't much traffic, but all the same I turned up the collar of my raincoat so that no one could catch a glimpse of my uniform. It was beginning to rain now, those heavy hard drops that mean there's more of the same on the way.

I crossed the road, and ran along the wide grass verge under the shelter of the trees.



Beyond the grass verge was a high brick wall, much of it covered in ivy. It stretched away into the distance, continuous as far as the eye could see, except for a massive arched gateway at the bend of the road. A great stone lion bestrode the gateway. As I came closer I could see he was roaring in the rain, his lip curled, his teeth bared. I stopped and stared up at him for a moment. That was when I heard a car slowing down behind me. I did not think twice. I pushed open the iron gate, darted through, and flattened myself behind the stone pillar. I watched the car until it disappeared round the bend.

To be caught would mean a caning, four strokes, maybe six, across the back of the knees. Worse, I would be back at school, back to detentions, back to

Basher Beaumont. To go along the road was dangerous, too dangerous. I would try to cut across country to the station. It would be longer that way, but far safer.



Strange Meeting

I was still deciding which direction to take when I heard a voice from behind me.

“Who are you? What do you want?”

I turned.

“Who are you?” she asked again. The old lady who stood before me was no bigger than I was. She scrutinised me from under the shadow of her dripping straw hat. She had piercing dark eyes that I did not want to look into.

“I didn’t think it would rain,” she said, her voice gentler. “Lost, are you?”

I said nothing. She had a dog on a leash at her side, a big dog. There was an ominous growl in his throat, and his hackles were up all along his back.

She smiled. “The dog says you’re on private property,” she went on, pointing her stick at me accusingly. She edged aside my raincoat with the end of her stick. “Run away from that school, did you? Well, if it’s anything like it used to be, I can’t say I blame you. But we can’t just stand here in the rain, can we? You’d better come inside. We’ll give him some tea, shall we, Jack? Don’t you worry about Jack. He’s all bark and no bite.” Looking at Jack, I found that hard to believe.



I don't know why, but I never for one moment thought of running off. I often wondered later why I went with her so readily. I think it was because she expected me to, willed me to somehow. I followed the old lady and her dog up to the house, which was huge, as huge as my school. It looked as if it had grown out of the ground. There was hardly a brick or a stone or a tile to be seen. The entire building was smothered in red creeper, and there were a dozen ivy-clad chimneys sprouting skywards from the roof.

We sat down close to the stove in a vast vaulted kitchen. "The kitchen's always the warmest place," she said, opening the oven door. "We'll have you dry in no time. Scones?" she went on, bending down with some difficulty and reaching inside. "I always have scones on a Sunday. And tea to wash it down. All right for you?" She went on chatting away as she busied herself with the kettle and the teapot. The dog eyed me all the while from his basket, unblinking. "I was just thinking" she said "You'll be the first young man I've had inside

I was just thinking," she said. "You'll be the first young man I've had inside this house since Bertie." She was silent for a while.

The smell of the scones wafted through the kitchen.



I ate three before I even touched my tea. They were sweet and crumbly, and succulent with melting butter. She talked on merrily again, to me, to the dog – I wasn't sure which. I wasn't really listening. I was looking out of the window behind her. The sun was bursting through the clouds and lighting the hillside. A perfect rainbow arched through the sky. But miraculous though it was, it wasn't the rainbow that fascinated me. Somehow, the clouds were casting a strange shadow over the hillside, a shadow the shape of a lion, roaring like the one over the archway

"Sun's come out," said the old lady, offering me another scone. I took it eagerly. "Always does, you know. It may be difficult to remember sometimes, but there's always sun behind the clouds, and the clouds do go in the end. Honestly."

She watched me eat, a smile on her face that warmed me to the bone.

"Don't think I want you to go, because I don't. Nice to see a boy eat so well, nice to have the company; but all the same, I'd better get you back to school after you've had your tea, hadn't I? You'll only be in trouble otherwise. Mustn't run off, you know. You've got to stick it out, see things through, do what's got to be done, no matter what." She was looking out of the window as she spoke.

“My Bertie taught me that, bless him, or maybe I taught him. I can’t remember now.” And she went on talking and talking, but my mind was elsewhere again.

The lion on the hillside was still there, but now he was blue and shimmering in the sunlight. It was as if he were breathing, as if he were alive. It wasn’t a shadow any more. No shadow is blue. “No, you’re not seeing things,” the old lady whispered. “It’s not magic. He’s real enough. He’s our lion, Bertie’s and mine. He’s our butterfly lion.”



“What d’you mean?” I asked.

She looked at me long and hard. “I’ll tell you if you like,” she said. “Would you like to know? Would you really like to know?”

I nodded.

“Have another scone first and another cup of tea. Then I’ll take you to Africa where our lion came from, where my Bertie came from too. Bit of a story, I can tell you. You ever been to Africa?”

“No,” I replied.

“Well, you’re going,” she said. “We’re both going.”

Suddenly I wasn’t hungry any more. All I wanted now was to hear her story. She sat back in her chair, gazing out of the window. She told it slowly, thinking before each sentence; and all the while she never took her eyes off the butterfly lion. And neither did I.



Timbavati

Bertie was born in South Africa, in a remote farmhouse near a place called Timbavati. It was shortly after Bertie first started to walk that his mother and father decided a fence must be put around the farmhouse to make a compound where Bertie could play in safety. It wouldn't keep the snakes out – nothing could do that – but at least Bertie would be safe now from the leopards, and the lions and the spotted hyenas. Enclosed within the compound were the lawn and gardens at the front of the house, and the stables and barns at the back – all the room a child would need or want, you might think. But not Bertie.

The farm stretched as far as the eye could see in all directions, twenty thousand acres of veld. Bertie's father farmed cattle, but times were hard. The rains had failed too often, and many of the rivers and waterholes had all but dried up. With fewer wildebeest and impala to prey on, the lions and leopards would sneak up on the cattle whenever they could. So Bertie's father was more often than not away from home with his men, guarding the cattle. Every time he left, he'd say the same thing: "Don't you ever open that gate, Bertie, you hear me? There's lions out there, leopards, elephants, hyenas. You stay put, you hear?" Bertie would stand at the fence and watch him ride out, and he would be left behind with his mother, who was also his teacher. There were no schools for a hundred miles. And his mother too was always warning him to stay inside the fence. "Look what happened in *Peter and the Wolf*," she would say.

His mother was often sick with malaria, and even when she wasn't sick she would be listless and sad. There were good days, days when she would play the piano for him and play hide-and-seek around the compound. Or he'd sit on her lap on the sofa out on the veranda and she'd just talk and talk, all about her home in England, about how much she hated the wildness and the loneliness of Africa, and about how Bertie was everything to her. But they were rare days. Every morning he'd climb into her bed and snuggle up to her, hoping against hope that today she'd be well and happy; but so often she wasn't, and Bertie would be left on his own again, to his own devices.

There was a waterhole downhill from the farmhouse, and some distance away. That waterhole, when there was water in it, became Bertie's whole world. He would spend hours in the dusty compound, his hands gripping the fence, looking out at the wonders of the veld, at the giraffes drinking, spread-legged, at the waterhole; at the browsing impala, tails twitching, alert; at the warthogs snorting and snuffling under the shade of the shingayi trees; at the baboons, the zebras, the wildebeests, and the elephants bathing in the mud. But the moment Bertie always longed for was when a pride of lions came padding out of the veld. The impala were the first to spring away, then the zebra would panic and gallop off. Within seconds the lions would have the waterhole to themselves, and they would crouch to drink.



From the safe haven of the compound Bertie looked and learned as he grew up. By now, he could climb the tree by the farmhouse, and sit high in its branches. He could see better from up there. He would wait for his lions for hours on end. He got to know the life of the waterhole so well that he could feel the lions were out there, even before he saw them.

Bertie had no friends to play with, but he always said he was never lonely as a child. At night he loved reading his books and losing himself in the stories, and by day his heart was out in the veld with the animals. That was where he yearned to be. Whenever his mother was well enough, he would beg her to take him outside the compound, but her answer was always the same.

"I can't, Bertie. Your father has forbidden it," she'd say. And that was that.

The men would come home with their stories of the veld, of the family of cheetahs sitting like sentinels on their kopje, of the leopard they had spotted high in his tree larder watching over his kill, of the hyenas they had driven off, of the herd of elephants which had stampeded the cattle. And Bertie would listen wide-

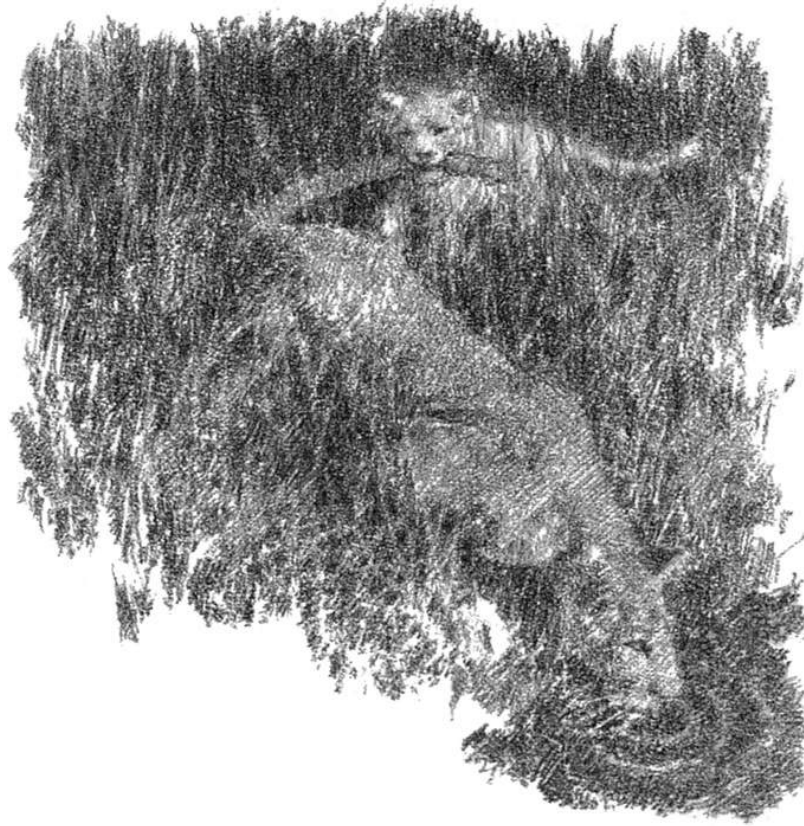
eyed, agog. Again and again he asked his father if he could go with him to help guard the cattle. His father just laughed, patted his head, and said it was man's work. He did teach Bertie how to ride, and how to shoot too, but always within the confines of the compound.

Week in, week out, Bertie had to stay behind his fence. He made up his mind though, that if no one would take him out into the veld, then one day he would go by himself. But something always held him back. Perhaps it was one of those tales he'd been told of black mamba snakes whose bite would kill you within ten minutes, of hyenas whose jaws would crunch you to bits, of vultures who would finish off anything that was left so that no one would ever find even the bits. For the time being he stayed behind the fence. But the more he grew up, the more his compound became a prison to him.

One evening – Bertie must have been about six years old by now – he was sitting high up in the branches of his tree, hoping against hope the lions might come down for their sunset drink as they often did. He was thinking of giving up, for it would soon be too dark to see much now, when he saw a solitary lioness come down to the waterhole. Then he saw that she was not alone. Behind her, and on unsteady legs, came what looked like a lion cub – but it was white, glowing white in the gathering gloom of dusk.



While the lioness drank, the cub played at catching her tail; and then, when she had had her fill, the two of them slipped away into the long grass and were gone.



Bertie ran inside, screaming with excitement. He had to tell someone, anyone. He found his father working at his desk.

“Impossible,” said his father. “You’re seeing things that aren’t there, or you’re telling fibs – one of the two.”

“I saw him. I promise,” Bertie insisted. But his father would have none of it, and sent him to his room for arguing.

His mother came to see him later. “Anyone can make a mistake, Bertie dear,” she said. “It must have been the sunset. It plays tricks with your eyes sometimes. There’s no such thing as a white lion.”

The next evening Bertie watched again at the fence, but the white lion cub and the lioness did not come, nor did they the next evening, nor the next. Bertie began to think he must have been dreaming it.

A week or more passed, and there had been only a few zebras and wildebeest down at the waterhole. Bertie was already upstairs in his bed when he heard his

father riding into the compound, and then the stamp of his heavy boots on the veranda.

“We got her! We got her!” he was saying. “Huge lioness, massive she was. She’s taken half a dozen of my best cattle in the last two weeks. Well, she won’t be taking any more.”

Bertie’s heart stopped. In that one terrible moment he knew which lioness his father was talking about. There could be no doubt about it. His white lion cub had been orphaned.

“But what if,” Bertie’s mother was saying, “what if she had young ones to feed? Perhaps they were starving.”

“So would we be if we let it go on. We had to shoot her,” his father retorted.

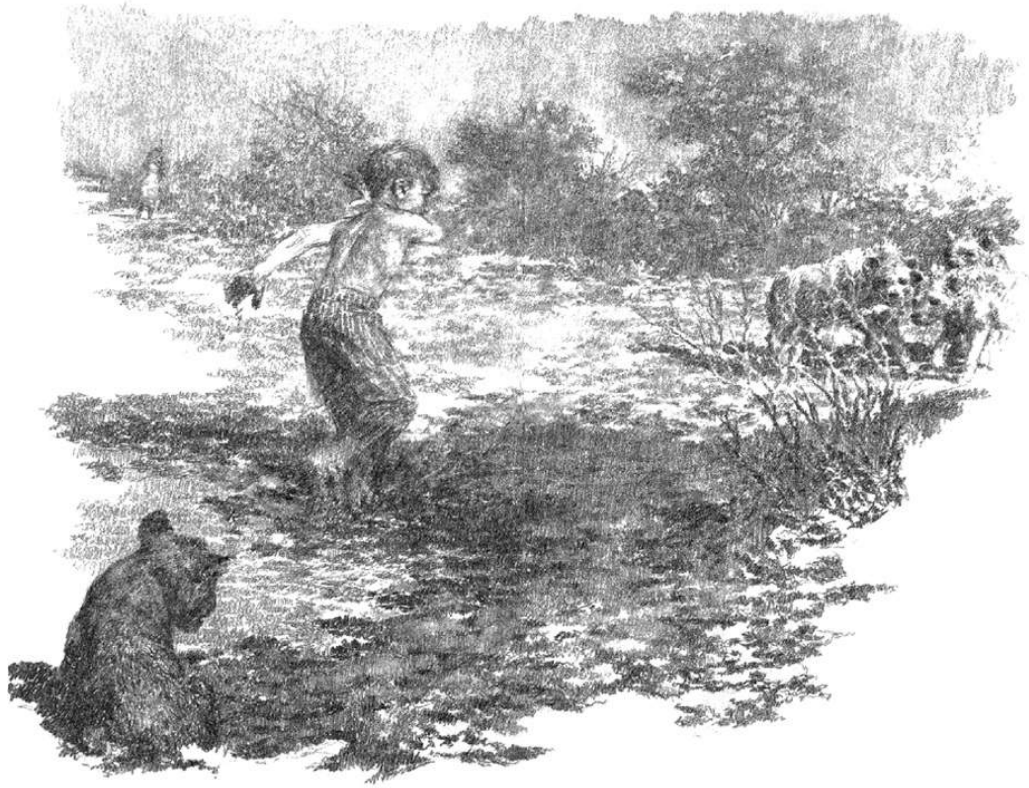
Bertie lay there all night listening to the plaintive roaring echoing through the veld, as if every lion in Africa was sounding a lament. He turned his face into his pillow and could think of nothing but the orphaned white cub, and he promised himself there and then that if ever the cub came down to the waterhole looking for his dead mother, then he would do what he had never dared to do, he would open the gate and go out and bring him home. He would not let him die out there all alone. But no lion cub came to his waterhole. All day, every day, he waited for him to come, but he never came.



Bertie and the Lion

One morning, a week or so later, Bertie was woken by a chorus of urgent neighing. He jumped out of his bed and ran to the window. A herd of zebras was scattering away from the waterhole, chased by a couple of hyenas. Then he saw more hyenas, three of them, standing stock still, noses pointing, eyes fixed on the waterhole. It was only now that Bertie saw the lion cub. But this one wasn't white at all. He was covered in mud, with his back to the waterhole, and he was waving a pathetic paw at the hyenas who were beginning to circle. The lion cub had nowhere to run to, and the hyenas were sidling ever closer.

Bertie was downstairs in a flash, leaping off the veranda and racing barefoot across the compound, shouting at the top of his voice. He threw open the gate and charged down the hill towards the waterhole, yelling and screaming and waving his arms like a wild thing. Startled at this sudden intrusion, the hyenas turned tail and ran, but not far. Once within range Bertie hurled a broadside of pebbles at them, and they ran off again, but again not far. Then he was at the waterhole and between the lion cub and the hyenas, shouting at them to go away. They didn't. They stood and watched, uncertain for a while. Then they began to circle again, closer, closer...



That was when the shot rang out. The hyenas bolted into the long grass, and were gone. When Bertie turned round he saw his mother in her nightgown, rifle in hand, running towards him down the hill. He had never seen her run before. Between them they gathered up the mud-matted cub and brought him home. He was too weak to struggle, though he tried. As soon as they had given him some warm milk, they dunked him in the bath to wash him. As the first of the mud came off, Bertie saw he was white underneath.

“You see!” he cried triumphantly. “He *is* white! He *is*. I told you, didn’t I? He’s my white lion!” His mother still could not bring herself to believe it. Five baths later, she had to.

They sat him down by the stove in a washing basket and fed him again, all the milk he could drink, and he drank the lot. Then he lay down and slept.



He was still asleep when Bertie's father got back at lunch time. They told him how it had all happened.

"Please, Father. I want to keep him," Bertie said.

"And so do I," said his mother. "We both do." And she spoke as Bertie had never heard her speak before, her voice strong, determined.

Bertie's father didn't seem to know quite how to reply. He just said: "We'll talk about it later," and then he walked out.

They did talk about it later when Bertie was supposed to be in bed. He wasn't, though. He heard them arguing. He was outside the sitting-room door, watching, listening. His father was pacing up and down.

"He'll grow up, you know," he was saying. "You can't keep a grown lion, you know that."

"And *you* know we can't just throw him to the hyenas," replied his mother. "He needs us, and maybe we need him. He'll be someone for Bertie to play with for a while." And then she added sadly: "After all, it's not as if he's going to have any brothers and sisters, is it?"

At this, Bertie's father went over to her and kissed her gently on the forehead. It was the only time Bertie had ever seen him kiss her.



“All right then,” he said. “All right. You can keep your lion.”

So the white lion cub came to live amongst them in the farmhouse. He slept at the end of Bertie’s bed. Wherever Bertie went, the lion cub went too – even to the bathroom, where he would watch Bertie have his bath and lick his legs dry afterwards. They were never apart. It was Bertie who saw to the feeding – milk four times a day from one of his father’s beer bottles – until later on when the lion cub lapped from a soup bowl. There was impala meat whenever he wanted it, and as he grew – and he grew fast – he wanted more and more of it.

For the first time in his life Bertie was totally happy. The lion cub was all the brothers and sisters he could ever want, all the friends he could ever need. The two of them would sit side by side on the sofa out on the veranda and watch the great red sun go down over Africa, and Bertie would read him *Peter and the Wolf*, and at the end he would always promise him that he would never let him go off to a zoo and live behind bars like the wolf in the story. And the lion cub would look up at Bertie with his trusting amber eyes.

“Why don’t you give him a name?” his mother asked one day.

“Because he doesn’t need one,” replied Bertie. “He’s a lion, not a person. Lions don’t need names.”

Bertie’s mother was always wonderfully patient with the lion, no matter how much mess he made, how many cushions he pounced on and ripped apart, no matter how much crockery he smashed. None of it seemed to upset her. And

strangely, she was hardly ever ill these days. There was a spring to her step, and her laughter pealed around the house. His father was less happy about it. "Lions," he'd mutter on, "should not live in houses. You should keep him outside in the compound." But they never did. For both mother and son, the lion had brought new life to their days, life and laughter.



Running Free

It was the best year of Bertie's young life. But when it ended, it ended more painfully than he could ever have imagined. He'd always known that one day when he was older he would have to go away to school, but he had thought and hoped it would not be for a long time yet. He'd simply put it out of his mind.

His father had just returned home from Johannesburg after his yearly business trip. He broke the news at supper that first evening. Bertie knew there was something in the wind. His mother had been sad again in recent days, not sick, just strangely sad. She wouldn't look him in the eye and she winced whenever she tried to smile at him. The lion had just lain down beside him, his head warm on Bertie's feet, when his father cleared his throat and began. It was going to be a lecture. Bertie had had them before often enough, about manners, about being truthful, about the dangers of leaving the compound.

"You'll soon be eight, Bertie," he said. "And your mother and I have been doing some thinking. A boy needs a proper education, a good school. Well, we've found just the right place for you, a school near Salisbury in England. Your Uncle George and Aunt Melanie live nearby and have promised to look after you in the holidays, and to visit you from time to time. They'll be father and mother to you for a while. You'll get on with them well enough, I'm sure you will. They are fine, good people. So you'll be off on the ship to England in July. Your mother will accompany you. She will spend the summer with you in Salisbury and after she has taken you to your school in September, she'll then return here to the farm. It's all arranged."

As his heart filled with a terrible dread, all Bertie could think of was his white lion. "But the lion," he cried, "what about the lion?"

"I'm afraid there's something else I have to tell you," his father said. Looking across at Bertie's mother, he took a deep breath. And then he told him. He told him he had met a man whilst he was in Johannesburg, a Frenchman, a circus owner from France. He was over in Africa looking for lions and elephants to buy for his circus. He liked them young, very young, a year or less, so that he could

train them up without too much trouble. Besides, they were easier and cheaper to transport when they were young. He would be coming out to the farm in a few days' time to see the white lion for himself. If he liked what he saw, he would pay good money and take him away

It was the only time in his life Bertie had ever shouted at his father. "No! No, you can't!"



It was rage that wrung the hot tears from him, but they soon gave way to silent tears of sadness and loss. There was no comforting him, but his mother tried all the same.

"We can't keep him here for ever, Bertie," she said. "We always knew that, didn't we? And you've seen how he stands by the fence gazing out into the veld. You've seen him pacing up and down. But we can't just let him out. He'd be all on his own, no mother to protect him. He couldn't cope. He'd be dead in weeks. You know he would."

"But you can't send him to a circus! You can't!" said Bertie. "He'll be shut up behind bars. I promised him he never would be. And they'll point at him. They'll laugh at him. He'd rather die. Any animal would." But he knew as he looked across the table at them that it was hopeless, that their minds were quite made up.

For Bertie the betrayal was total. That night he made up his mind what had to

be done. He waited until he heard his father's deep breathing next door. Then, with his white lion at his heels, he crept downstairs in his pyjamas, took down his father's rifle from the rack and stepped out into the night. The compound gate yawned open noisily when he pushed it, but then they were out, out and running free. Bertie had no thought of the dangers around him, only that he must get as far from home as he could before he did it.

The lion padded along beside him, stopping every now and again to sniff the air. A clump of trees became a herd of elephants wandering towards them out of the dawn. Bertie ran for it. He knew how elephants hated lions. He ran and ran till his legs could run no more. As the sun came up over the veld he climbed to the top of a kopje and sat down, his arm round the lion's neck. The time had come.

"Be wild now," he whispered. "You've got to be wild. Don't come home. Don't ever come home. They'll put you behind bars. You hear what I'm saying? All my life I'll think of you, I promise I will. I won't ever forget you." And he buried his head in the lion's neck and heard the greeting groan from deep inside him. He stood up. "I'm going now," he said. "Don't follow me. Please don't follow me." And Bertie clambered down off the kopje and walked away.



When he looked back, the lion was still sitting there watching him; but then he stood up, yawned, stretched, licked his lips and sprang down after him. Bertie shouted at him, but he kept coming. He threw sticks. He threw stones. Nothing worked. The lion would stop, but then as soon as Bertie walked on, he simply followed at a safe distance.



“Go back!” Bertie yelled, “you stupid, stupid lion! I hate you! I hate you! Go back!” But the lion kept loping after him whatever he did, whatever he said.

There was only one thing for it. He didn’t want to do it, but he had to. With tears filling his eyes and his mouth, he lifted the rifle to his shoulder and fired over the lion’s head. At once the lion turned tail and scampered away through the veld. Bertie fired again. He watched till he could see him no more, and then turned for home. He knew he’d have to face what was coming to him. Maybe his father would strap him – he’d threatened it often enough – but Bertie didn’t mind. His lion would have his chance for freedom, maybe not much of one. Anything was better than the bars and whips of a circus.



The Frenchman

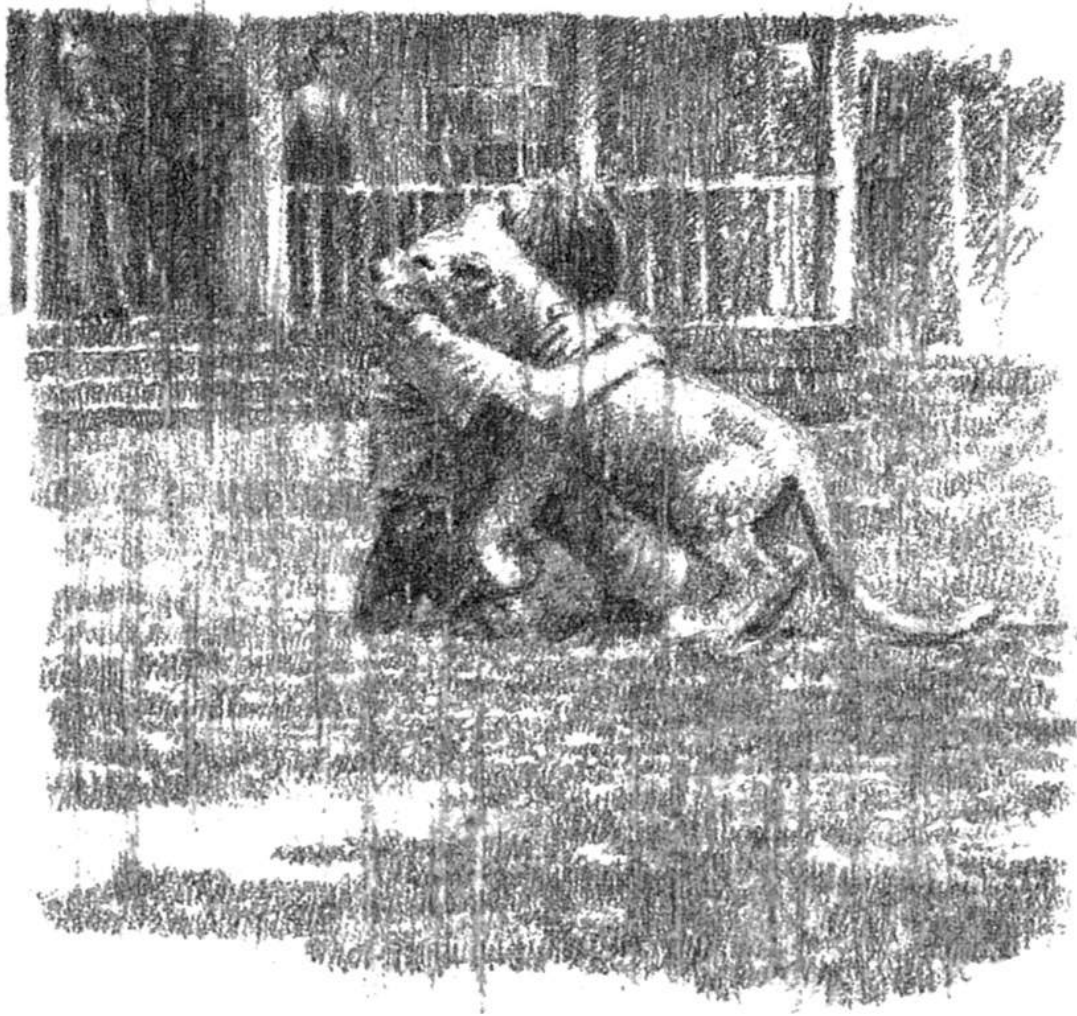
They were there waiting on the veranda, his mother in her nightgown, his father in his hat, his horse saddled, ready to come after him. "I've set him free," Bertie cried. "I've set him free, so he won't ever have to live behind bars." He was sent to his room at once, where he threw himself on his bed and buried his face in his pillow.

Day after day his father went out looking for the white lion, but each evening he came back empty-handed and blazing with fury.

"What'll I tell the Frenchman when he comes, eh? Did you for one minute think of that, Bertie? Did you? I should strap you. Any father worth his salt would strap you." But he didn't.

Bertie spent all day and every day at the fence, or up his tree in the compound, or at his bedroom window, his eyes scanning the veld for anything white moving through the grass. He prayed at his bedside every night until his knees were numb, prayed that his white lion would learn how to kill, would somehow find enough to eat, would avoid the hyenas, and other lions too, come to that. Above all, he prayed he would not come back, at least not until the Frenchman from the circus had come and gone.

The day the Frenchman came, it rained, the first rain for months, it seemed. Bertie watched him as he stood there, dripping on the veranda, his thumb hooked into his waistcoat pocket, as Bertie's father broke the news that there was no white lion to collect, that he had escaped. That was the moment when Bertie's mother put her hand to her throat, cried out and pointed. The white lion was wandering through the open compound gate, yowling pitifully. Bertie ran to him and fell on his knees and held him. The lion was soaked to the skin and trembling. He was panting with hunger and so thin that you could see his rib cage. They all helped to rub him down, and then looked on as he ate ravenously.



"Incroyable! Magnifique!" said the Frenchman. "And white, just as you said, white like the snow, and tame too. He will be the star of my circus. I shall call him *'Le Prince Blanc'*, 'The White Prince'. He will have all he needs, all he wants, fresh meat every day, fresh straw every night. I love my animals, you know. They are my family, and this lion of yours, he will be my favourite son. Have no fear, young man, I promise you that he will never be hungry again." He put his hand on his heart. "As God is my witness, I promise it."

Bertie looked up into the Frenchman's face. It was a kind face, not smiling, yet earnest and trustworthy. But even so, it did not make Bertie feel any better.

"There, you see," said Bertie's mother. "He'll be happy, and that's all that matters, Bertie, isn't it?"

Bertie knew that there was no point in begging. He knew now that the lion could never survive on his own in the wild, that he would have to go with the Frenchman. There was nothing else for it.

That night as they lay in the dark together side by side, Bertie made him a last promise. "I will find you," he whispered. "Always remember that I will find you. I promise I will."



The next morning the Frenchman shook hands with Bertie on the veranda and said goodbye. "He'll be fine, don't you worry. And one day you must come to France and see my circus, *Le Cirque Merlot*. It is the best circus in all of France." Then they left, the white lion in a wooden crate rocking from side to side in the back of the Frenchman's wagon. Bertie watched until the wagon disappeared from view.

A few months later, Bertie found himself on a ship steaming out of Cape Town, bound for England and school and a new life. As the last of Table Mountain vanished in a heat haze, he said goodbye to Africa and was not at all unhappy. He had his mother with him, for the time being at least. And after all, England was nearer France than Africa was, much nearer.

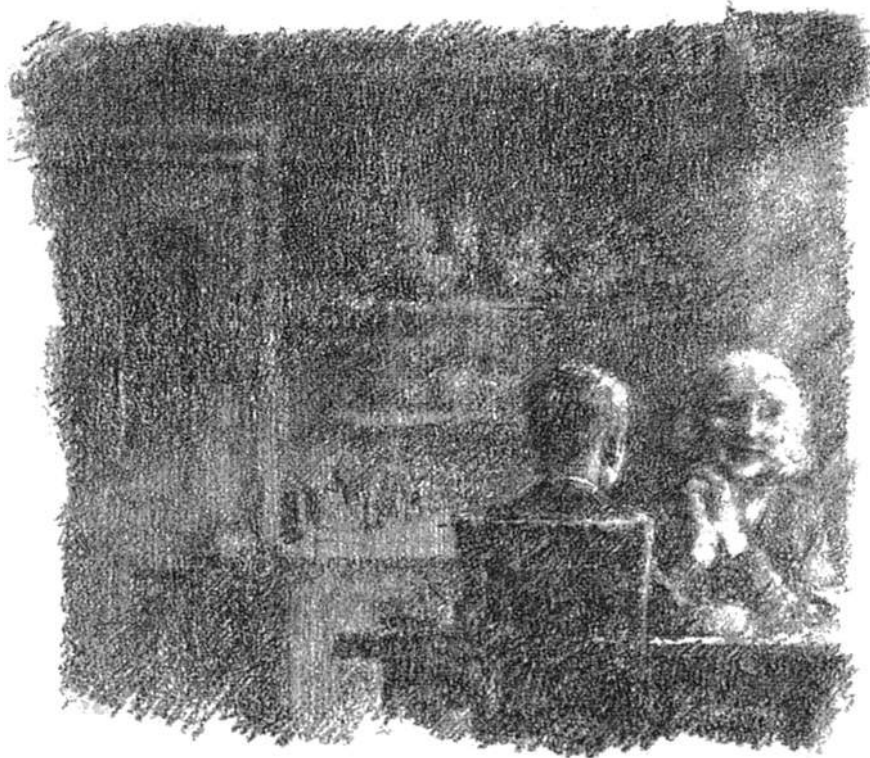


Strawbridge

The old lady drank her tea and wrinkled her nose in disgust. “I’m always doing that,” she said. “I’m always letting my tea go cold.” The dog scratched his ear, groaning with the pleasure of it, but eyeing me all the time.

“Is that the end then?” I asked.

She laughed and put down her cup. “I should say not,” she said. And then she went on, picking a tea leaf off the tip of her tongue. “Up till now it’s been just Bertie’s story. He told it to me so often that I almost feel I was there when it happened. But from now on it’s my story too.”



“What about the white lion?” I had to know. “Did he find the white lion? Did

he keep his promise?”

The old lady seemed suddenly clouded with sadness. “You must remember,” she said, putting a bony hand on mine, “that true stories do not always end just as we would wish them to. Would you like to hear the truth of what happened, or shall I make something up for you just to keep you happy?”

“I want to know what really happened,” I replied.

“Then you shall,” she said. She turned from me and looked out of the window again at the butterfly lion, still blue and shimmering on the hillside.

Whilst Bertie was growing up on his farm in Africa with his fence all around, I was growing up here at Strawbridge in this echoing cold cavern of a house with its deer park and its high wall all around. And I grew up, for the most part, alone. I too was an only child. My mother had died giving birth to me, and Father was rarely at home. Maybe that was why the two of us, Bertie and I, got on so well from the first moment we met. We had so much in common from the very start.

Like Bertie, I scarcely ever left the confines of my home, so I had few friends. I didn’t go to school either, not to start with. I had a governess instead, Miss Tulips – everyone called her “Nolips” because she was so thin-lipped and severe. She moved around the house like a cold shadow. She lived on the top floor, like Cook, and like Nanny. Nanny Mason – bless her heart – brought me up and taught me all the do’s and don’ts of life like all good nannies should. But she was more than just a nanny to me, she was a mother to me, and a wonderful one too, the best I could have had, the best anyone could have had.



My mornings were always spent at my studies with Nolips, but all the while I was looking forward to my afternoons out walking with Nanny Mason – except on Sundays, when I was allowed to be on my own all day, if Father wasn't home for the weekend, which he usually wasn't. Then I could fly my kites when it was fine, and read my books when it wasn't. I loved my books – *Black Beauty*, *Little Women*, *Heidi* – I loved them all, because they took me outside the park walls, they took me all over the world. I met the best friends I ever had in those books – until I met Bertie, that is.

I remember it was just after my tenth birthday. It was Sunday and I was out flying my kites. But there wasn't much wind, and no matter how hard I ran, I just couldn't get even my best box kite to catch the wind and fly. I climbed all the way up Wood Hill, looking for wind. And there at the top I found it at last, enough to send my kite soaring. But then the wind gusted and my kite swirled away crazily towards the trees. I couldn't haul it in in time. It caught on a branch and stuck fast in a high elm tree in amongst the rookery. The rooks flew out cawing in protest whilst I tugged at my line, crying in my fury and frustration. I gave up, sat down and howled. That was when I noticed a boy emerging from the shadow of the trees.

"I'll get it down for you," he said, and began to climb the tree. Easy as you like, he crawled along the branch, reached out and released my kite.



It floated down and landed at my feet. My best kite was torn and battered, but at least I had it back. Then he was down the tree and standing there in front of me.

"Who are you? What do you want?" I asked.

"I can mend it, if you like," he said.

"Who are you?" I asked again.

"Bertie Andrews," he replied. He was wearing a grey school uniform, and one I recognised at once. From the lion gateway I had often watched them on their walks, two by two, blue school caps, blue socks.

"You're from the school up the road, aren't you?" I said.

"You won't tell on me, will you?" His eyes were wide with sudden alarm. I saw then that his legs were scratched and bleeding.

"Been in the wars, have you?" I said.

"I've run away," he went on. "And I'm not going back, not ever."

"Where are you going?" I asked him.

He shook his head. "I don't know. In the holidays I live at my Auntie's in

Salisbury, but I don't like it there."

"Haven't you got a proper home?" I said.

"Course I have," he replied. "Everyone has. But it's in Africa."

That whole afternoon we sat together on Wood Hill and he told me all about Africa, about his farm, about his waterhole, about his white lion and how he was somewhere in France now, in a circus and how he couldn't bear to think about him. "But I'll find him," he said fiercely. "I'll find him somehow."



To be honest, I wasn't sure how much I really believed all this about a white lion. I just didn't think lions could be white.

"But the trouble is," he went on, "even when I do find him, I won't be able to take him home to Africa like I always wanted to."

"Why not?" I asked.

"Because my mother died." He looked down and pulled at the grass beside him. "She had malaria, but I think she really died of a broken heart." When he looked up his eyes were swimming with tears. "You can, you know. Then my father sold the farm and married someone else. I never want to go back. I never want to see him again, never."

I wanted to say how sorry I was about his mother, but I couldn't find the right words to say it.

"You really live here, do you?" he said. "In that big place? It's as big as my school."

I told him then what little there was to know of me, all about Father being away in London so much, about Nolips and Nanny Mason. He sucked at the

purple clover as I talked; and when neither of us had anything more to say we lay back in the sun and watched a pair of mewing buzzards wheeling overhead. I was wondering what would happen to him if he got caught.

“What are you going to do?” I said at last. “Won’t you get into trouble?”

“Only if they catch me.”

“But they will, they’re bound to, in the end,” I said. “You’ve got to go back, before they miss you.”

After a while he propped himself up on his elbow and looked down at me.

“Maybe you’re right,” he said. “Maybe they won’t have missed me yet. Maybe it’s not too late. But if I go back, could I come again? I can face it if I can come again. Would you let me? I’ll mend your kite, really I will.” And he gave me a smile so melting that I couldn’t refuse him.

So it was arranged. He would meet me under the big wych elm on Wood Hill every Sunday afternoon at three, or as close to three as he could. He would have to come through the woods so that he could never be seen from the house. I knew full well that if Nolips ever found out, there’d be merry hell to pay – for both of us, probably. Bertie shrugged, and said that if he got caught, all they could do at school was beat him, and that once more wouldn’t make much difference anyway. And if they expelled him, well then, that would suit him fine.



And All's Well

Bertie came every Sunday after that. Sometimes it couldn't be for long because he had detention back at school, or maybe I'd have to send him away because Father was down for the weekend, shooting pheasants in the park with his friends. We had to be careful. He *did* mend my best box kite, but after a while we forgot all about flying kites, and we just talked and walked.

Bertie and I lived for our Sundays. In those next two years we became, first, good companions, and then best of friends. We never told each other we were, because we didn't need to. The more I got to know him, the more I believed everything about Africa, and about "The White Prince" in the circus somewhere in France. I believed him too when he told me again and again how somehow, someday he would find his white lion, and make sure that he'd never have to live behind bars again.

The school holidays always dragged interminably because Bertie wasn't there on Sundays. But at least there were no lessons to endure with Nolips. She always went off in the holidays to stay with her sister by the sea in Margate. Instead of her lessons though, Nanny Mason would take me on endless nature walks – "walks on the wild side", she called them.

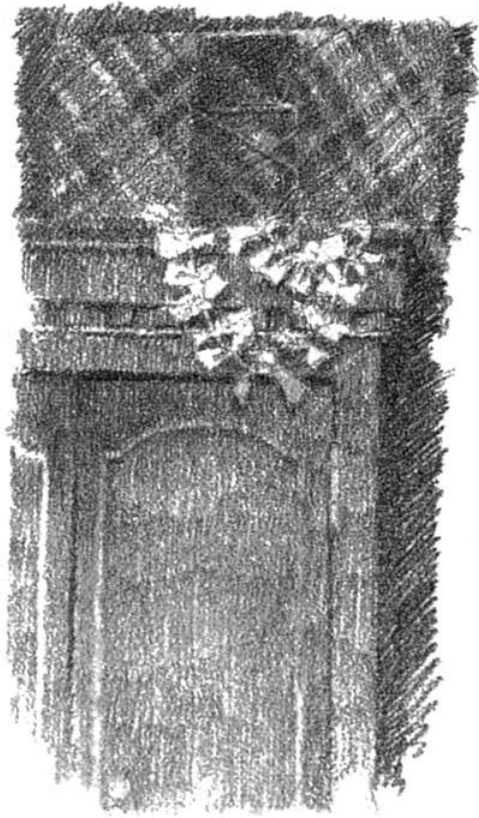
I grumbled and stamped my feet. "But it's so boring," I'd tell her. "If we had zebras and water buffaloes and elephants and baboons and giraffes and wildebeests and spotted hyenas and black mamba snakes and vultures and lions, I wouldn't mind. But a few deer, a fox's hole, and maybe a badger's set? A dozen rabbit droppings, one robin's nest and some cuckoo pint?" Once, before I could stop myself, I said: "And do you know, Nanny, there's white lions in Africa, real white lions?"

"Fancy that," she laughed. "You and your fairy tales, Millie. You read too many books."



Bertie and I didn't dare write letters to each other in case someone found them and read them. But school term came round again and he'd be there under the wych elm on the first Sunday at three o'clock without fail. What we found to talk about all the time I cannot honestly remember. He sometimes said how he could never look at a circus poster without thinking of "The White Prince". But as time passed, he talked less and less of the white lion, and then not at all. I thought that maybe he had forgotten all about him.

We both grew up too quickly. We had one last summer term together, before I was to be sent off to a convent school by the sea in Sussex, and he was to go away to a college under the shadow of Canterbury Cathedral. We treasured each meeting, knowing how few we had left. We were silent in our sadness. The love between us stayed unspoken. We knew it when our eyes met, when our hands touched. We were just so sure of each other. Before he left me that last Sunday he gave me a kite he had made in carpentry lessons at school and told me I had to think of him every time I flew it.



Then he went his way to his college and I went mine to my convent, and we didn't see each other again. I was always very careful where I flew the kite he'd given me, just in case I lost it up a tree and couldn't get it back again. I thought that if I lost the kite it would be like losing Bertie for ever. I kept it on top of my cupboard in my bedroom. It's still up there to this day.

Now we did write because we were away from home and it was safe to do so. We wrote letters that talked to each other just as we had done all those years on Wood Hill. My letters were long and rambling, about tittle-tattle at school, about how much happier it was at home now that Nolips had left. His were always short and his handwriting so tiny you could hardly read it. He was no happier shut inside the walls of his cathedral precinct than he had been before. There were bells, he wrote, always bells – bells to wake you up, bells for meals, bells for lessons, bells, bells, bells cutting his days into thin slices. How we both hated bells. The last thing he heard at night was the nightwatchman walking the city walls outside his dormitory window, ringing his bell and calling out: "Twelve o'clock. A fine night. And all's well." But he knew, as I knew, as everyone knew, that all was not well, that a great war was coming. His letters, and mine, were full of the dread of it.

Then the storm of war broke. Like many storms, it rumbled only distantly at first, and we all hoped it would somehow pass us by. But it was not to be like that. Father looked so grand in his khaki uniform and shiny brown boots.



He said goodbye to Nanny Mason and me on the front steps, climbed into his car and was driven away. We never saw him again. I can't pretend I grieved much when the news came that he had been killed. I know a daughter should grieve for a dead father, and I tried to. I was sad of course, but it is difficult to grieve for someone you never really knew, and my father had always been a stranger to me. Worse, so much worse for me, was the thought that the same thing might one day happen to Bertie. I just hoped and prayed that the war would end whilst he was still safe at college in Canterbury Nanny Mason kept saying it would all be over by Christmas. But Christmas came each year and it never was over.

I remember Bertie's last letter from college by heart.

Dearest Millie,

I am old enough now to join up, so I shall. I have had all I can take of fences and walls and bells. I want to fly free, and this seems to be the only way I can do it. Besides, they need men. I can see you smiling at that. All you remember is a boy. I am over six foot now, and I shave twice a week. Honestly! I may not write again for some time, but whatever happens I shall be thinking of you always.

*Your
Bertie*

And that was the last I was to hear of him – for a while, at least.





A Lot of Old Codswallop

The dog was whining at the kitchen door. “Let Jack out for me, will you?” said the old lady. “There’s a dear. I’ll tell you what, I’ll fetch down the kite Bertie made for me, shall I? You’d like to see it, wouldn’t you?” And she went out.

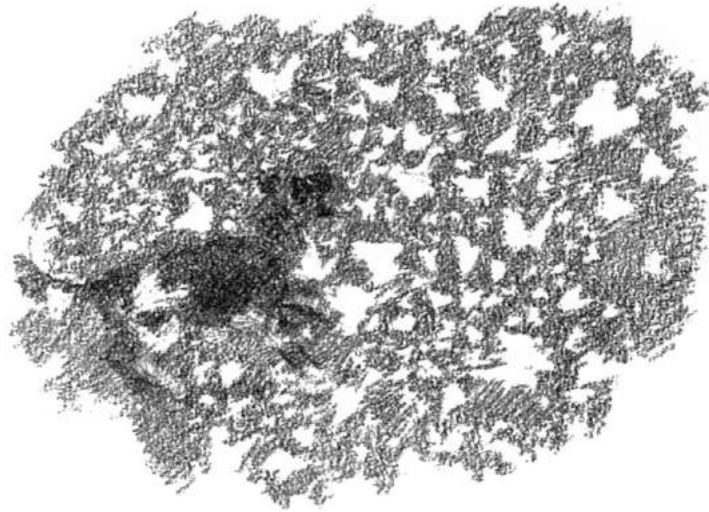
I was only too happy to let the dog out and shut the door on him.

She was back sooner than I expected. “There,” she said, setting the kite down on the table in front of me. “What do you think of it then?” It was huge, much bigger than I had expected, and covered in dust. It was made of brown canvas stretched over a wooden frame. All the kites I had seen had been more colourful, more flamboyant. I think the disappointment must have shown in my face.

“She still flies, you know,” she said, blowing the dust off. “You should see how she goes. You should see her.” She sat down in her chair and I waited for her to begin again. “Now then, where was I?” she asked. “I’m so forgetful these days.”

“Bertie’s last letter,” I said. “He was just going off to the war. But what about the white lion, ‘The White Prince’? What happened to him?” I could hear the dog barking wildly outside. She smiled at me. “Everything comes to he who waits,” she said. “Why don’t you have a look out of the window?”

I looked. The lion on the hillside was blue no more. It was white now, and the dog was bounding across the hillside, chasing away a cloud of blue butterflies that rose all around him.



“He chases everything that moves,” she said. “But don’t worry. He won’t catch a single one. He never catches anything.”

“Not *that* lion,” I said. “I meant the lion in the story. What happened to him?”

“Don’t you see? They’re the same. The lion out there on the hillside and the lion in the story. They’re the same.”

“I don’t understand,” I said.

“You soon will,” she replied. “You soon will.” She took a deep breath before she began again.

For many years Bertie never spoke about the fighting in the trenches. He always said it was a nightmare best forgotten, best kept to himself. But later on when he’d had time to reflect, when time had done its healing perhaps, then he told me something of how it had been.

At seventeen, he’d found himself marching with his regiment along the straight roads of northern France up to the front line, heads and hearts high with hope and expectation. Within a few months he was sitting huddled at the bottom of a muddy trench, hands over his head, head between his knees, curling himself into himself as tight as he would go, sick with terror as the shells and whizzbangs blew the world apart around him. Then the whistle would blow and they’d be out and over the top into No Man’s Land, bayonets fixed and walking towards the German trenches into the ratatat of machine-gun fire. To the left of him and to the right of him his friends would fall, and he would walk on, waiting for the bullet with his name on which he knew could cut him down at any moment.

At dawn they always had to come out of their dugouts and “stand to” in the

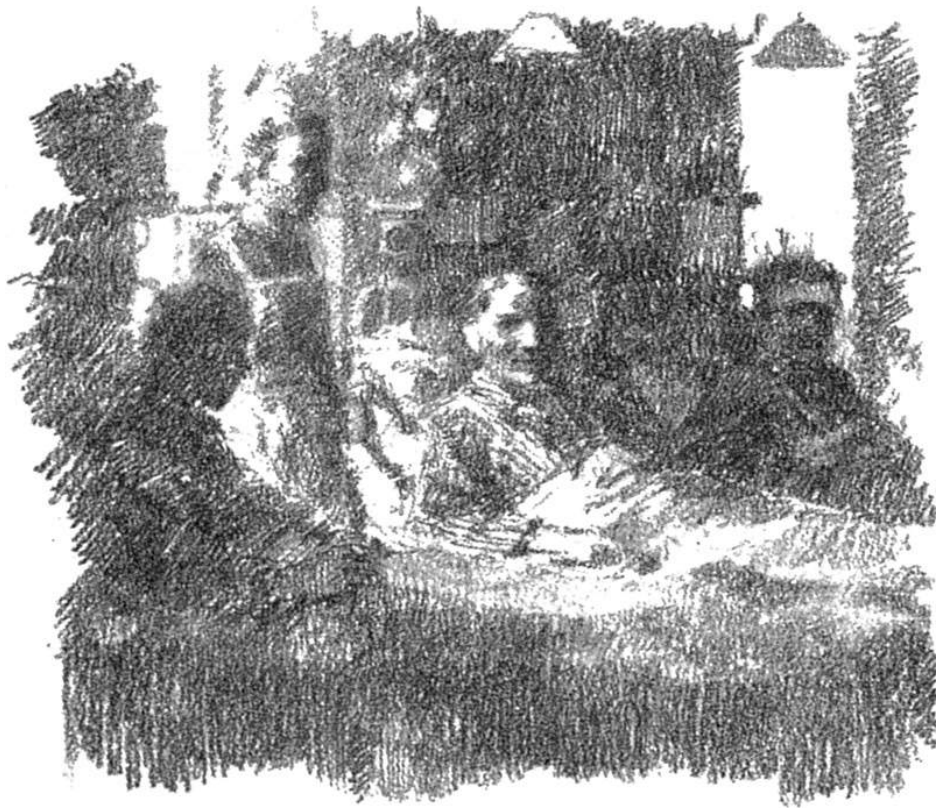
trenches, just in case there was an attack. The Germans often attacked at dawn. That's how it was on the morning of his twentieth birthday. They came swarming over No Man's Land out of the early morning sun, but they were soon spotted and mown down like so much ripe corn. Then they were turning and running. The whistle went, and Bertie led his men over the top to counter-attack. But as always the Germans were expecting them, and the usual slaughter began. Bertie was hit in the leg and fell into a shellhole. He thought of waiting there all day and then crawling back under cover of darkness, but his wound was bleeding badly and he could not staunch it. He decided he had to try to crawl back to the trenches whilst he still had the strength to do it.

Hugging the ground, he was almost at the wire, almost back to safety, when he heard someone crying out in No Man's Land. It was a cry he could not ignore. He found two of his men lying side by side, and so badly wounded that they could not move. One of them was already unconscious. He hoisted him onto his shoulders and made for the trenches, the bullets whipping and whining around him. The man was heavy and Bertie fell several times under his weight, but he got himself to his feet again and staggered on, until they tumbled together down into the trench. The stretcher-bearers tried to take Bertie away. He'd bleed to death, they said. But he would not listen. One of his own men was still lying wounded out there in No Man's Land, and he was going to bring him in, no matter what.



Waving his hands above his head, Bertie climbed out of the trench and walked forward. The firing stopped almost at once. He was so weak himself by now that he could scarcely walk, but he managed to reach the wounded man and drag him back. They say that in the end both sides, German and British, were up on the parapets and cheering him on as he stumbled back towards his lines. Then other men were running out to help him and after that he didn't know any more.

When he woke up he found himself in hospital lying in a bed, with the two friends he had rescued on either side. He was still there some weeks later when he was told that he was to be awarded the Victoria Cross for his bravery under fire. He was the hero of the hour, the pride of his regiment.



Afterwards Bertie always called it a “lot of old codswallop”. To be really brave, he said, you have to overcome fear. You have to be frightened in the first place, and he hadn’t been. There wasn’t time to be frightened. He did what he did without thinking, just as he had saved the white lion cub all those years before when he was a boy in Africa. Of course, they made a great fuss of him in the hospital, and he loved all that, but his leg did not heal as well as it should have. He was still there in the hospital when I found him.

It was not entirely by accident that I found him. For over three years now there had been no letter, no word from him at all. He had warned me, I know, but the long silence was hard to bear. Every time the postman came, I hoped, and the pang of disappointment was sharper each time there was no letter from him. I told all to Nanny Mason who dried my tears and told me to pray, and that she would too. She was sure there’d be a letter soon.



Without Nanny I don't know how I would have gone on living. I was so miserable. I had seen the wounded men coming back from France, blinded, gassed, crippled, and always dreaded seeing Bertie's face amongst them. I had seen the long lists in the newspapers of all the men who had been killed or who were "missing". I looked each day for his name and thanked God every time I did not find it. But still he never wrote, and I had to know why. I thought maybe he had been so badly wounded that he could not write, that he was lying in some hospital alone and unloved. So I determined I would become a nurse. I would go to France, and heal and comfort as best I could, and just hope that somehow I might find him. But I soon discovered that amongst so many men in uniform it would be hopeless to go looking for him. I did not even know his regiment, nor his rank. I had no idea where to begin.

I was sent to a hospital some fifty miles behind the lines, not too far from Amiens. The hospital was a converted chateau with turrets and great wide staircases, and chandeliers in the wards. But it was so cold in winter that many of the men died as much from the cold as from their wounds. We did all we could for them, but we were short of doctors and short of medicines. There were always so many men coming in, and their wounds were terrible, so terrible. Each time we saved one it was such a joy to us. In the midst of the suffering all around us, we needed some joy, believe me.

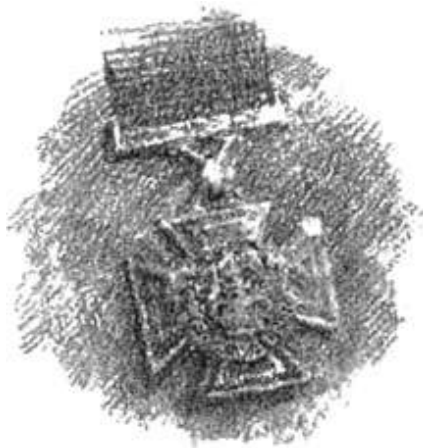
I was at breakfast one morning – it was June of 1918. I was reading a magazine, the *Illustrated London News*, I remember, when I turned the page and saw a face I knew at once. He was older, thinner in the face and unsmiling, but I was sure it was Bertie. His eyes were deepset and gentle, just as I remembered them. And there was his name: “Captain Albert Andrews VC”. There was a whole article underneath about what he had done, and how he was still recovering from his wounds in a hospital, a hospital that turned out to be little more than ten miles away. Wild horses would not have kept me from him. The next Sunday I cycled over.

He was sleeping when I saw him first, propped up on his pillows, one hand behind his head. “Hello,” I said.

He opened his eyes and frowned at me. It was a moment or two before he knew me.

“Been in the wars, have you?” I said.

“Something like that,” he replied.





The White Prince

They said I could take him out in his wheelchair every Sunday so long as I didn't tire him, so long as he was back by supper. As Bertie said, it was just like our Sundays had been when we were little. There was only one place we could go to, a small village only a mile away. There wasn't much left of the village, a few streets of battered houses, a church with its steeple broken off halfway up, and a cafe in the square, thankfully still intact. I would push him in his chair some of the way and he would hobble along with his stick when he felt strong enough. Mostly we would sit in the cafe and talk, or walk along the river and talk. We had so many years to catch up on.

He hadn't written, he told me, because he'd thought that each day at the front might be his last, that he might be dead by sunset. So many of his friends were dead. Sooner or later, it had to be his turn. He wanted me to forget him, so that I wouldn't know when he was killed, so that I wouldn't be hurt. What you don't know, you don't grieve over, he said. He had never imagined that he would survive, that he would ever see me again.

It was on one of our Sunday outings that I noticed the poster across the street on the wall of what was left of the post office. The colours were faded and the bottom half had been torn away, but at the top the print was quite clear. It was in French. *Cirque Merlot*, it read, and underneath: *Le Prince Blanc* – The White Prince! And just discernible, a picture of a lion roaring, a white lion. Bertie had seen it too.

"It's him!" he breathed. "It has to be him!" With no help from me, he was out of his wheelchair, stick in hand, limping across the street towards the cafe.

The café owner was wiping down the tables outside on the pavement. "The circus," Bertie began, pointing back at the poster. He didn't speak much French, so he shouted in English instead. "You know, lions, elephants, clowns!"

The man looked at him blankly and shrugged. So Bertie started roaring like a lion and clawing the air. I could see alarmed faces at the window of the cafe, and the man was backing away shaking his head. I ripped the poster off the wall and

brought it over. My French was a little better than Bertie's. The cafe owner understood at once.



“Ah,” he said, smiling with relief. “Monsieur Merlot. *Le cirque. C’est triste, très triste.*” And he went on in broken English: “The circus. He is finished. Sad, very sad. The soldiers, you understand, they want beer and wine, and girls maybe. They do not want the circus. No one comes, and so Monsieur Merlot, he have to close the circus. But what can he do with all the animals? He keep them. He feed them. But the shells come, more and more they come, and his house – how you say it? – it is bombarded. Many animals are dead. But Monsieur Merlot, he stay. He keep only the elephants, the monkeys, and the lion, ‘The White Prince’. Everyone love The White Prince. The army, they take all the hay for the horses. There is no food for the animals. So Monsieur Merlot, he take his gun and he have to shoot them. No more circus. Finish. *Triste, très triste.*”

“All of them?” cried Bertie. “He shot all of them?”

“No,” said the man. “Not all. He keep The White Prince. He could not shoot The White Prince, never. Monsieur Merlot, he bring him from Africa many years ago. Most famous lion in all of France. He love the lion like a son. That lion, he make Monsieur Merlot a rich man. But he is not rich no more. He lose everything. Now he have nothing, just The White Prince. It is true. I think they die together. Maybe they die already. Who knows?”

“This Monsieur Merlot ” Bertie said “where does he live? Where can I find

“The Monsieur Merlot,” Bertie said, “where does he live? Where can I find him?”

The man pointed out of the village. “Seven, maybe eight kilometres,” he said. “It is an old house by the river. Over the bridge and on the left. Not too far. But maybe Monsieur Merlot he is not there no more. Maybe the house is not there no more. Who knows?” And with a last shrug he turned and went indoors.



There were always army lorries rumbling through the village, so it was not at all difficult to hitch a ride. We left the wheelchair behind in the cafe. Bertie said it would only get in the way, that he could manage well enough with his stick. We found the house, a mill house, just over the bridge where the cafe owner had said it would be. There wasn't much left of it. The barns all around were shell-blasted, the ruins blackened by fire. Only the main house still had a roof, but it too had not gone unscathed. One corner of the building had been holed and was partially covered by canvas that flapped in the wind. There was no sign of life.

Bertie knocked on the door several times, but there was no answer. The place frightened me. I wanted to leave at once, but Bertie would not hear of it. When he pushed gently at the door, it opened. Everything was dark inside. I did not want to go in, but Bertie took me firmly by the hand.

“He's in here,” he whispered. “I can smell him.”

And it was true. There was a smell in the air, pungent and rank, and to me quite unfamiliar.

“Qui est là?” said a voice from the darkness of the room. *“Qu’est-ce que vous voulez?”* He spoke so quietly you could hardly hear him over the rush of the river outside. I could just make out a large bed under the window at the far end of the room. A man was lying there, propped up on a pile of cushions.

“Monsieur Merlot?” Bertie asked.

“Out?”

As we walked forward together, Bertie went on: “I am Bertie Andrews. Many years ago you came to my farm in Africa, and you bought a white lion cub. Do you still have him?”

As if in answer the white blanket at the end of the bed became a lion, rose from the bed, sprang down and was padding towards us, a terrible rumble in his throat. I froze where I was as the lion came right up to us.

“It’s all right, Millie. He won’t hurt us,” said Bertie, putting an arm round me. “We’re old friends.” Moaning and yowling, the lion rubbed himself up against Bertie so hard that we had to hold on to each other to stop ourselves from falling over.



A Miracle, A Miracle!

The lion eyed Bertie for a few moments. The yowling stopped, and he began to grunt and groan with pleasure as Bertie smoothed his mane and scratched him between the eyes. “Remember me?” he said to the lion. “Remember Africa?”

“You are the one? I am not dreaming this?” said Monsieur Merlot. “You are the boy in Africa, the one who tried to set him free?”

“I’ve grown a bit,” said Bertie, “but it’s me.” Bertie and Monsieur Merlot shook hands warmly, while the lion turned his attention on me, licking my hand with his rough warm tongue. I just gritted my teeth and hoped he wouldn’t eat it.

“I did all I could,” Monsieur Merlot said, shaking his head. “But look at him now. Just skins and bones like me. All my animals they are gone, except *Le Prince Blanc*. He is all I have left. I had to shoot my elephants, you know that? I had to. What else could I do? There was no food to feed them. I could not let them starve, could I?”

Bertie sat down on the bed, put his arms around the lion’s neck and buried his head in his mane. The lion rubbed up against him, but he kept looking at me. I kept my distance, I can tell you. I just could not get it out of my head that lions do *eat* people, particularly if they are hungry lions. And this lion was very hungry indeed. You could see his ribs, and his hip bones too.

“Don’t worry, *monsieur*” said Bertie. “I will find you food. I will find food enough for both of you. I promise.”

The driver of the ambulance I waved down thought at first that he was just giving a nurse a lift back to the village. He was, as you can imagine, a little more reluctant when he saw the old man, and then Bertie, and still more when he saw a huge white lion.

The driver swallowed a lot, said nothing all the way, and just nodded when Bertie asked him to let us out in the village square. And so there we were half an hour or so later, the four of us sitting outside the cafe in the sun, the lion at our feet gnawing a huge bone the butcher was only too pleased to sell us. Monsieur Merlot ate a plate of fried potatoes in complete silence and washed it down with

a bottle of red wine. Around us gathered an astonished crowd of villagers, of French soldiers, of British soldiers – at a safe distance. All the while Bertie scratched the lion’s head right between his eyes.



“He always liked a good scratch just there,” Bertie said, smiling at me. “I told you I would find him, didn’t I?” he went on. “I was never sure you really believed me.”

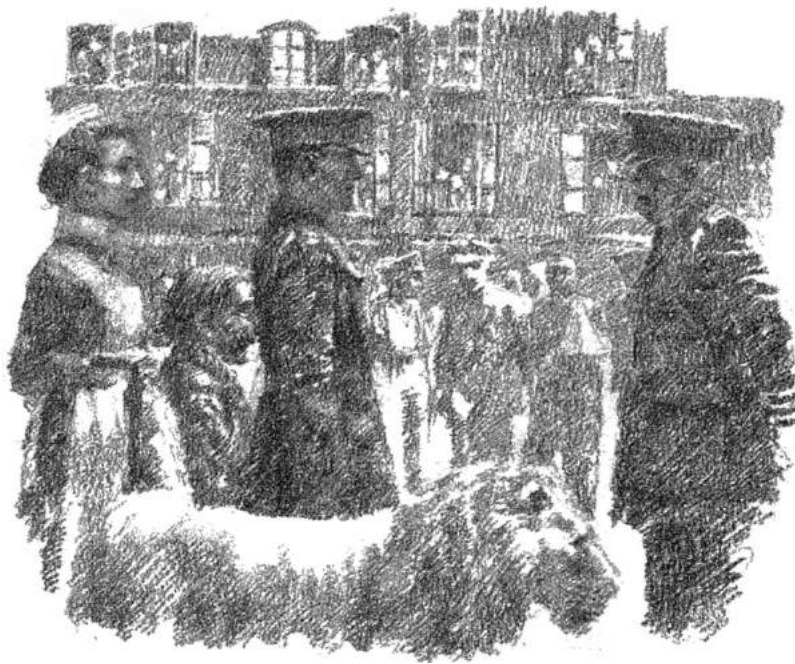
“Well, I did,” I replied, and then I added: “After a while, anyway.” It was the truth. I suppose that may explain why I took all that happened that morning so much in my stride. It was amazing, surreal almost, but it was no surprise. A prophecy come true, like a wish come true – and this was both – can never be entirely surprising.

As we sat there outside the cafe sipping our wine, the three of us decided what should be done about The White Prince. Monsieur Merlot kept crying and saying it was all “*un miracle, un miracle*”; and then he would wipe the tears from his eyes again, and drink down another glass of wine. He liked his wine.

The whole plan was entirely Bertie’s idea. To be honest, I didn’t see how it

could possibly be done. I should have known better. I should have known that once Bertie had set his heart on something, he would see it through.

As we walked the lion down the village street, Bertie leaning on the lion, me pushing Monsieur Merlot in the wheelchair, the crowd parted in front of us and backed away. Then they began to follow us, at a discreet distance, of course, up the road towards Bertie's hospital. Someone must have gone on ahead to warn them, because we could now see a huddle of doctors and nurses gathered on the front steps, and there were people peering out of every window. As we came up to the hospital, an officer stepped forward, a colonel it was.



Bertie saluted. "Sir," he began, "Monsieur Merlot here is a very old friend of mine. He will need a bed in the hospital. He's in need of rest, sir, and a lot of good food. The same goes for the lion. So I wondered, sir, if you'd mind if we used the walled garden behind the hospital. There's a shed in there where the lion could sleep. He'd be quite safe, and so would we. I know him. He doesn't eat people. Monsieur Merlot here has said that if I can feed the lion and take care of him, then I can take him back to England with me."

"The brass cheek of it!" the colonel spluttered as he came down the steps. "Who the devil do you think you are anyway?" he said. And that was when he recognised Bertie. "You're the fellow that won the VC, aren't you?" he said, suddenly a lot more polite. "Andrews, isn't it?"

"Yes, sir, and I want to take the lion back to England when I can. We've got

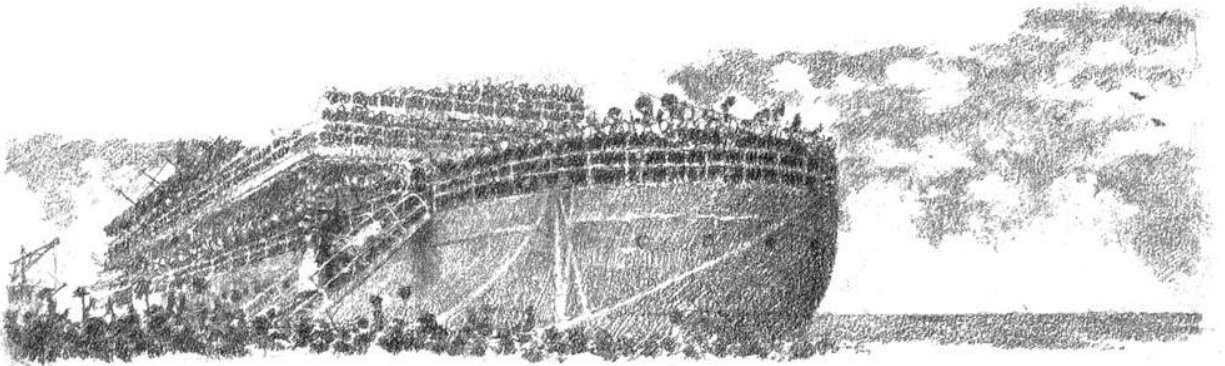
Yes, sir, and I want to take the lion back to England when I go. We've got somewhere in mind for him to live," and he turned to me. "Haven't we?" he said.

"Yes," I said.

It wasn't at all easy persuading the colonel to agree. He began to soften only when we told him that if we didn't look after the white lion, no one else would, and then he would have to be taken away and shot. A lion, the symbol of Britain, shot! Not at all good for morale, Bertie argued. And the colonel listened.

It wasn't any easier persuading the powers that be in England to allow the lion to come back home when the war was over, but somehow Bertie managed it. He just wouldn't take no for an answer. Bertie always said afterwards that it was the medal that did it, that without the prestige of the Victoria Cross behind him he'd never have got away with it, and The White Prince would never have come home.

When we docked at Dover, the band was playing and the bunting was out, and there were photographers and newspaper reporters everywhere. The White Prince walked off the ship at Bertie's side to a hero's welcome. "The British Lion Comes Home" roared the newspapers the next day.



So we came back here to Strawbridge, Bertie, The White Prince and me. I married Bertie in the village church. I remember, Bertie had a bit of a disagreement with the vicar because he wouldn't allow the lion inside the church for the wedding. I was very glad he didn't – but I never told Bertie that. Nanny Mason adored both Bertie and The White Prince, but she insisted on washing him often, because he smelt – the lion, not Bertie. Nanny Mason stayed on with the three of us – "her three children", she called us – until she retired to the seaside in Devon.



The Butterfly Lion

We never had children of our own – just The White Prince – and I can tell you, he was enough of a family for anyone. He roamed free in the park just as we had planned he would, and chased the deer and the rabbits whenever he felt like it; but he never did learn how to kill for himself. You can't teach old lions new tricks. He lived well, on venison mostly, and slept on a sofa on the landing – I wouldn't have him inside our bedroom, no matter how often Bertie asked. You have to draw the line somewhere.

Bertie's leg never recovered completely. When it was bad, he often needed a stick, or me, or the lion to lean on. It pained him a lot, particularly when the weather was cold and damp, and he never slept well. On Sundays the three of us would wander the park together, and he would sit on the top of Wood Hill with his arm around his old friend's neck and I would fly kites. As you know, I've always loved kites; and so, it turned out, did the lion, who pounced on several of them as they landed, savaged them and ripped them to pieces.

The lion never showed any interest in escaping, and even if he'd wanted to, the park wall was too high for an old lion to jump. Wherever Bertie went he wanted to go too. And if ever Bertie went out in the car, then he'd sit by me near the stove in the kitchen, and watch me with those great amber eyes, listening all the while for the sound of Bertie's car coming up the gravel to the front of the house.

The old lion lived on into a ripe old age. But he became stiff in his legs and could see very little towards the end. He spent his last days stretched out asleep at Bertie's feet, right where you're sitting now. When he died, we buried him at the bottom of the hill out there. Bertie wanted it that way so he could always see the spot from the kitchen window. I suggested we plant a tree in case we forgot where he was. "I'll never forget," he said fiercely. "Never. And besides, he deserves a lot more than a tree."

Bertie grieved on for weeks, months after the lion died. There was nothing I could do to cheer him or even console him. He would sit for hours in his room,

or go off on long walks all on his own. He seemed so shut away inside himself, so distant. Try as I did, I could not reach him.

Then one day I was in the kitchen here, when I saw him hurrying down the hill, waving his stick and shouting for me.



“I’ve got it,” he cried, as he came in, “I’ve got it at last.” He showed me the end of his stick. It was white. “See that, Millie? Chalk! It’s chalk underneath, isn’t it?”

“So?” I said.

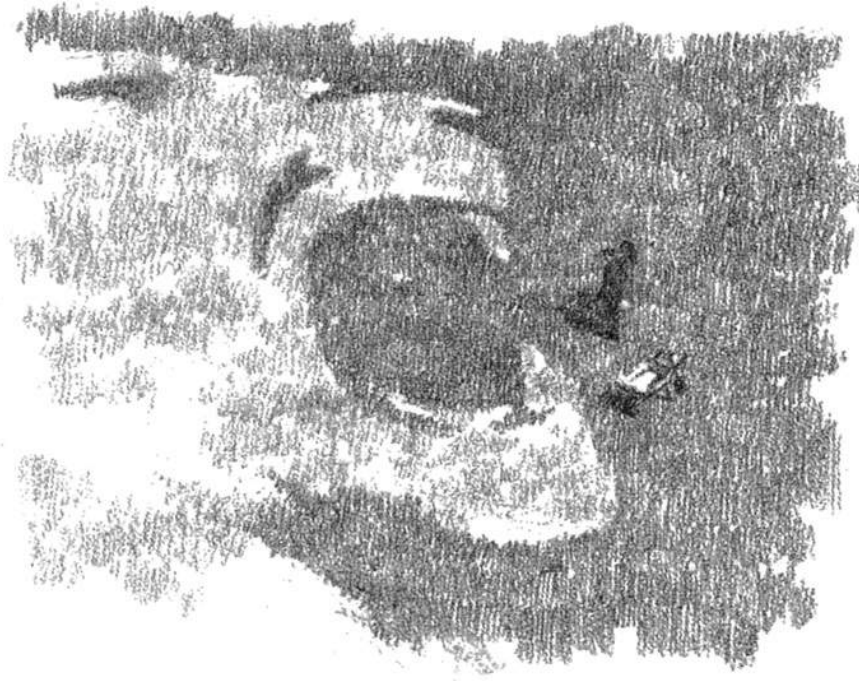
“You know the famous White Horse on the hillside at Uffington, the one they carved out of the chalk a thousand years ago? That horse never died, did it? It’s still alive, isn’t it? Well, that’s what we’re going to do, so he’ll never be forgotten. We’ll carve The White Prince out on the hillside – he’ll be there for ever, and he’ll be white for ever too.”

“It’ll take a bit of time, won’t it?” I said.

“We’ve got plenty, haven’t we?” he replied, with the same smile he had smiled at me when he was a ten-year-old boy asking me if he could come back and mend my kite for me.

It took the next twenty years to do it. Every spare hour we had, we were up there scraping away with spades and trowels; and we had buckets and wheelbarrows to carry away the turf and the earth. It was hard, back-breaking work, but it was a labour of love. We did it, Bertie and I, we did it together –

paws, claws, tail, mane, until he was whole and perfect in every detail.



It was just after we'd finished that the butterflies first came. We noticed that when the sun comes out after the rain in the summer, the butterflies – Adonis Blues, they are, I looked them up – come out to drink on the chalk face. Then The White Prince becomes a butterfly lion, and breathes again like a living creature.

So now you know how Bertie's white lion became The White Prince and how The White Prince became our butterfly lion.



And the Lion Shall Lie Down with the Lamb

The old lady turned to me and smiled. “There,” she said. “That’s my story.”

“And what about Bertie?” I knew as I asked that I shouldn’t have. But I had to know.

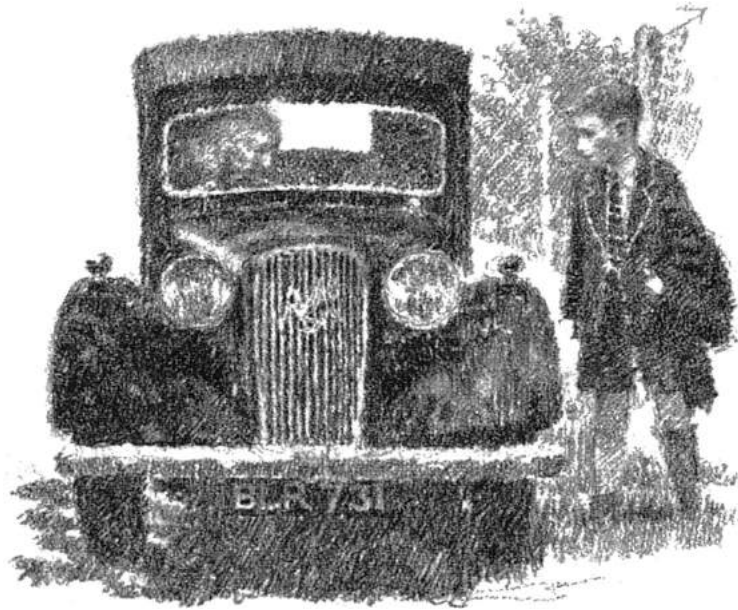
“He’s dead, dear,” the old lady replied. “It’s what happens when you get old. It’s nothing to worry about. It’s lonely, though. That’s why I’ve got Jack. And Bertie, like his lion, lived on to a good age. He’s buried out there under the hill beside The White Prince.” She looked back at the hill for a moment. “And that’s where I belong too,” she said.

She tapped the table with her fingers. “Come on. Time to go. Back to school with you before they miss you and you get yourself into trouble. We wouldn’t want that, would we?” She laughed. “Do you know, that’s just what I told Bertie all those years ago when he ran away from school. You remember?” She was on her feet now. “Come on, I’ll drive you. And don’t look so worried. I’ll make sure no one sees you. It’ll be like you’ve never been gone.”

“Can I come again?” I asked.

“Course you can,” she said. “I may not always be easy to find, but I’ll be here. I’ll just tidy away the tea things, and then we’ll go, shall we?”

It was a very old-fashioned car, black and upright and dignified, with a leathery smell and a whiny engine. She dropped me at the bottom of the school park, by the fence.



“Take care, dear,” she said. “And be sure you come again soon, won’t you? I’ll be expecting you.”

“I will,” I replied. I climbed the fence before I turned to wave; but by that time the car had gone.

To my huge relief no one had missed me. And best of all, Basher Beaumont was in the sickroom. He’d gone down with measles. I just hoped his measles would last a long time, a very long time.

All through supper I could think of nothing but Bertie Andrews and his white lion. Stew and dumplings and then semolina pudding with raspberry jam – again! It was as I was picking my way through my slimy semolina that I remembered Bertie Andrews had been at this school. Maybe, I thought, maybe he’d had to sit here and eat slimy semolina just as we did now.

I looked up at the honours boards around the dining hall, at the names of all the boys who had won scholarships over the years. I looked for Bertie Andrews. He wasn’t there. But then, I thought, why should he be? Maybe, like me, he wasn’t brilliant at his school work. Not everyone wins scholarships.

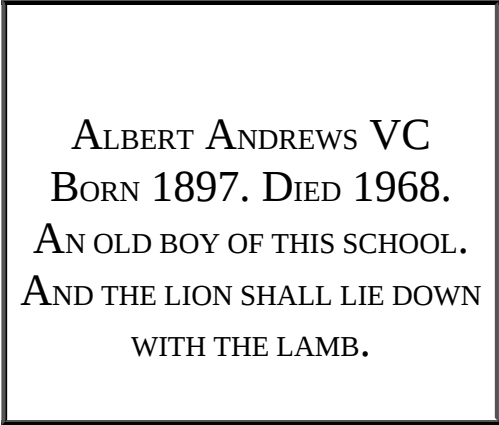
Cookie – Mr Cook, my history teacher – was sitting beside me at the end of my table. “Who were you looking for, Morpurgo?” he asked suddenly.

“Andrews, sir,” I said. “Bertie Andrews.”

“Andrews? Andrews? There’s an Albert Andrews who won the Victoria Cross in the First World War. You mean him?” Cookie scraped his bowl clean and licked the back of his spoon. “I love raspberry jam. You’ll find his name in the chapel, under the East Window, under the War memorial. But he wasn’t

killed in the war, you know. He lived down at Strawbridge, that place with the lion on the gateway, just across the main road. He died, maybe ten, twelve years ago, soon after I came to teach here. The only old boy ever to win the VC. That's why they put up a memorial plaque to him in the chapel after he died. I remember the day his wife came to unveil it – his widow, I should say. Poor dear, just herself and her dog in that great big place. She died only a few months later. Broken heart, they say. You can, you know. You can die of a broken heart. That house has been empty ever since. No family to take it on. No one wants it. Too big, you see. Shame.”

I said I wanted to be excused, to go to the toilet. I hurtled down the passage, out across the courtyard and into the chapel. The small brass plaque was exactly where Cookie had said it was, but hidden by a vase of flowers. I moved the vase to one side. The plaque read:



ALBERT ANDREWS VC
BORN 1897. DIED 1968.
AN OLD BOY OF THIS SCHOOL.
AND THE LION SHALL LIE DOWN
WITH THE LAMB.

All night long I tried to puzzle it out. Cookie was wrong. He just had to be. I never slept a wink.



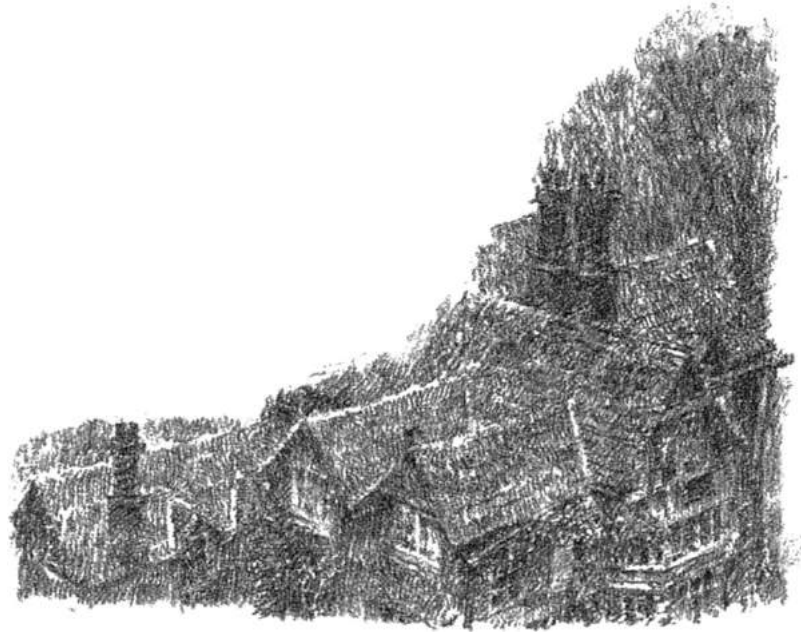
Adonis Blues

The next afternoon after games were over, I went over the fence at the bottom of the park, hared up through Innocents Breach, across the road, along the wall and slipped through the iron gateway with the stone lion roaring above me. It was raining a light summer rain.

I tried knocking at the front door. No one came. No dog barked. I went round to the back and peered in through the kitchen window. The box kite was still there on the kitchen table, but there was no sign of the old lady anywhere. I rattled the kitchen door, and knocked louder, again and again. I called out: “Hello! Hello!” There was no reply. I banged on the window. “Are you there? Are you there?”

“We all are,” came a voice from behind me. I turned. There was no one there. I was alone, alone with the white lion on the hillside. I had imagined it.

I climbed the hill and went to sit in the grass above the white of the lion’s mane. I looked down at the great house beneath me. Jackdaws cawed overhead. There was bracken and grass growing out of the gutters and around the chimney pots. Some of the windows were boarded up. Drainpipes hung loose and rusting. The place was empty, quite empty.

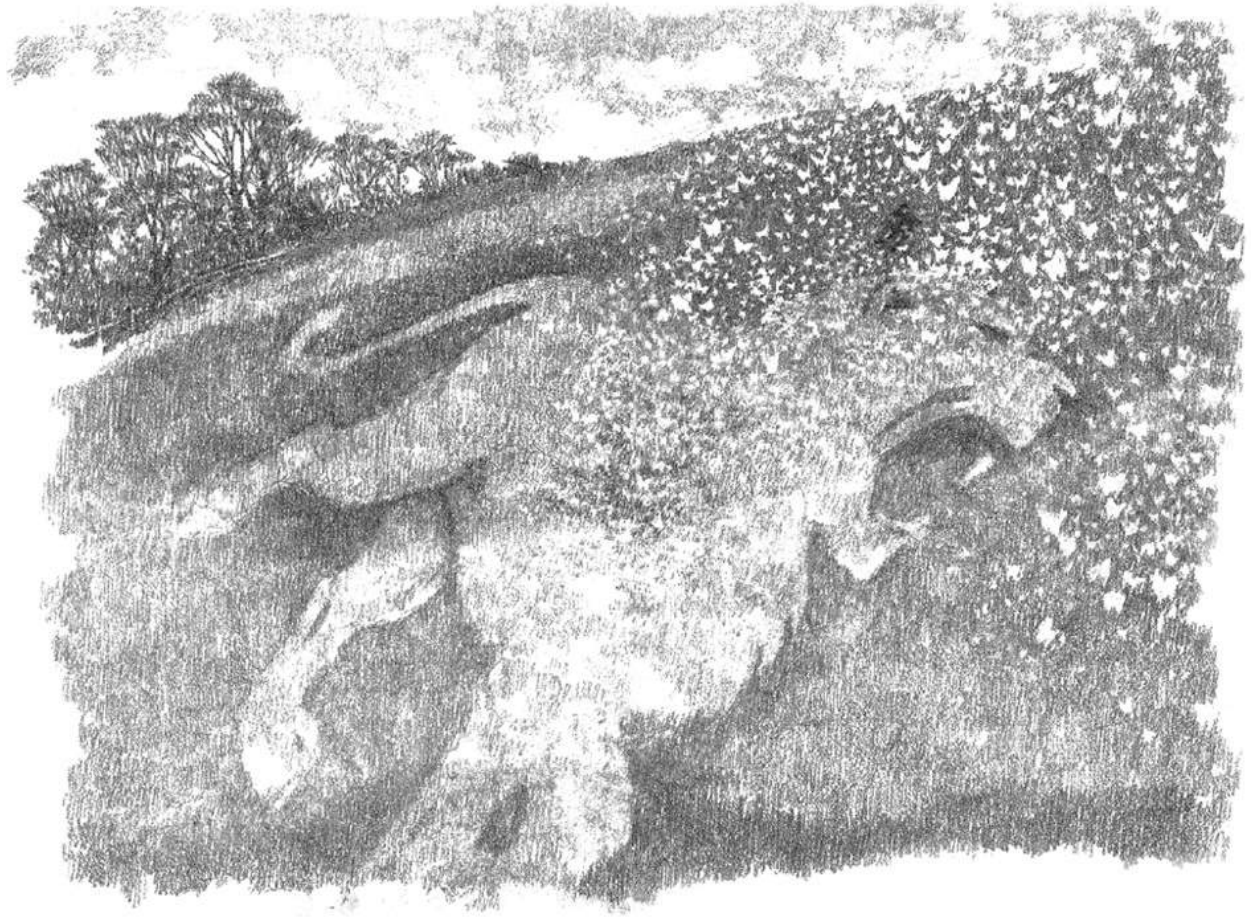


The rain suddenly stopped and the sun warmed the back of my neck. The first butterfly landed on my arm. It was blue. “Adonis Blues, Adonis Blues,” came the voice again, like an echo in my head. Then the sky around me was filled with butterflies, and they were settling to drink on the chalk.

“Adonis Blues, remember?” The same voice, a real voice, her voice. And this time I knew it was not in my head. “Keep him white for us, there’s a dear. We don’t want him forgotten, you see. And think of us sometimes, won’t you?”

“I will,” I cried. “I will.”

And I swear I felt the earth tremble beneath me with the roar of a distant lion.



michael
morpurgo

AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR OF
Born to Run

Kaspar
Prince
of Cats

Illustrated by
Michael Foreman



KASPAR PRINCE OF CATS

michael morpurgo



Illustrated by Michael Foreman



HarperCollins *Children's Books*

For all the good and kind people at The Savoy who looked after us so well.

MM.

For my brother Pud, a North Sea fisher-man and boy.

MF.



Contents

Dedication

The Coming of Kaspar

Not Johnny Trott at All

A Ghost in the Mirror

“Who Gives a Fig, Anyway?”

Running Wild

Stowaway

“We’ve Only Gone and Hit A Flaming Iceberg”

Women and Children First

“Good Luck and God Bless You”

A New Life

Postscript



The Coming of Kaspar

Prince Kaspar Kandinsky first came to the Savoy Hotel in a basket. I know because I was the one who carried him in. I carried all the Countess' luggage that morning, and I can tell you, she had an awful lot of it.

But I was a bell-boy so that was my job: to carry luggage, to open doors, to say good morning to every guest I met, to see to their every need, from polishing their boots to bringing them their telegrams. In whatever I did I had to smile at them very politely, but the smile had to be more respectful than friendly. And I had to remember all their names and titles too, which was not at all easy, because there were always new guests arriving. Most importantly though, as a bell-boy – which, by the way, was just about the lowest of the low at the hotel – I had to do whatever the guests asked me to, and right away. In fact I was at almost everyone's beck and call. It was “jump to it, Johnny”, or “be sharp about it, boy”, do this “lickedysplit”, do that “jaldi, jaldi”. They'd click their fingers at me, and I'd jump to it lickedysplit, I can tell you, particularly if Mrs Blaise, the head housekeeper, was on the prowl.

We could always hear her coming, because she rattled like a skeleton on the

move. This was on account of the huge bunch of keys that hung from her waist. She had a voice as loud as a trombone when she was angry, and she was often angry. We lived in constant fear of her. Mrs Blaise liked to be called “Madame”, but on the servants corridor at the top of the hotel where we all lived – bell-boys, chamber maids, kitchen staff – we all called her Skullface, because she didn’t just rattle like a skeleton, she looked a lot like one too. We did our very best to keep out of her way.



To her any misdemeanour, however minor, was a dreadful crime – slouching, untidy hair, dirty fingernails. Yawning on duty was the worst crime of all. And that's just what Skullface had caught me doing that morning just before the Countess arrived. She'd just come up to me in the lobby, hissing menacingly as she passed, "I saw that yawn, young scallywag. And your cap is set too jaunty. You know how I hate a jaunty cap. Fix it. Yawn again, and I'll have your guts for garters."

I was just fixing my cap when I saw the doorman, Mr Freddie, showing the Countess in. Mr Freddie clicked his fingers at me, and that was how moments later I found myself walking through the hotel lobby alongside the Countess, carrying her cat basket, with the cat yowling so loudly that soon everyone was staring at us. This cat did not yowl like other cats, it was more like a wailing lament, almost human in its tremulous tunefulness. The Countess, with me at her side, swept up to the reception desk and announced herself in a heavy foreign accent – a Russian accent, as I was soon to find out. "I am Countess Kandinsky," she said. "You have a suite of rooms for Kaspar and me, I think. There must be river outside my window, and I must have a piano. I sent you a telegram with all my requirements."

The Countess spoke as if she was used to people listening, as if she was used to being obeyed. There were many such people who came in through the doors of the Savoy: the rich, the famous and the infamous, business magnates, lords and ladies, even Prime Ministers and Presidents. I don't mind admitting that I never much cared for their haughtiness and their arrogance. But I learned very soon, that if I hid my feelings well enough behind my smile, if I played my cards right, some of them could give very big tips, particularly the Americans. "Just smile and wag your tail." That's what Mr Freddie told me to do. He'd been working at the Savoy as a doorman for close on twenty years, so he knew a thing or two. It was good advice. However the guests treated me, I learned to smile back and behave like a willing puppy dog.

That first time I met Countess Kandinsky I thought she was just another rich aristocrat. But there was something I admired about her from the start. She didn't just walk to the lift, she sailed there, magnificently, her skirts rustling in her wake, the white ostrich feathers in her hat wafting out behind her, like pennants in a breeze. Everyone – including Skullface, I'm glad to say – was bobbing curtsies or bowing heads as we passed by, and all the time I found myself basking unashamedly in the Countess' aura, in her grace and grandeur.

I felt suddenly centre stage and very important. As a fourteen-year-old bell-

boy, abandoned as an infant on the steps of an orphanage in Islington, I had not had many opportunities to feel so important. So by the time we all got into the lift, the Countess and myself and the cat still wailing in its basket, I was feeling cock-a-hoop. I suppose it must have showed.

“Why are you smiling like this?” The Countess frowned at me, ostrich feathers shaking as she spoke.

I could hardly tell her the truth, so I had to think fast. “Because of your cat, Countess,” I replied. “She sounds funny.”

“Not she. He. And he is not *my* cat,” she said. “Kaspar is no one’s cat. He is the Prince of cats. He is Prince Kaspar Kandinsky, and a prince belongs to no one, not even to a Countess.” She smiled at me then. “I tell you something, I like it when you smile. English people do not smile so often as they should. They do not laugh, they do not cry. This is a great mistake. We Russians, when we want to laugh, we laugh. When we want to cry, we cry. Prince Kaspar is a Russian cat. At this moment he is a very unhappy cat, so he cries. This is natural, I think.”

“Why’s he so unhappy?” I found myself asking her.

“Because he is angry with me. He likes to stay in my house in Moscow. He does not like to travel. I tell him, ‘how can I go to sing in opera in London if we do not travel?’ He does not listen. When we travel he always make big fuss, big noise. When I let him out of his basket, he will be happy again. I will show you.”

Sure enough, the moment Kaspar climbed out of the basket in the Countess’ sitting room, he fell completely silent. He tested the carpet with one paw, and then leaped nimbly out and began at once to explore. That was when I first understood just why the Countess called him a Prince of cats. From his whiskers to his paws he was black all over, jet black, and sleek and shiny and beautiful. And he knew he was beautiful too. He moved like silk, his head held high, his tail swishing as he went.

I was about to leave the room to fetch the rest of her luggage, when the Countess called me back, as guests often did when they were about to give me a tip. Because of her title, and her ostrich feathers, and all the fine luggage she had arrived with, I was very hopeful by now that the tip might be a generous one. As it turned out she didn’t want to give me a tip at all.

“Your name? I wish to know your name,” she said, removing her hat with a flourish.

“Johnny Trott, Countess,” I told her. She laughed at that, and I didn’t mind, because I could tell at once that she was not mocking me.

“That is a very funny name,” she said. “But who knows? Maybe for you

Kandinsky is a funny name too.”



By this time Kaspar had leaped up on to the sofa. He sprang off again almost at once, and went to sharpen his claws, first on the curtain, then on one of the armchairs. After that he went on a tour of the room, behind the desk, in under the piano, up on the window ledge, for all the world like a prince inspecting his new palace, claiming it, before settling down on the armchair by the fireplace, from

where he gazed up at us both, blinking his eyes slowly, and then licking himself, purring contentedly as he did so. Clearly the prince approved of his palace.

“He’s a very smart looking cat,” I said.

“Smart? Smart? Kaspar is not smart, Johnny Trott.” The Countess was clearly not at all pleased with my description of her cat. “He is beautiful – the most beautiful cat in all of Russia, in all of England, in all of the whole world. There is no other cat like Prince Kaspar. He is not smart, he is magnificent. You agree, Johnny Trott?”

I nodded hurriedly. I could hardly argue.

“You wish to stroke him?” she asked me.

I crouched down by the chair, reached out my hand tentatively and stroked his purring chest with the back of my finger, but only for a second or two. I sensed that, for the moment, this was all he would allow. “I think maybe he likes you,” said the Countess. “With Prince Kaspar, if you are not a friend, you are an enemy. He did not scratch you, so I think you must be a friend.”



As I stood up again I noticed she was fixing me with a searching look.

“I wonder, are you a good boy, Johnny Trott? Can I trust you?”

“I think so, Countess,” I replied.

“This is not good enough. I have to know for sure.”

“Yes,” I told her.

“Then I have a very important job for you. During each day I am here in London you will look after Prince Kaspar for me. Tomorrow morning I begin rehearsal at the opera. Covent Garden. *Magic Flute*. Mozart. I am Queen of the Night. You know this opera?”

I shook my head.

“One day you will hear it. Maybe one day I shall sing it for you on the piano, when I practice. Every morning after breakfast I must practice. Prince Kaspar, he is happy when I sing. At home in Moscow he likes to lie on my piano to listen to me, and he waves his tail, just like now. Look at him. This is how I know he is happy. But when I am at rehearsal I must know that you look after him well, that he is happy. You will do this for me? Feed him for me? Talk to him? Take him for a walk outside, once in the morning, once in the evening? He likes this very much. You will not forget?”

The Countess Kandinsky was not an easy person to say no to. And anyway, the truth is I was flattered to be asked. I did wonder how I would be able to manage it in between my other duties downstairs. But I wondered also whether maybe she'd give me a good tip for it, though I certainly didn't dare say anything about that.

The Countess smiled at me and held out her gloved hand to me for me to take. I hesitated. I had never before shaken hands with a guest. Bell-boys just didn't ever shake hands with guests. But I knew she meant me to, so I did. Her hand was small and the glove very soft.

“You and me and Prince Kaspar, we shall be good friends. I know this. You may leave us now.”

So I turned to go.

“Johnny Trott,” she said, laughing again. “I am sorry, but you have a very funny name, maybe the funniest name I ever heard. I have decided you are a good boy, Johnny Trott. You know why I think this? You never ask for money. I shall pay you five shillings every week for three months – I am here for three months at the opera. Ah, so now you smile again, Johnny Trott. I like it when you smile. If you had a tail, you would be waving it like Prince Kaspar, I think.”

When I brought up her trunks later on and left them in the hallway of her suite, I heard her in the sitting room singing at the piano. I caught a glimpse of Kaspar lying there right in front of her, gazing at her, his tail swishing contentedly. When I left I stayed outside the door for a while just listening. I knew even then as I stood there in the corridor that this was a day I would never forget. But I could never have imagined in my wildest dreams how the arrival of the Countess

and the coming of Kaspar would change my life for ever.





Not Johnny Trott at All

I never had a mother, nor a father come to that, nor any brothers or sisters, none that I know of anyway. Not that I have ever felt sorry for myself. The truth is that you don't miss what you've never had. But you do wonder. As a small boy growing up in the orphanage in Islington, I often used to try to imagine who my mother was, what she looked like, how she dressed, how she spoke. For some reason I never much bothered about my father.

I must have been about nine years old, and on the way back from school one day, walking down Tollington Road, when I saw a fine lady passing by in a carriage. The carriage happened to stop right by me. She was dressed all in black and I could see she had been crying. I don't know why, but I smiled at her and she smiled back. At that moment I was sure she was my mother. Then the carriage moved on, and she was gone. For months afterwards I dreamed about her. But as the memory of that moment faded, so did the dream. I had other imaginary mothers of course. They didn't have to be posh or rich, but I certainly didn't want to believe that my mother might be down on her hands and knees scrubbing someone's doorstep, her nose and hands red and raw with the cold.

Above all my mother had to be beautiful. She couldn't be too old and she couldn't be too young. She mustn't have children. It was essential to me that I was the only child. And of course, she would have to have fair hair, because I had fair hair.

It was natural then, I suppose, that within a few days I had quite made up my mind that Countess Kandinsky fitted the bill perfectly. She was fair-haired, supremely beautiful and elegant, about the right age to be my mother, and so far as I could tell, childless. So if she was my mother, it followed that I had to be a Russian count or prince – I didn't much mind which. The more I thought about it, the more I liked the idea, and the more I'd daydream about it. I would lie awake in my little attic room up on the servant's corridor, where the roof leaked and the water pipes gurgled and groaned, and I'd dream my dream, knowing of course that it was probably all nonsense, but believing in it just enough for me to be able to enjoy it all the same. Thinking back, I'm sure it was this silly fantasy, as much as my cat-minding duties that made me look forward so much to visiting the Countess' rooms while she was at rehearsals. I went up there at every possible opportunity, as often as I could manage, without my absence in the lobby being noticed. I was always up and down in the lift, carrying luggage, and each time I'd just slip away for a minute or two and check on Kaspar. Mr Freddie noticed of course – he noticed everything.

"What have you been up to, lad?" he asked me once when I came back down.

"Nothing," I told him with a shrug.

"Well, one day," he said, "maybe that nothing will get you into a whole lot of trouble with Skullface. So you'd better watch your step." I knew Mr Freddie wouldn't snitch on me, he wasn't like that.

Usually I'd find Kaspar sitting at the bedroom window, watching the barges steaming by on the river, or sometimes he'd be curled up asleep in his chair in the sitting room. Either way, he'd hardly deign to give me a second glance until the food was in his bowl, and until he decided he was ready for it. Those first few days, I felt he was treating me in much the same way as most of the guests who came to the Savoy, with a certain cold disdain. I wanted to like him and be liked by him, but he kept his distance. I wanted to stroke him again, but I didn't dare because he made it perfectly clear by the way he looked at me that he didn't want me to. I did dare talk to him though – probably because he couldn't answer me back. I would crouch beside him as he lay in his chair cleaning himself after his meal, and I'd tell him how my name was not Johnny Trott at all, but Count Nicholas Kandinsky – the Tsar of Russia was called Nicholas, I knew that, so I

thought the name would do fine for me. I told Kaspar that I was in fact the long lost son of the Countess, that she had come to London to look for me, and that therefore I was to be treated with greater respect, even if he was a Prince, and that anyway there wasn't much difference between a Prince and a Count.



He'd listen for a while to my fantastical ramblings, but he'd soon tire of them, break into a great roaring purr, close his eyes and go to sleep. But then, after only a few days he surprised me by jumping up to sit on my lap after he'd finished his meal. I dared to hope that at last he was beginning to treat me as an equal, that he must have believed my story after all, that we might now be friends. So I stroked him.

Clearly I presumed too much. Kaspar sank his claws into my knee just to remind me who the Prince was, then sprang off my lap and went to the window, where he sat deliberately ignoring me, swishing his tail with quiet satisfaction and watching the barges on the river. I went to stand by him to try to make it up to him.

"And I love you too," I told him. I said it sarcastically, but even as I was saying it, I knew I really did mean it. He was an ungrateful, supercilious creature, and not at all endearing in any way. Yet despite all this I loved him, and I wanted him to love me too. There were moments when, if I'm honest, I relished Kaspar's aristocratic aloofness. Twice a day, during my work breaks, I'd take him out for his walk. We went to the park down by the river, but to get

to the park I had to walk Kaspar on his lead from the lift all the way across the lobby to the front door. I swear that Kaspar knew perfectly well that everyone was looking at him, admiring him. He certainly knew how to put on the style, stepping out all high and mighty like the Prince of Cats he was, his tail waving majestically. Did I feel proud! Mr Freddie would doff his top hat to us as we passed by. There was some mockery in the gesture, I knew, but there was something else too. Mr Freddie knew class when he saw it, and Prince Kaspar was class. He left no one in any doubt about that. Even the dogs in the park knew it. One withering look from Kaspar, and any notions they might have had of the prospect of a good cat-chase withered away instantly. Tails between their legs they would bark at us, but only from a safe distance. Kaspar made it plain that he simply despised them, and then he ignored them.



It was on a bench in the park one spring day, perhaps six weeks or so later, that Kaspar first showed me any real affection. He was sitting up on the park bench beside me basking in the sunshine, when without even thinking about it I found myself stroking his head. He looked up at me to let me know it was all fine by him, and then he smiled, I promise you he smiled. I felt his head pushing into my hand, felt the purr coming over him. His tail was trembling with pleasure. I know it sounds silly, but at that moment I felt so happy that I was almost purring myself. I looked into his eyes and for the first time I could tell that he liked me, that at last he thought of me as his friend. I felt honoured.

The next morning I met the Countess hurrying through the lobby.

“Ah Johnny Trott,” she said, as I opened the front door for her. “I am late for rehearsals. All my life I am late. You will walk with me. I have an important thing I must say to you.”

It was raining, so I held the umbrella for her as we crossed the Strand and walked up into Covent Garden, past the barrel organ with the monkey who turned the handle, and the blind soldier playing his accordion by the fruit stalls.

She stopped to pat the coalman's horse, who was standing between the shafts of his cart, hanging his head in the rain, and looking thoroughly miserable and soaked through. The Countess berated the coalman soundly when he came out of the pub, and told him in no uncertain terms that he should put a blanket on the horse in such weather, that in Russia they treated horses properly. The coalman was speechless, too stunned and shamefaced to argue. We walked on.

"I have much to thank you for, Johnny Trott. Prince Kaspar is a very happy cat, happy to be in London. And when Kaspar is happy, I am happy. I sing better when I know Kaspar is happy. This is true. You know how I know he is happy, because he smiled at me this morning. And this he does not do very often, so I know you must look after him very well."



I was about to tell her all about Kaspar smiling at me the day before, but she was in full flow and I didn't dare to interrupt her.

"Because you make us both so happy, Johnny Trott, I wish to invite you to *The Magic Flute*, to the opera at Covent Garden. Tomorrow evening. It is the first night. You will come?"

I was so taken aback I did not even think to thank her. "Me?" I said.

"Why not? You will sit in the best seat. Dress circle. You are a guest of the Queen of the Night."

"I'd really like to, Countess, honest I would," I told her, "but I can't. I'll be working. I don't finish till ten o'clock."

"Don't worry, I fixed this already with the manager at the hotel," she said,

with an imperious wave of her hand. “I told him you do not work tomorrow, you have the whole day off.”

“But you’ve got to be smart to go to the opera, Countess.” I said. “I’ve seen all the grand gentlemen and the ladies. I haven’t got the right clothes.”

“I’ll fix this too, Johnny Trott. You’ll see. I’ll fix everything.”

And so she did. She hired me a suit to wear – the first proper suit I ever put on. I could hardly believe it when I found myself the next day standing in front of her in her sitting-room, all washed and brushed up, while she adjusted my tie and collar. I remember that I was looking up into her face, and all I wanted to do was to call her “mother”, to hug her tight and never let go.



She frowned. “Why do you look at me like this, Johnny Trott?” she said. “I think maybe you have tears in your eyes. I like this. You are a boy with feeling, so you will be a man with big heart. Mozart had a big heart, and he was the greatest man who ever lived. A little mad maybe, but I think you have to be a little mad to be great. I love this man. I tell you something, Johnny Trott. I have no son, no husband. I have only Prince Kaspar and my music. But if I had a husband he would be Mozart, and I say something else: if I have a son, I want him to be like you. This is the truth. Now, Johnny Trott, I take your arm, and you

will walk me to Covent Garden. Be proud, Johnny Trott. Walk like Kaspar. Walk tall, like you are a Prince, like you are my son.”

This time when Mr Freddie saw me coming and raised his top hat, there was no mockery in it whatsoever, only open-mouthed astonishment. The Savoy lobby fell silent in utter disbelief as we strode through. I felt about ten feet tall, and that’s how I continued to feel as we made our way up through Covent Garden market to the Royal Opera House.

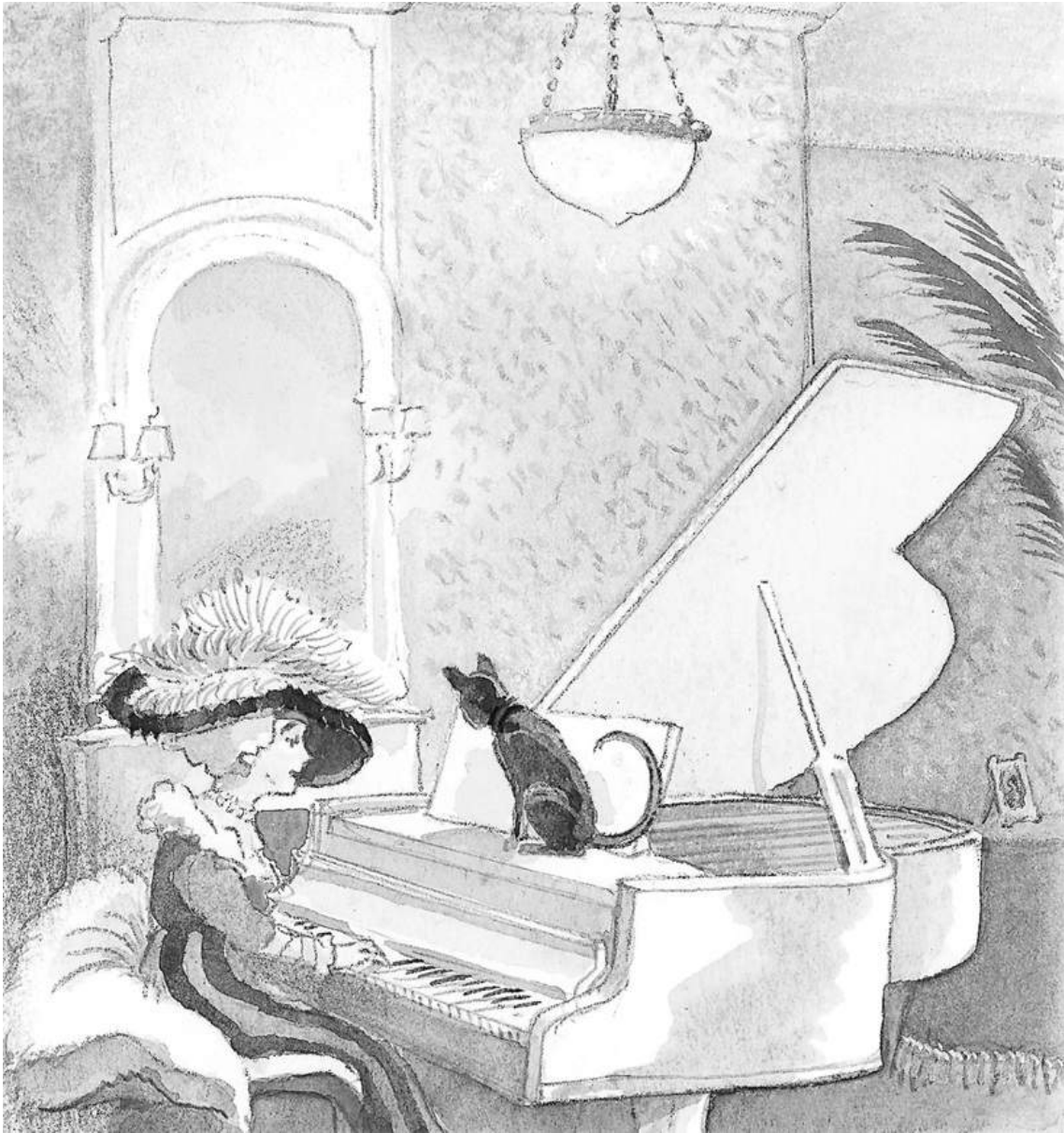
I should like to be able to say that I remember every moment, every note of my evening at the opera, but I do not. It passed in a blur of wonderment. I do however have a very clear memory of Countess Kandinsky as she made her first entrance as Queen of the Night, the rapturous applause after every aria she sang, and the standing ovation for her at the final curtain. In fact I was so proud of her, so carried away by it all, that I stuck my fingers in my mouth and gave her the loudest, longest whistle I could, ignoring the disapproving looks all around me. I knew full well it was not the thing to do, but I just didn’t care. I whistled again and again. I stood and clapped until my hands hurt, till the curtain closed for the last time.



As we walked back to the hotel together later that night I was so laden down with all the flowers she had been given that I could scarcely see in front of me. Kaspar was waiting for us when we got back, yowling around us until I gave him some milk. The Countess went straight to the piano, her hat still on, and began to play softly.

“This I play every night after the opera, before I go to bed. It is a lullaby by Mozart. It is beautiful, no? Prince Kaspar, he likes this very much.”

And as if to prove it Kaspar leaped up on to the piano to listen. “Johnny Trott,” she went on, still playing. “Do you think they liked how I sang tonight? You must tell me the truth.”



"Of course," I told her. "Didn't you hear them?"

"And you, Johnny Trott, do you like how I sing?"

"I never heard anything so wonderful," I said, and I meant it.

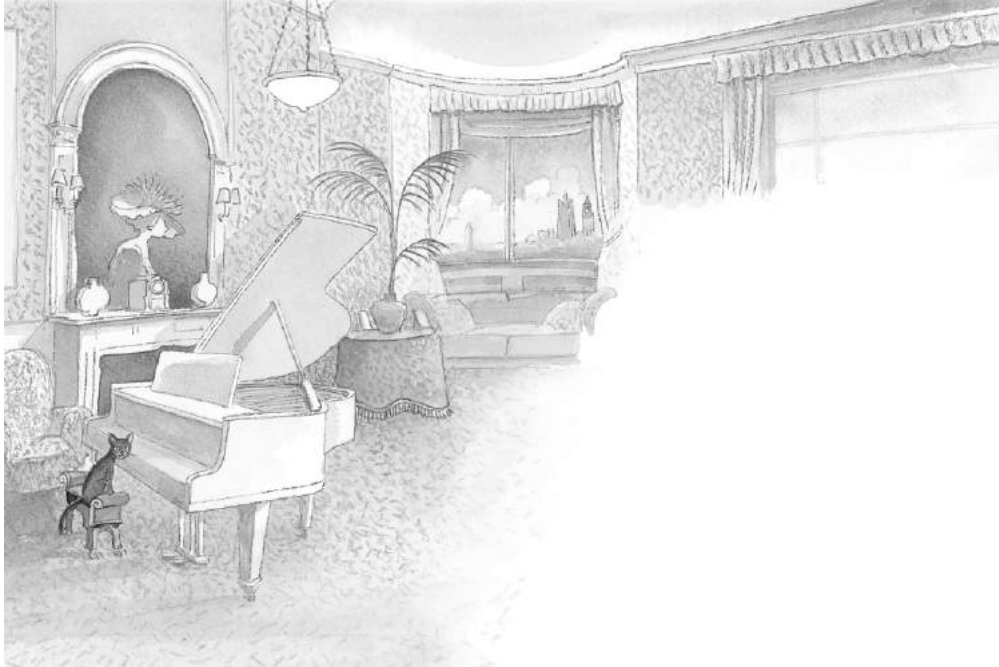
She stopped playing and beckoned me over to the piano. She reached up and brushed the hair from my forehead. "You go now, Johnny Trott. It is very late."

The next day Mr Freddie and all the others on the servant's corridor teased me mercilessly. "Who's a Laadeedaa lad then?" They called after me. "Laadeedaa!" Whatever they said, I didn't mind. I was on cloud nine. During our walk in the park that morning, I told Kaspar all about my night at the opera, how everyone there had taken the Countess to their hearts, how she would be the talk of

London, that he should be very proud of her. When no one was around I even whistled him a snatch of a tune I had remembered, but this did not seem to impress him at all.

When we came back through the front door half an hour later, I was expecting more of the same banter, more ribbing. I was even looking forward to it. But as I came through the lobby I noticed everyone was behaving very strangely, that they were averting their eyes, obviously not wanting to talk to me. I thought at first they must be angry with me. Mr Freddie came over to me then, and took me gently to one side, to offer me some advice, I thought, something he often did when I'd done something wrong.

"Best get this over with, Johnny," he began. "It's the Countess. She was knocked down an hour or so ago, just outside in the street. An omnibus it was. They say she walked straight out in front of it. Couldn't have seen it coming. We was all very fond of her, you most of all. Almost like a mother she was to you, wasn't she? I'm sorry, Johnny. She was a good lady, a fine lady, and a kind one too."



A Ghost in the Mirror

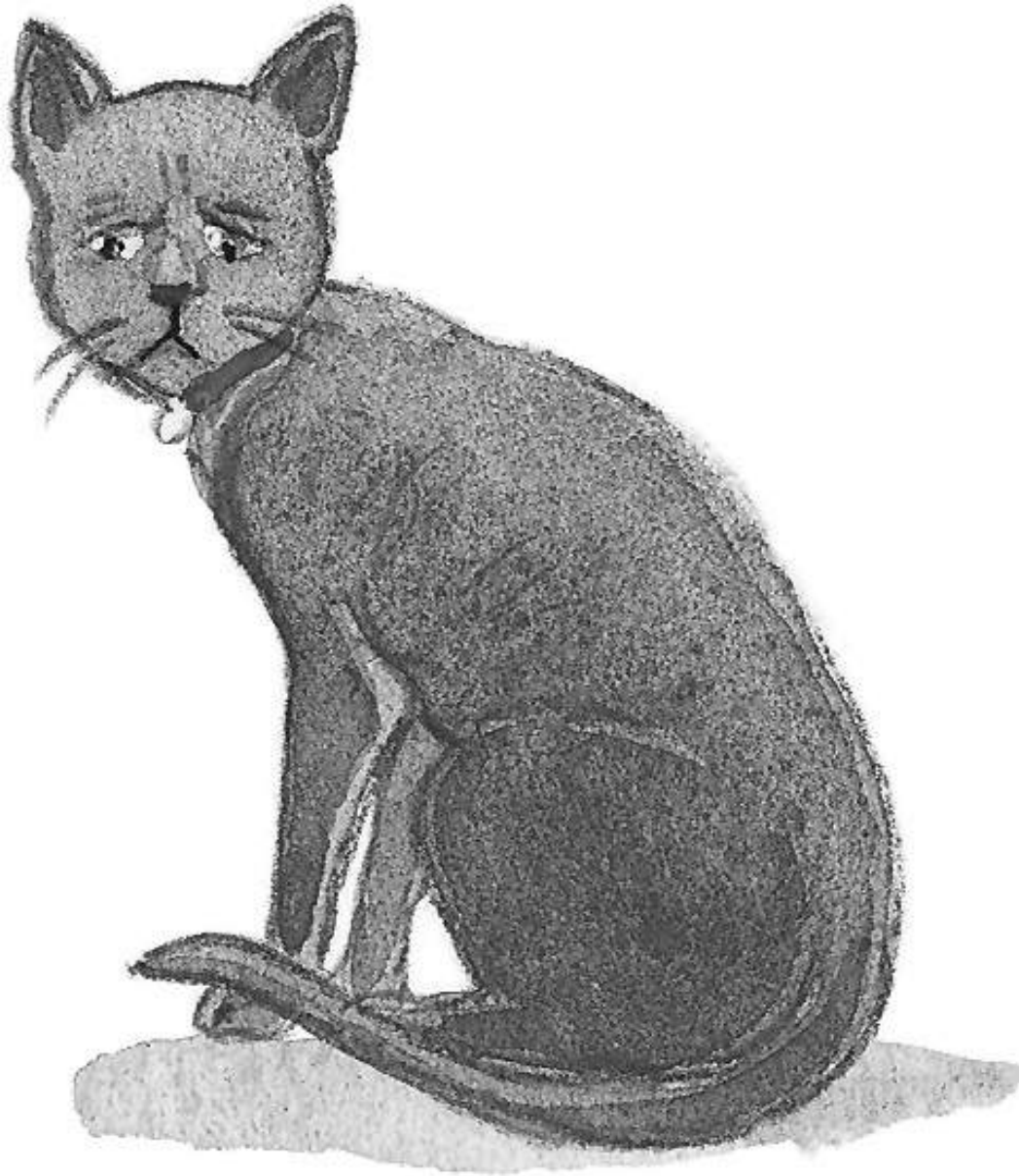
I cried myself to sleep that night. Mr Freddie was right. The Countess had been like a mother to me – not that I knew what a real mother was like, but she was certainly the mother I had always hoped to find. I had found her, and now she was gone. I had lost as well the first real friend I had ever had, the first person who had ever told me they liked me. I cannot tell you how grateful I have always been to her for that. In all my life I have never known anyone whose light shone so brightly, so brilliantly and so briefly. The shock of her death stunned everyone. For days afterwards the whole hotel was plunged into a deep sadness.

I hate to have to admit it, but to begin with I was too wrapped up in my own grief to notice Kaspar, nor to think very much about him and what would happen to him, now that the Countess was gone. It took Mr Freddie to jolt me out of my self-pity.

“I’ve been watching you, Johnny lad,” he said to me one evening. “You’ve been moping about the place all day. You’ve got to buck yourself up, you have. It won’t hardly bring her back, will it? And I’m sure it’s not what she would have wanted. You know what she’d have wanted. She’d like for you to go on looking after that cat of hers as well as you can, for as long as you can. And if you’re feeling bad, think what that cat must be feeling. So you go up there,

Johnny and see to him. The Countess' rooms are bought and paid for another month at least, so I've been told. I reckon it's your job to look after that Kaspar, till someone from the family comes and fetches him away."

So that's what I did, and that's when I began to notice how sad Kaspar had become. That's when I noticed something else too. Every time I went in to be with Kaspar it was as if the Countess was there in the room with me. Sometimes I thought I even smelled her perfume. Sometimes I was sure I heard her humming and singing. More than once, late in the evening, I heard that lullaby playing on the piano. And time and again I thought I caught sight of her in the mirror, but when I turned round she wasn't there. I knew she had been, though. I was certain of it. I wasn't frightened, not exactly. But it troubled me, and made me feel uncomfortable every time I went into her room.



It was obvious to me that Kaspar sensed her presence too. He was not himself at all. He was nervous, restless, anxious. He didn't purr anymore. He'd stopped washing himself, and so far as I could see, he hardly slept. He'd spend hours searching the rooms for the Countess, yowling piteously. He wouldn't eat, he wouldn't drink. He was clearly pining for her. I decided that maybe if I took him out more often, for walks in the park, it might help him. He drank from the puddles then, which was something.

I tried to reassure him all I could. I told him over and over that everything would be all right. Sitting there on our bench one day I promised him faithfully that I'd look after him. But I could see he wasn't listening. More and more he

just didn't seem to care. More and more he just didn't seem to want to go on living. I tried feeding him by hand, but he would only sniff at it and turn away. I tried calves liver from the kitchen. I tried best beef, finely chopped. Nothing worked. Kaspar was losing weight all the time, losing his sleekness. His coat was beginning to stare. He was already the ghost of his former self. There seemed to be nothing I could do to halt his decline. I knew if he went on like this, it could only end one way. Now I would lie awake at night, not grieving for the Countess any more, but trying desperately to think of some way of saving Kaspar's life.



It was during one of these long and sleepless nights that I had an idea. It occurred to me that it was only in the Countess' rooms that I had felt her presence, that I'd caught my fleeting glimpses of her. Maybe it was the same for Kaspar. Maybe that was what was troubling him. If I got him out of those rooms somehow, and away from her, then he might possibly be able to forget her.

I had it in my head that the only thing to do was to bring Kaspar up to my little attic room and look after him there. That way I could also be with him more often. But I knew from the start there would be problems. Sooner or later, as Mr Freddie had said, the Countess' relations would be coming to collect her belongings, and no one knew when that would be. One thing was for sure: they'd

be coming for Kaspar too, and they'd expect to find him in her rooms. And if he wasn't there, they'd be bound to ask me where he was. Just about everyone who worked in the hotel knew by now that I had been looking after Kaspar. I couldn't say I was keeping him in my room because we were absolutely forbidden to keep pets in our rooms. The house rules were very strict. No birds in cages, no goldfish, no cats, no dogs, no mice. In fact no friends of any kind were allowed up in the servants' rooms, animal or human. Breaking any of the house rules would lead to instant dismissal – Skullface never showed any mercy. I told Mr Freddie my plans because I knew he'd understand. He said it was far too dangerous to take Kaspar up there, that I'd be out of a job and on the streets just like that if Skullface ever found out about it.

"You don't want to risk everything for a cat, Johnny," he said. "Not even for Kaspar."

It was good advice. I thought about it long and hard, but in the end I knew I had no choice. I could think of no other way of saving Kaspar. I told everyone on the servants' corridor what I was doing – there was no way I could keep a cat up there in my room and keep it a secret from them. One thing was certain: none of them would snitch on me to Skullface, we all hated her far too much. Besides, they all realised by now just how ill Kaspar was, and they all wanted to help. He'd become quite a favourite.

Late one evening we all crowded into my room where Mary O'Connell, one of the scullery maids, made us all join hands and make a secret pact not to tell a living soul. Mary was an Irish girl from County Galway. She was a powerful character and had a persuasive way with words. She was very religious-minded, and she made us all swear on her bible never to say a word. Luke Tandy, a waiter in the Riverside Restaurant, said he wouldn't swear on the bible because he didn't believe in all that "religious malarkey".

"Well you'd better believe something else then, Luke," Mary told him, wagging her finger at him. "You say a word to a soul, and I'll beat the living daylights out of you, so I will."

All I had to worry about now was Skullface herself. She hardly ever made an appearance on our corridor but we all knew she could come up there any time. We had to keep an eye out for her, but most of all we had to get lucky.



That same night I crept downstairs, let myself into the Countess' room, and carried Kaspar up into his new home in my little attic room. As soon as I got him there I sat him on the bed beside me and gave him a good talking to. "None of your yowling, Kaspar. If Skullface finds you up here, we're done for, me and you both. And you've got to eat. You've got to get better, you hear me?" He didn't yowl, but he didn't eat either. He just lay there curled up on my bed sleeping, and hardly moved. When I left him to go on duty downstairs in the

lobby he took very little notice of me. And he took very little notice of me when I came back either. Mary O'Connell tried to feed him, tried to talk him into it, but he wasn't interested. Almost everyone on the corridor had a go. We tried chicken, salmon, even caviar once – anything Mary could filch from the kitchens without being noticed. All of it went uneaten. He wouldn't touch anything, not even his milk.



Just in case the Countess' relatives turned up, I'd put it about everywhere – we all had – that Kaspar had escaped from the Countess' rooms and could not be found. I made a great song and dance about organising a search of the whole hotel, pretended to be beside myself with worry, and I asked everyone to keep an

eye out for him. Mr Freddie knew what I was up to of course, but besides Mary and Luke and all the gang on our corridor, no one else did. So now I could only take Kaspar for his walk at night time, when hardly anyone would be about. I'd hurry out the back way, through the tradesmen's entrance, with Kaspar hidden under my coat. While we were out there in the park he seemed to perk up for a while, but it never lasted. Back in my room he would curl up again, and close his eyes. Often I would hear him sighing deeply, almost as if he wished every breath to be his last. It broke my heart to see him like this. I felt so utterly helpless.

Meanwhile the Countess' brother and sister came to take away all her things. They asked after Kaspar, and I told them, as I'd told everyone else, that he'd disappeared. In the Countess' sitting room they stood by the piano for a while and cried on one another's shoulders. I found myself looking again in the mirror, where I had so often caught a ghostly glimpse of the Countess. I did not see her this time but I felt her presence. I made her a silent promise then and there that I wouldn't let Kaspar die.

As it turned out Kaspar didn't die. He was saved. But I have to say that it had nothing whatsoever to do with me. In the end, Kaspar was saved by happenchance, by pure happy circumstance.

I had seen the Stanton family about in the hotel, but to begin with had paid them little enough attention. They seemed a lot like other rich families that came to stay for a month or two in the hotel. They were American; father, mother, and a little girl. Both the parents seemed rather stiff and prim and proper, even a bit standoffish, which in my experience was not at all like most of the Americans guests I'd met in the hotel. The little girl was different though. She was about seven or eight, I guessed, and was always in trouble, always being ticked off by her mother. She was for ever wandering off on her own and getting herself lost. As I was soon to learn, getting lost didn't upset her one bit, but it did upset her parents, particularly her mother, whom I'd often see hurrying through the lobby in search of her. It was from her mother, one breakfast time, that I first learned the little girl's name.



“Elizabeth. I’m looking for Elizabeth,” she said, rushing up the stairs into the lobby from the Riverside Restaurant. All her usual composure was gone. There was a wild and anxious look about her. “She’s run off again. Have you seen her? Have you seen her?”

Fortunately Mr Freddie was nearby. He was always good in these situations. “Don’t you worry, Mrs Stanton, we’ll find her for you. She hasn’t come through the front door, so she’s got to be in the hotel somewhere. Young Johnny here

will look upstairs. Every floor, Johnny, make sure you search every floor thoroughly. And meanwhile, Mrs Stanton, I'll have a good look around for her down here. We'll have her back with you in a jiffy, lickedysplit. You'll see." He clapped his hands at me. "Off you go, Johnny lad. Jaldi, jaldi. Sharp about it now, there's a good lad."

An hour later I'd searched every floor of the hotel, high and low, and there was still no sign of her. I was about to check downstairs to see if Mr Freddie hadn't already found her, when I wondered if I should check the servants' corridor up in the attic.

I thought it very unlikely she'd be up there, but Mr Freddie had told me to search every floor. And besides, I remembered my own childhood well enough to know that children like to hide in the most unexpected places. So I climbed the stairs to have a look.

From the far end of the corridor I could already see that the door to my room was open, and I knew at once she must be in there. As I stole along the corridor I could hear her talking inside my room.



"Good cat," she was saying, "nice cat, beautiful cat." I found her kneeling at the foot of my bed. Beside her was Kaspar, eating ravenously from his bowl, wolfing down the liver I had left for him, and purring like a lion.



“Who Gives a Fig, Anyway?”

Elizabeth looked up at me and smiled. “Hello,” she said. “My name is Miss Elizabeth Stanton. What’s the cat called?”

“Kaspar,” I told her.

“Is he yours?”

“Yes,” I said. “And this is my room too.”

“I knocked and there was no one in,” she went on. “So I thought it would be a good place to hide. I like hiding. Then I saw this cat lying on the bed, and he looked so sad. He’s very beautiful, but he’s very thin, you know, and he doesn’t look at all well. Look at him. He’s starving hungry. You should feed Kaspar more often, that’s what I think.”

“Your mother’s been looking for you. She thought you’d got lost,” I told her, trying my best to hide my growing irritation. To be honest, I didn’t much like being told by some hoity-toity little rich girl that Kaspar needed to eat more. Hadn’t I been trying for weeks on end now to get him to do just that? And although I was relieved to see Kaspar eating again, I have to confess I was more than a little upset that this little girl seemed to have succeeded so easily where I had failed. So the truth is that at our first meeting I was not at all disposed to like

Miss Elizabeth Stanton. She seemed far too full of herself for my liking.

"You just wait till I tell Mama and Papa about Kaspar," she went on. "Can I take him downstairs to show them?"

It hadn't even occurred to me until that moment that this little girl could blow the whole secret. I crouched down so that we were face to face and put my hands on her shoulders. She had to know just how serious I was about this. "You can't. You can't say a word," I told her. "The thing is, you see, I'm not allowed to keep pets up here. Against the rules, see? No pets in the servants' quarters. If anyone finds out, I'll get the sack, lose my position. I'll have nowhere to live, and neither will Kaspar. No one else knows he lives up here. So you won't tell anyone, will you? It'll be our little secret, right?"

She was looking at me very intently all the while. She thought for a moment or two. Then she said: "I don't like rules, especially unfair rules like not being allowed to keep a cat. So I won't tell anyone, cross my heart and hope to die." Then she added, "But you will let me come up and feed Kaspar again sometime, won't you?"

I hadn't any choice.

"I suppose so," I said. "If you want to."

"I do, I do," she cried. "I like him so much, and he likes me, I know he does."



It was true. Kaspar was looking up at her adoringly. He could hardly take his

eyes off her. She grabbed my hand and shook it. "Oh thank you, thank you. But I don't know your name, do I?"

"Johnny Trott," I told her. She let out a peal of laughter. "Johnny Rot. Johnny Rot. That's such a funny name. Bye Kaspar, bye Johnny Rot." And still giggling she skipped off down the corridor and was gone. As I watched her go I remembered the last person who had found my name so funny. I was already disliking Elizabeth a little less.

I had no idea then and I still have no idea now how she managed to get Kaspar to eat his liver that morning. I asked her later on, once I'd got to know her better, and she gave me one of her infuriating shrugs. "S'easy when you know how," she told me. "Animals always do whatever I want, because they know I'd do anything for them, and that's because they know I love them, and that's why they love me." She had this way, as some children do, of making everything sound so simple and straightforward.

After that first surprise visit, Miss Elizabeth Stanton, or Lizziebeth as I discovered she liked to be called, came up to my room to feed Kaspar at least twice a day without fail. Sometimes I was there, sometimes I wasn't. Whenever she'd been I'd find a little scribbled note on my pillow. It would say something like this:

"Dear Jonny Rot, I came to feed Caspa again. I stoll some smoked samon from my breakfast. He likes it a lot which I don't because it smells of fish wich is horrible. I made your bed too which you didn't. And you should too. Don worry your secrets safe. Promise. I like secrits because its like hidding and I like hidding. from your friend Lizziebeth."

There's no doubt at all in my mind that it was the arrival of Lizziebeth that saved Kaspar's life. Somehow she brought joy into his life where there had only been sorrow. With her there beside him he was eating and drinking everything that was put in front of him. Within a week he was beginning to sharpen his claws, mostly on the curtains, but sometimes on my trousers, and when I was wearing them too. That hurt a lot. I didn't mind much, though, because I was just so happy to see him getting better. His coat shone, his tail swished, and when one day he smiled up at me I knew for sure that Prince Kaspar Kandinsky was himself again. Lizziebeth had lifted his spirits, and she'd lifted mine too. But I was worried that one day she might "let the cat out of the bag", so to speak. I kept reminding her that secrecy was everything.



“Remember, Lizziebeth, you’ve got to keep schtum,” I told her one evening, tapping my nose conspiratorially. She liked that. So whenever she left my room after that, she’d tap her nose. “Schtum,” she’d whisper. “I’ve got to keep schtum.”



Lizziebeth became quite a little mascot on our corridor, and quite a hero too on account of everything she'd done for Kaspar. She may have been a little bit on the talkative side, and could be quite mischievous too – she was a bundle of fun and she made us all laugh. But I couldn't help wondering whether she might one day become too overexcited and blurt out our secret by mistake.

I took all the precautions I could, asking her to always check behind her before she climbed the stairs to our corridor, and I made it an absolute rule that she spoke in whispers whenever she came to see us. Those, it seemed, were the kind of rules she was quite happy with. Lizziebeth liked anything, I discovered, that involved some kind of conspiracy. It was during these long whispered conversations in my room that I got to know so much more about her. Actually, to begin with they weren't conversations at all, not as such. They were more like monologues. Once Lizziebeth started one of her stories, there was no stopping her. "Do you know..." she'd begin, and on she'd go, on and on. She'd sit there cross-legged on the floor of my room with Kaspar on her lap and just talk and talk. And I'd be happy to listen, because she told me of a world I'd never seen inside before. For over a year now, ever since I'd left the orphanage, I'd served people like her at the Savoy; fetched and carried for them, polished their boots, brushed their coats, opened doors for them, bowed and scraped, as bell-boys have to do. But until now not one of them had ever really talked to me, unless

they were snapping their fingers at me, or ordering me to do something.



It's true that I wasn't sure sometimes whether Lizziebeth was talking to me or to Kaspar. It didn't much matter either way. Both of us would listen as entranced as the other, Kaspar gazing up into her eyes all the while, purring with pleasure, and me hanging on her every word.

Once she told us about the great ship she'd come over on from America, about the icebergs she'd seen, as tall as the skyscrapers in New York, which was where she lived, how one day when they were at sea she'd wandered off on her own to find somewhere to hide, and found herself right down below in the engine room. There was quite a kerfuffle, she said, because everyone thought she'd fallen overboard. When at last she was found and brought back to their cabin her mother had cried and cried, and called her "my little angel", but her father had told her she was "the naughtiest girl in the whole world". So she wasn't sure *what* she was.



Afterwards they had taken her to the Captain of the ship who had a great, fat face and sad eyes, like a walrus she said, and they'd made her apologise for causing so much trouble to the crew who had been searching for her all over the ship for two hours before she was found, and to the Captain who'd had to stop the ship in mid-ocean, and had lookouts scanning the ocean with binoculars looking for her. She had to promise faithfully in front of the Captain never to go off on her own while they were on the ship. She promised with her fingers crossed behind her, she said, so it didn't count. So when it got rough a day or two later and they were being tossed about in the biggest, greenest waves she'd ever seen, and everyone was as sick as dogs, she decided she'd do what one of

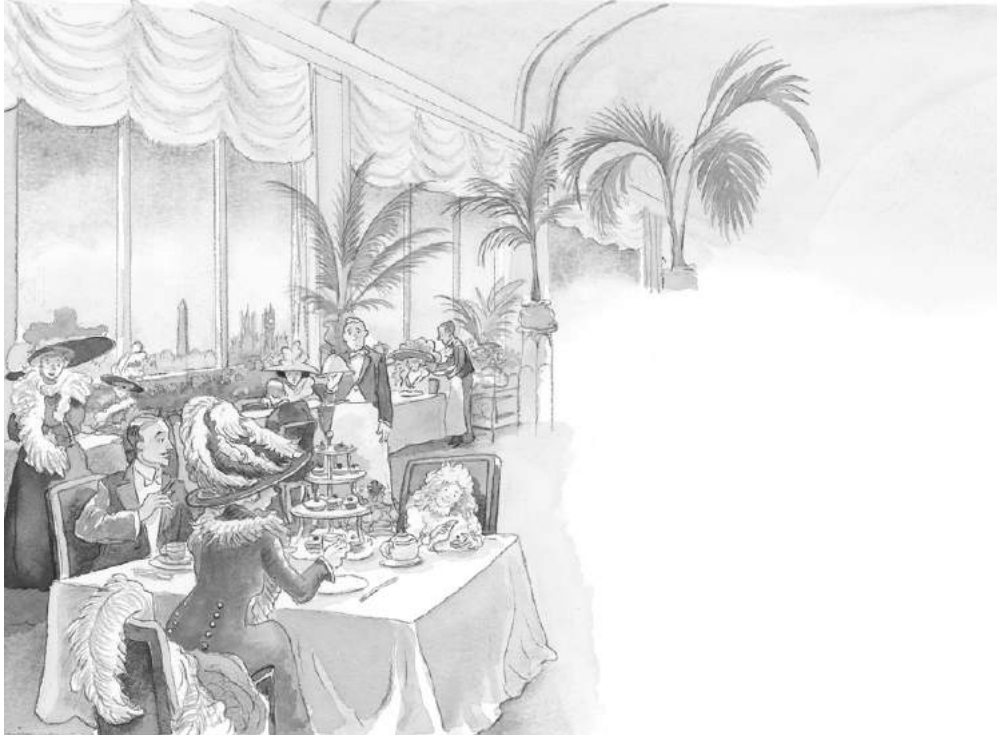
the sailors had told her to do if it ever got rough, to go down to the very bottom of the ship where the boat doesn't roll so much, and just lie down. The very bottom of the ship, she discovered, was full of cows and calves. So she lay down beside them in the straw, and that was where they found her, fast asleep, when the storm was over. This time they were *both* "mad" with her. So she was locked in the cabin as a punishment. She shrugged. "I didn't care," she told me. "Who gives a fig, anyway?"



Back at home in New York her governess was always sending her up to her room to make her do her writing all over again, or because her spelling wasn't good enough. She was always being sent to her room by her mother too, for

running around the house when she should walk, or making a noise when her father was working in his study. “I didn’t mind,” she said, with a shrug and a little laugh. “I didn’t give a fig, anyway.” In the holidays the family would sail up the coast to Maine in their three-masted yacht, which was called the *Abe Lincoln*, and they’d live in this big house on an island where there was no other house but theirs, and no one there except them, their guests and the servants. One day she decided to be a pirate, so she tied a spotted pirate’s scarf around her head and went off with a spade to look for buried treasure. And when they came calling for her she hid away in a cave, and she only came out when she was good and ready. She knew they’d be mad at her, but she really didn’t like anyone calling for her “like I was some kind of a dog”. So when she strolled back into the house that evening, she was sent straight up to bed without any dinner. “I didn’t want any dinner anyway,” she said, “so I didn’t give a fig, anyway, did I?”

Bit by bit, through these stories and dozens of others, I pieced together something of the lives of Lizziebeth and her family. I looked at them now with very different eyes whenever they walked by me on their way into breakfast, whenever I opened the door for them or wished them good morning. Lizziebeth would give me a great beaming smile whenever she saw me in the lobby, and Mr Freddie would wink at me from the front door, and sometimes he’d *miaow* softly as he passed me by. Such moments were enough to lift my spirits all day long. Life was suddenly good, and fun too. Kaspar was well again, we had both found a new friend, and our secret was safe. Everything was fine, or so I thought.



Running Wild

Everything after that seemed to happen suddenly, and in very quick succession. It was a quiet weekend at the hotel, with fewer guests around. There were no big dressy dinners, no grand balls, no smart parties. All of us who worked there preferred it like this, even if the days could drag a bit. Everyone was more relaxed. I liked the weekends anyway, because Kaspar and I usually saw more of Lizziebeth then. She'd be bored out of her mind downstairs, and would often sneak up to see Kaspar, sometimes three or four times a day, leaving me a note each time. I finished work earlier on a Sunday, so usually she'd be up there in my room with Kaspar, waiting for me when I got back. Sometimes she'd steal away some scones and cake, hiding them away in a napkin – she was always saying I was too thin and needed feeding up – and since I was always more than a little hungry after work, I didn't argue with her.

We were sitting there one Sunday evening tucking into some delicious fruit cake, when I heard a voice in the corridor outside. Skullface! It was Skullface! She was talking to Mary O'Connell, and she was not in a good mood.

“That idiot boy, Johnny Trott, is he in?”

“I haven’t seen him, Mrs Blaise,” Mary told her. “Honest.”

The footsteps came closer and closer, the bunch of keys rattling louder with every step.

Skullface was ranting now. “Do you know what that he’s gone and done? Well, I’ll tell you, shall I? He’s only used a black brush on Lord Macauley’s best brown boots. There’s black all over them. And who gets the blame? Me. Well. I’ll have his guts for garters, I will. Where is he?”

“I don’t know, Mrs Blaise, honest to God I don’t.” Mary was doing her best for me.

The footsteps were right outside my door now, and there I was with Lizziebeth in my room, and Kaspar cleaning himself on her lap. All she had to do was to open the door and I’d get the sack for sure. I could hear my heart pounding in my ears. I was praying that somehow, anyhow, Mary would prevent her from opening that door. It was this very moment that Kaspar chose to stop washing his paws and spring out of Lizziebeth’s lap, yowling in his fury. It wasn’t his gentle *miaow*, this was his wailing war cry, and it was shrill and loud, horribly loud. For a moment or two there was silence outside the door. Then, “A cat! As I live and breathe, a cat!” cried Skullface. “Johnny Trott’s got a cat in his room! How dare he? How dare he? It’s against the rules, my rules!”

I looked aghast at Lizziebeth. Without a moment’s hesitation she picked up Kaspar, and dumped him unceremoniously in my arms. “In the wardrobe,” she whispered. “Get in the wardrobe. Quick!”

Once in there I crouched down, stroking Kaspar frantically to calm him down, to stop him from yowling again. Then I heard something I simply couldn’t believe. Kaspar was yowling again, from outside the wardrobe, from my room. Yet he couldn’t be, because he was with me, inside the wardrobe, in my arms and he definitely wasn’t yowling. Yet he *was* yowling – I could hear him! In my panic and confusion it took several moments before I realised what was going on: Lizziebeth was out there in my room and mimicking Kaspar pitch perfectly.

Mary told me afterwards – she told everyone afterwards – exactly what had happened. Apparently Lizziebeth opened the door to Skullface yowling and wailing at her just like Kaspar. Skullface just stood there, gaping at Lizziebeth. She could not believe her eyes. It was a while before she could speak at all. Her mouth opened and shut like a goldfish, Mary said. Then Skullface gathered herself a little. “What on earth, young lady...” she said at last. “What on earth do you think you are doing up here in the servants’ quarters, young lady? It’s strictly out of bounds.”



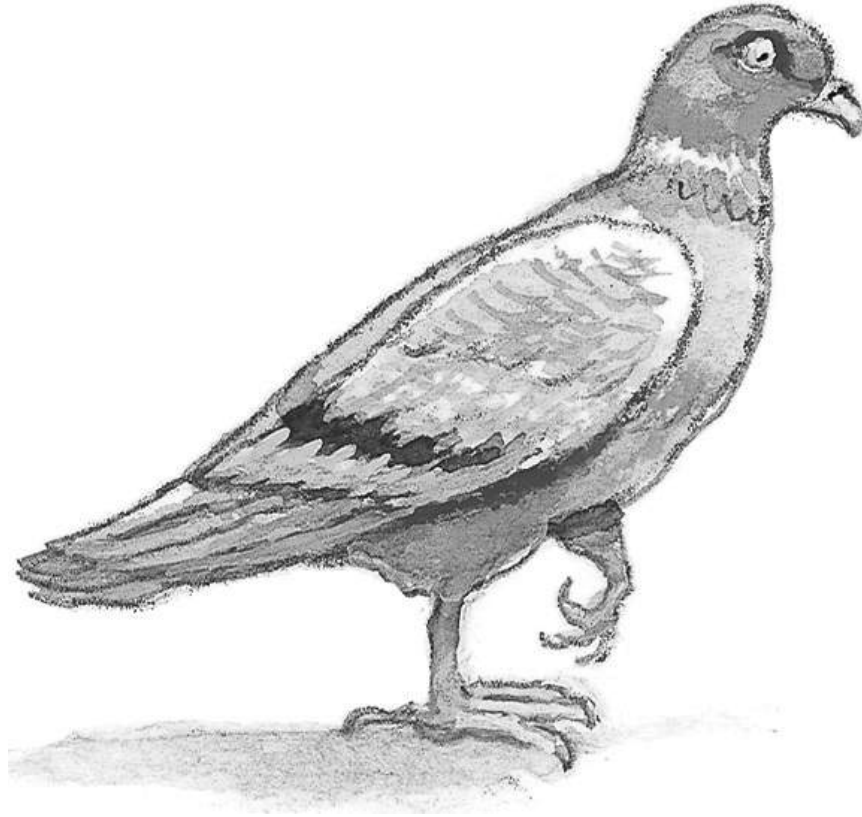
Lizziebeth yowled back at her. “I’m a cat,” she said quite calmly, in between yowls. “I was chasing a mouse, and he ran in here. So I ran in after him and I caught him. I’m very good at catching mice, you know. I gobbled him up, just like that. One gulp. I’ve got to tell you, he tasted just wonderful. Best mouse I ever ate. Byeeee!” With that, she yowled at the astonished Skullface, and skipped off down the corridor, still yowling as she went, past Skullface, past Mary and the others, all of whom by now had come out into the corridor to see what all the fuss was about.

Skullface, it seems, then stuck her head round my door, took one quick look into the room, slammed the door furiously behind her, and stormed off down the corridor, fulminating as she went. “Children, wretched children!” she fumed. “If I had my way they wouldn’t be allowed in the Savoy at all. Nothing but a nuisance, a perfect nuisance. If there’s one thing I can’t stand it’s a spoilt child. And an American spoilt child is the worst of all, the work of the devil himself! Running wild like that all over my hotel. How dare she?” She stopped and turned round, wagging her finger at everyone. “And you tell that Johnny Trott when you see him that he will apologise to Lord Macauley, and polish his boots again. This time I want them nutty brown and shining, not a trace of black, and he’s to come and show them to me before he returns them to his lordship. At once, at once. You tell him.”

How we laughed in the corridor when she’d gone. We were doubled up and aching with it. Lizziebeth, who was already a great favourite with everyone up there, had now become a matchless heroine to us all. Her quick thinking, her brazenness and her fearlessness had saved the day, probably saved my job too, and most certainly saved Kaspar from being taken away.

But it was only the next day that this same fearlessness very nearly cost her her life, and mine too, come to that. It was from Kaspar that I first learned something was wrong. He was always happy to see me when I came upstairs after work. He'd be lying there on the bed, his legs in the air, his tail swishing, willing me to tickle his tummy. I came back to my room to see him at about eleven o'clock, my usual time, my first work-break of the morning. I was hoping Lizziebeth might be there with him. But this morning she wasn't. And neither was Kaspar lying on my bed. Instead he was pacing the room and yowling. He was in a very agitated state, leaping up and down and off the windowsill. I'd seen him do this before if there was a pigeon strutting up and cooing at him from the parapet outside the window. But there was no pigeon. I tried feeding Kaspar – I thought it might calm him down – but he wasn't interested. Clearly nothing mattered to him except whatever was going on outside that window. So I climbed up, and opened the window wide enough for me to crane my neck, so I could see all the way along the narrow gully in both directions. No pigeons there either.

That was when I spotted Lizziebeth. I could see at once what she was trying to do. She was on her hands and knees and climbing out of the gully up on to the roof tiles. Ahead of her was a pigeon, hopping ever upwards on one leg towards the ridge of the roof. Its other leg hung useless. Lizziebeth was following it, cooing as she climbed, stopping from time to time to throw it some crumbs, trying all she could to entice it down. She seemed quite unaware of the danger she was in.



My first instinct was to shout to her, to warn her, but something told me that to alarm her at that moment was the worst thing I could do. Instead, I climbed out of the window, closing it behind me so that Kaspar couldn't follow me, and crept along the gully trying not to look down over the parapet and down into the street, eight storeys below. Lizziebeth had almost reached the ridge above me, but by now the pigeon was hopping away from her along the ridge towards the chimney stack. I climbed up after her. Only when I was right below her did I venture to call out to her, and then only as softly as I could.

"Lizziebeth," I said. "It's me. It's Johnny. I'm right below you. You mustn't go any higher. You mustn't."

She didn't look down at first. She just kept climbing.

"It's the pigeon," she told me. "He's awful hurt. Looks like he's broke his leg or something."

That was the moment she looked down. Only then did she realise just how high she was. All her fearlessness left her in an instant. She slipped at once and clung there, frozen with terror. The ridge was only a short distance above her, but I could see that she wasn't going to be able to get up there on her own, not now, and that there was no possible way she could come down either.

"Stay right where you are, Lizziebeth," I told her. "Don't move, I'm coming

up.”

All I could think of was that somehow I had to get her up on to that ridge. We’d just sit there until we were seen and rescue came. But between me and her was a steep, tiled roof, acres of tiles, it seemed, and with no foothold, nothing to hold on to. One slip, one loose tile, and I’d be slipping and sliding back down the roof and probably over the parapet. It didn’t bear thinking about. So I tried not to. That was why I talked to her all the way up as I climbed. I wasn’t only trying to calm her fears, I was desperately trying to calm my own.



“Just hang on, Lizziebeth. Look up at the pigeon. Whatever you do, don’t look down. I’m coming. I’ll be right there. Promise.”

I climbed as fast as my shaking legs would allow. I went sideways across the tiles like a crab, zigzagging up the roof. It was longer, but it made it easier, safer, less steep. I just fixed my mind on reaching that ridge, and climbed. More than once I dislodged a tile and sent it crashing down into the gully below. Then at last I was up there and sitting astride the ridge. Now I was able to reach down, grasp Lizziebeth by the wrist and haul her up. We sat there facing one another, safe for the moment, but both of us breathless with fear. The pigeon was quite oblivious to all that had been done to help him. He hopped one-legged back down the roof, along the gully, and then up on to the parapet, pecking away at the crumbs as he went. He flew off quite happily.

Someone must have been watching all this drama unfold, because the Fire Brigade came soon enough. There were bells clanging in the street below, and firemen in shiny helmets began to appear all along the gully below, one of them talking to us all the while, telling us again and again not to move. The truth is that neither of us could have moved even if we’d wanted to. They ran ladders up to us and lifted us down, Lizziebeth first. When at last I was carried in through

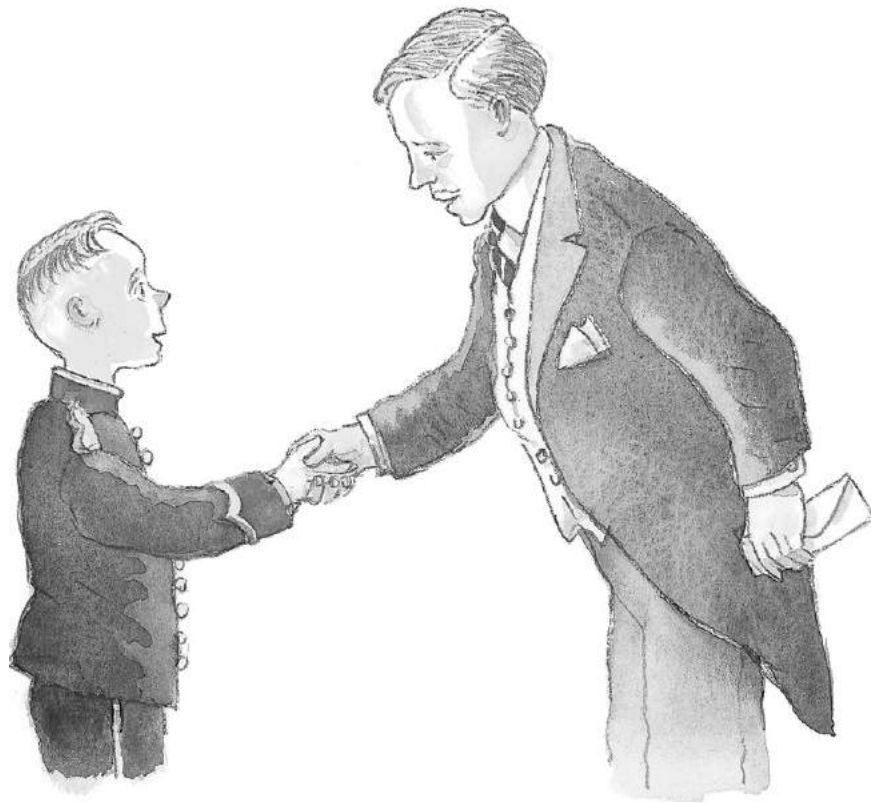
the big window at the end of our corridor, I saw it was crowded with people. The hotel manager was there, Skullface, Mary, Luke, Mr Freddie, everyone. As I walked by they all began to clap me on the back. It was only then that I really understood what I'd done. The manager pumped my hand, and told me I was a proper little hero. But Skullface wasn't clapping. She wasn't smiling either. She knew something wasn't quite as it should be, but I could tell she didn't know what it was. I smiled at her though, defiantly, triumphantly. I think I enjoyed that moment more than all the backslapping and handshaking. Although that was fun too.

They laid on a celebratory supper for me down in the kitchens that night, and sat me at the head of the table. They sang *For He's a Jolly Good Fellow* over and over again. We had quite a night of it. After a while the manager came to fetch me away. He was taking me up to the Stantons' rooms, he told me, because the family wanted to thank me personally. When I was ushered in, I found the three of them lined up in the sitting room to greet me, Lizziebeth in her dressing gown. It was all very formal and proper. I stood before them, trying all I could not to catch Lizziebeth's eye. I knew that just one look between us could give everything away.

"Young man," Mr Stanton began. "Mrs Stanton and I, but most of all Elizabeth of course, owe you a very great debt of gratitude."

Suddenly I saw, and I could not have been more surprised, that there were tears in his eyes, and his voice broke. I had never imagined that men such as this could ever cry.

"Elizabeth is our only child," he went on, his voice charged with emotion. "She is very precious to us, and today you saved her life. We shall not forget this."

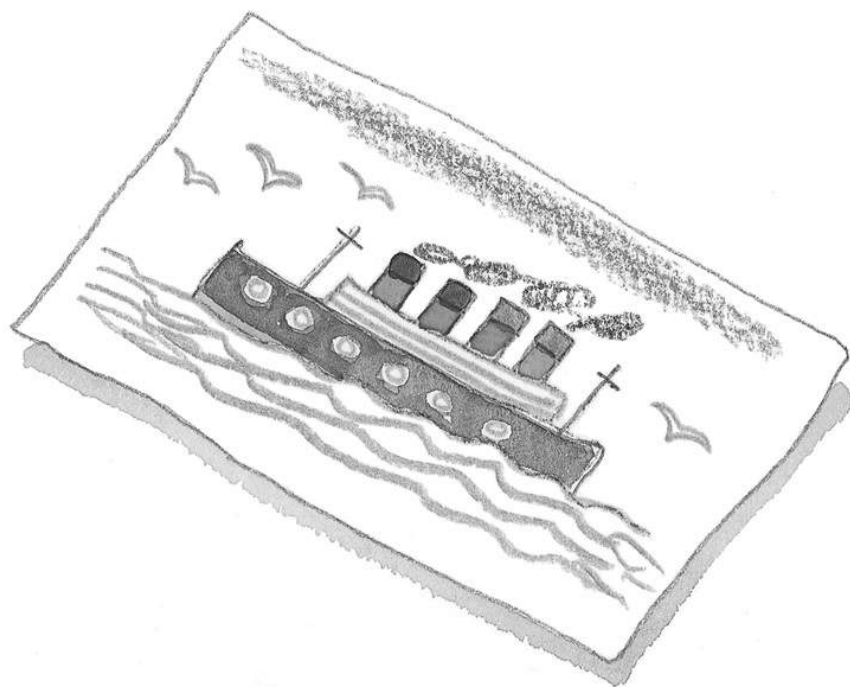


He stepped forward, shook my hand, and presented me with a large white envelope. “No money could ever be enough of course, young man, but this is just a token of our deep appreciation for what you did, for your extraordinary courage.”

I took the envelope from him, and opened it. In it were five ten pound notes. I had never in my life seen so much money. Before I could say thank you, or indeed say anything at all, Lizziebeth was standing there in front of me, holding out a large piece of paper. I was looking down at a picture of Kaspar.

“I drew it for you,” she said. She was speaking to me as if we hardly knew one another. She was an amazing actress. “I like drawing pictures. It’s a cat. I hope you like it. I did it for you because I especially like black cats. And on the other side, you can see...” She turned the paper over for me. “On the other side I’ve done a picture of the ship we’re sailing home on next week. It’s got four big funnels, and Papa says it’s the biggest, fastest ship in the whole wide world. It’s true, isn’t it, Papa?”

“She’s called the *Titanic*,” Mrs Stanton added. “It’ll be her maiden voyage, you know. Isn’t she the most magnificent ship you ever saw?”





Stowaway

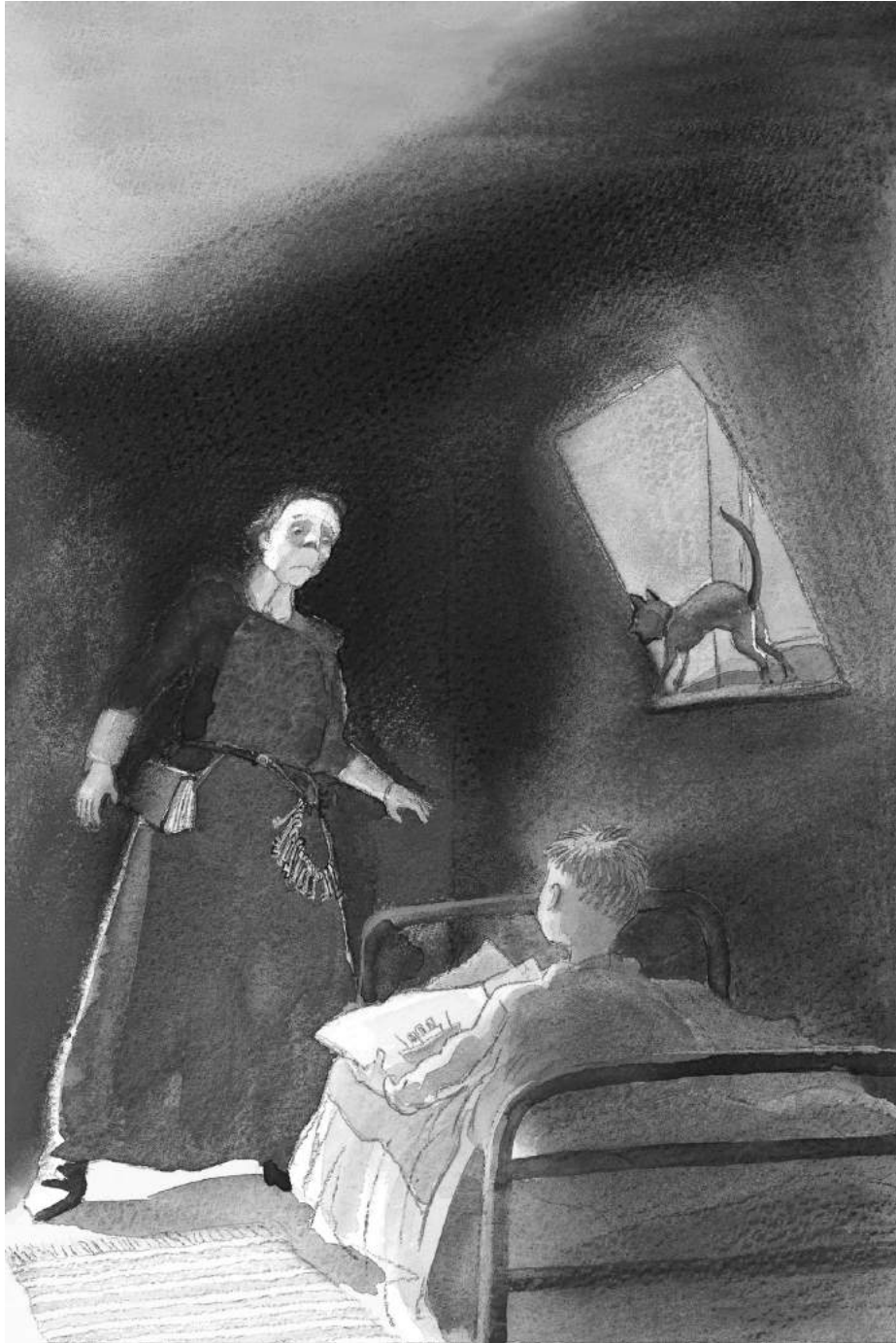
I should have taken more notice of Lizziebeth's drawings, appreciated them more when she gave them to me, and afterwards, but the truth was I'd never in my life seen so much money. Sitting on my bed late that night, I kept counting it to make sure I wasn't dreaming it. Everyone on the corridor came in. They had to see it with their own eyes. Mary O'Connell held each note up to the light, I remember, to check it wasn't a forgery. "Well, you never know, do you? Not with these rich folk," she said. I told Mary something I hadn't spoken about with the others, how I'd been thinking about it and was beginning to feel very uncomfortable about taking the money. Mary was always good about right and wrong, she understood these things.

"I didn't do it for the money, Mary." I told her, "I did it because it was Lizziebeth up there."

"I know that, Johnny," she said. "But that doesn't mean you don't deserve it, does it? This money is your ticket out of here. It's a God-given fortune, so it is. There's two years wages here. For God's sakes, you could go anywhere, do anything. Wouldn't any one of us like to do that! You don't want to be having to shine shoes for the rest of your life, do you?"

I lay awake most of that night talking it all through with Kaspar – he was a good listener. By morning I felt that despite everything Mary had said, I might have to give the money back. Lizziebeth’s drawings were a thank you, and that was fine; but I couldn’t help thinking that the money was in some way a kind of pay-off; reward money for a bell-boy. No, I didn’t like being treated like a bell-boy, and I didn’t want a reward. I’d give the money back. But then by morning I’d almost changed my mind again. Maybe Mary had been right after all. I’d keep the money. Why shouldn’t I?

I was still lying there propped up on my pillows, with Kaspar curled up at the end of the bed, looking at Lizziebeth’s picture of the great ship with the four funnels steaming through the ocean, gulls flying overhead, when the door suddenly flew open. Skullface stood there. “I thought so. I thought as much!” she said. “First that girl was in here *miaowing* like a cat, and that was odd enough. Then a day later she was up here again, wasn’t she? But this time up on the roof, just outside your window. Strange that. Strange sort of coincidence, I thought. D’you know something, Johnny Trott, I don’t believe in coincidences. And now you’re quite the little hero, aren’t you? Well, I weren’t born yesterday. I’m no one’s fool, Johnny Trott. I knew something fishy was going on. But now I can see, it weren’t fishy at all, it were catty, more like.”



She came into the room, shutting the door behind her, and stood over me, a nasty vindictive grin on her face. Kaspar had leaped on to the window-sill, and was hissing and wailing at her furiously. "Well now," she went on. "I hear you've come into the money, Johnny Trott, is that right?" I nodded.

"Here's the deal then," she went on. "Either you pack your bags, hand in your uniform and you're out in the streets within the hour, or you hand over the money. It's that simple. Hand over the money and you can stay. I'll even let you

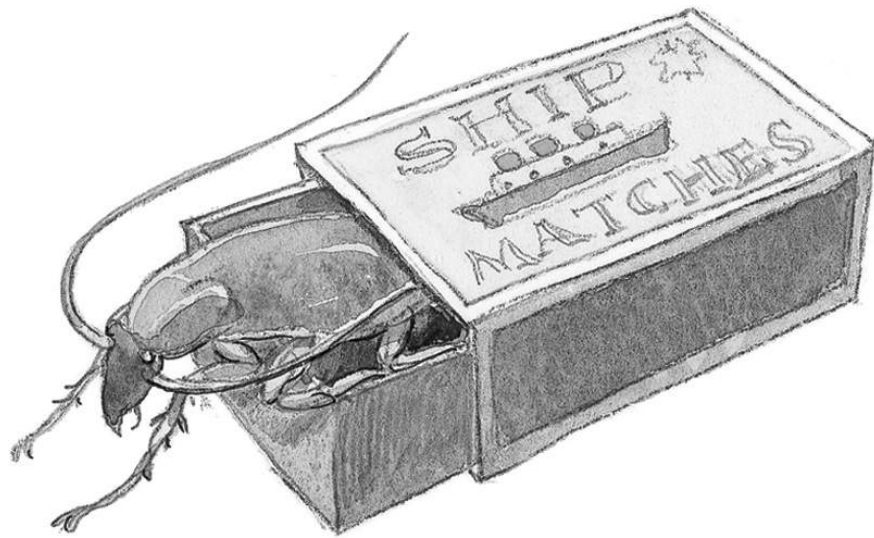
keep your horrible cat up here, for a while anyway. There, I can't be more generous than that, can I now?"

A few moments later as she walked out of my room, tucking the envelope into her pocket, I was almost grateful to her. After all she'd made my decision for me. I sat down on my bed where Kaspar soon joined me for some petting and reassurance. I was thinking things through. I was no poorer than I had been before it all happened. And now at least I had her word, for what it was worth, that Kaspar would be safe, for a while anyway. I still had my job. I felt a great sense of relief, but that was very soon overwhelmed by a wave of sadness. All too soon now Lizziebeth would be leaving and sailing back to America. "I'm going to miss her. We're both going to miss her, Kaspar," I said aloud. "We won't miss the money – we never really had it, did we – but we will miss Lizziebeth. What are we going to do without her?"



I shouldn't have said anything. Kaspar must have understood enough of it or maybe he just picked up on my sadness, I don't know. But either way, it became clear to me as the days passed that he understood all too well that Lizziebeth would soon be going. After the very public rooftop rescue – it had been in all the papers too – Lizziebeth had the perfect excuse now to come up and see me often, even for us to be seen talking down in the lobby. So at least we were able to spend more and more time together during those final days.

Time and again I was tempted to tell her about how Skullface had blackmailed me and taken her father's money, but I thought how angry it would make her, that it was too much to expect a young girl of that age to keep quiet about such a thing. So I didn't tell her anything about that, but I did tell her things I'd never told anyone else: about my life in the orphanage in Islington, about Harry, the cockroach that I'd kept as a pet in a matchbox, about Mr Wellington, who was supposed to look after us, but who must have hated children so much because he'd cane us so often for the slightest thing. He caned me for keeping Harry, then took him away and stamped on him right in front of my eyes, in front of all of us. That was what made me run away in the end – I'd often thought of it before, but never dared. I told her how I'd wandered the streets of London for weeks, living rough, before finding work as a bell-boy at the Savoy. And of course she wanted to know all about Countess Kandinsky. I told her my dream of finding my mother one day. I told her so many of my hopes and dreams. And all the while, she listened wide-eyed.



That last week together, things changed between Lizziebeth and me. From the moment we were sitting up on that roof holding hands, and sharing our fear, she was no longer a little rich girl from America, and I wasn't a fourteen-year-old orphan from London. We had become proper friends, the best of friends. She no longer gabbled on all the time about herself, or about Kaspar, as she had when I'd first known her. She asked questions, and she wanted answers. "We haven't got much more time together," she said one morning, "so you have to tell me everything, because I want to remember everything about you and about Kaspar for ever and ever."

She'd bring me new drawings every day, of her house in New York, of the Statue of Liberty, of her island home in Maine, of her dressed as a pirate, of her with Kaspar, of me in my uniform, but mostly of Kaspar: Kaspar sleeping, Kaspar sitting, Kaspar hunting. But as the day for her to leave came ever closer, we became more silent together, more sad together. She would hug Kaspar close all the time she was with us in my room, and I could feel her wanting to stretch every minute into an hour, into a week, into a month. I wanted the same.



It was on the last evening that she first suggested the idea. She was cradling Kaspar, rocking him gently, her head buried in his neck, when suddenly she looked up at me, her eyes filled with tears.

"You could come, Johnny. You and Kaspar, you could come with us. We could go on the ship together. You could come and live in New York. You'd love it. I know you would. And in America you wouldn't have to be a bell-boy. In America you can be whatever you want to be, that's what Papa says. It's the land of the free. You could be President of the United States. Anyone could be. Please come, Johnny, please come." As she was talking I felt a sudden hope surging inside me at the prospect of a new and exciting life across the ocean, in America, but immediately I could see how impossible it was.

"I can't, Lizziebeth," I said. "I mean I couldn't even pay for my passage..."

"What about the money?" she replied. "What about the money my father gave you?"

I told her everything, all about how Skullface had blackmailed me. I hadn't intended to. It just came pouring out.

Lizziebeth was silent for a while.

"She's a witch," she said finally, "and I hate her." Then she brightened suddenly. "I could ask Papa," she went on. "He's got a lot of money. He could pay for your passage."

"No," I told her firmly. "I don't want money from him."

She looked hurt and crestfallen at this, and I wished at once I hadn't spoken so

directly. “You don’t want to come, do you?” She said.

“I do,” I told her. “I really do. I don’t want to be carrying luggage and polishing shoes all my life, do I? And I’d love to go across to America in that big ship you drew for me – what was it called again?”

“*Titanic*,” Lizziebeth said, in tears now. “We’re going early in the morning. We’ve got to go by train first, Ma says, before we can get to the ship. You could come with us. You could come and see us off. And you could bring Kaspar.”

“I suppose I could see the ship then, couldn’t I?” I said, but I knew even as I spoke that I was grasping at straws. “It’s no good, Lizziebeth. Skullface wouldn’t let me have a day off work. I know she wouldn’t. I’d really like to see the *Titanic* too. Is it really the biggest ship in the world?”

“And the fastest,” she said, getting up suddenly and handing me Kaspar. “I’m going to speak to Papa. You saved my life didn’t you? I’m going to ask him, and I’m going to tell him about Skullface too.”

She was out of my room and gone before I could stop her.

The very same day, only a few hours later, Skullface was seen walking grimfaced out of the tradesmen’s entrance with her suitcase, “never to return”, as Mr Freddie told me with a smile all over his face.



But I never saw my money again. The next morning I found myself sitting in a first class train carriage with the Stanton family on the way to Southampton. The manager had told me that he'd had a special request from Mr Stanton that Kaspar and I be allowed to accompany the family to Southampton, and help them with their luggage on board ship. He said that considering recent events, and how I had enhanced the good name of the hotel, he was happy this one time to let me go. But I would be on duty, he reminded me. I had to wear my Savoy

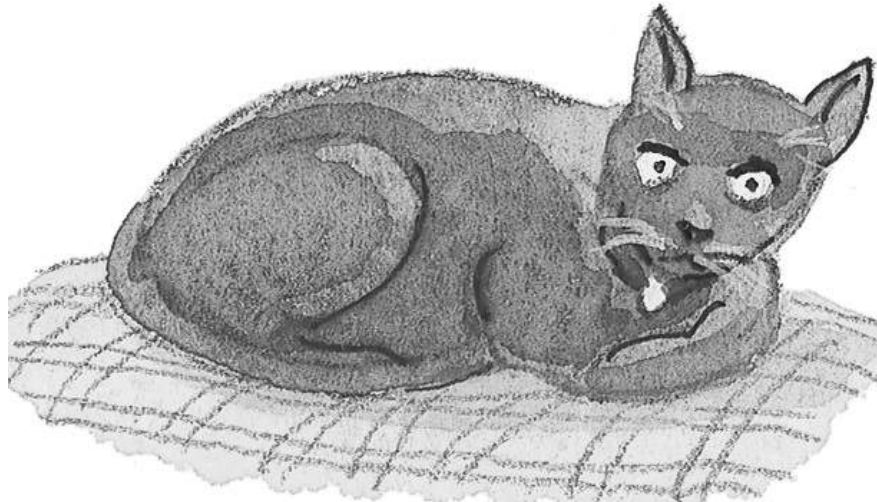
uniform, carry all their trunks and bags on board, and see to their every need until the ship sailed.



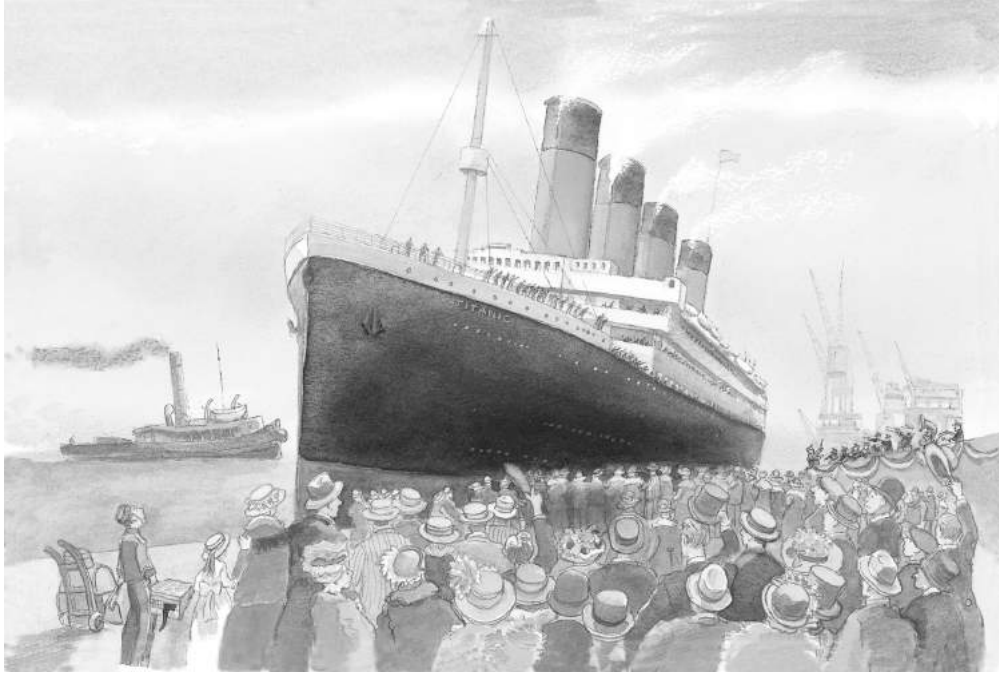
In among the luggage I carried out of the hotel that day was a picnic basket Mary O'Connell had "borrowed" from the stores. Inside the basket was Kaspar. He yowled all the way down in the lift, wailed all the way across the lobby, past Mr Freddie, who lifted his hat to him in farewell. He only stopped his

complaining once we were in the cab, when Lizziebeth took him out and cradled him in her arms. That was when she began telling her mother and father the whole story of our secret, of how we'd met, all about Kaspar and me, and the Countess Kandinsky, and my orphanage, and Harry the cockroach and Mr Wellington, and how I'd run away. One story flowed into the next, my whole life story and Kaspar's in a torrent of words that tumbled over one another in her excitement to tell the whole thing. She hardly paused for breath until we got to the station.

Kaspar sat on Lizziebeth's lap all the way down on the train to Southampton. It was for the most part a silent journey, because Lizziebeth slept and so did Kaspar.



I shall never forget my first sighting of the *Titanic*. She seemed to dwarf the entire dockside. As I went up the gangplank carrying the Stantons' trunks, Lizziebeth in front of me carrying Kaspar in the picnic basket, the band was playing on the quayside, and there were crowds of people everywhere, spectators on shore and passengers all along the railings, high excitement and anticipation on every face. I was agog with it all. Twice or three times I went back and forth to their cabin – deck C, number 52. I've never forgotten the number. Their cabin was at least as spacious as their rooms at the Savoy, and just as luxurious. I was bowled over by the palatial splendour of everything I saw, by the sheer enormity of the ship, both inside and out. It was grander and more magnificent than I could ever have imagined.



The time came when I'd carried all their trunks up to their cabin, and I knew the moment for parting had come. Lizziebeth knew it too. Sitting on the sofa, she said her last goodbye to Kaspar, burying her face in his neck and sobbing her heart out. Her father took the cat from her as gently as he could and put him back in the picnic basket. It was as he was doing this that I decided. It had never even occurred to me until that moment.



"Lizziebeth," I said, "I want you to take him with you to America."
"You mean it?" she cried. "You really mean it?"

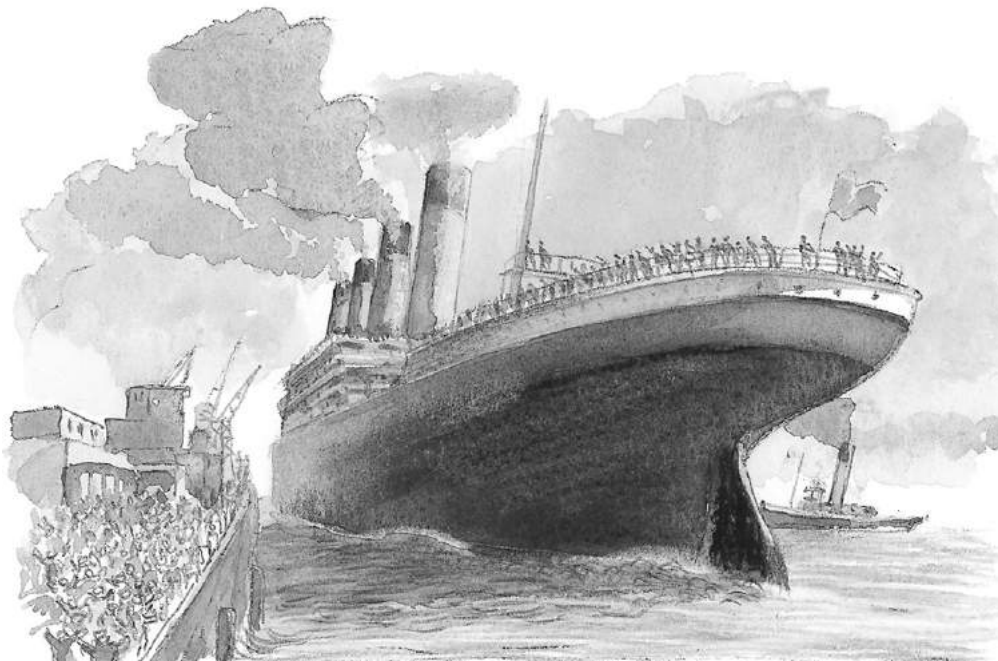
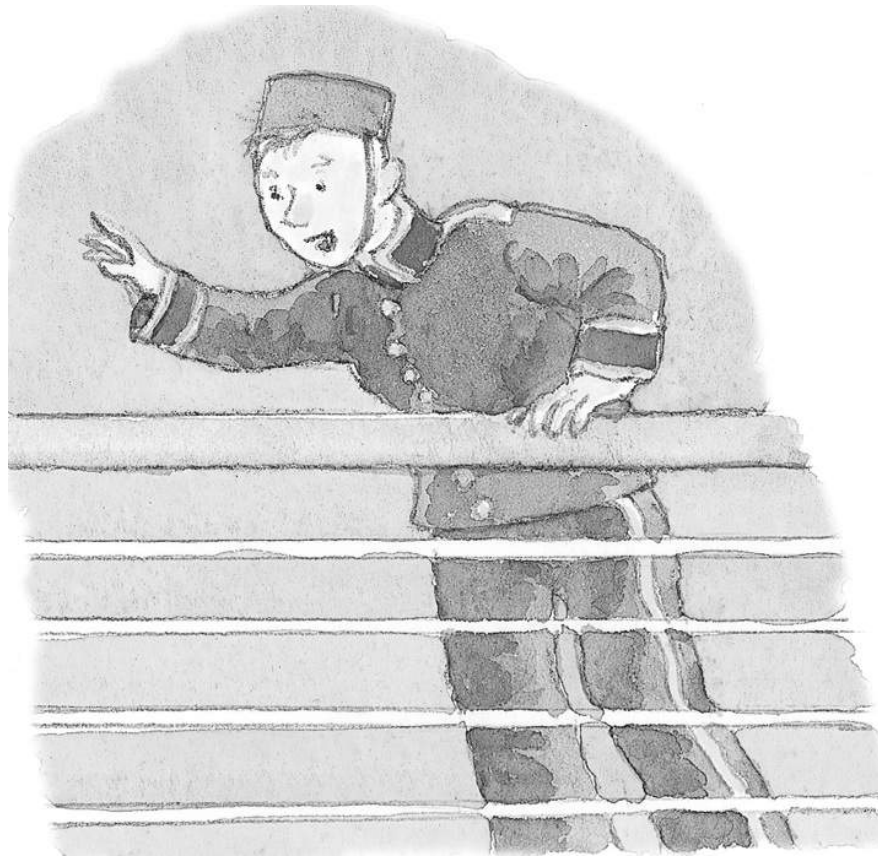
“I mean it,” I told her.

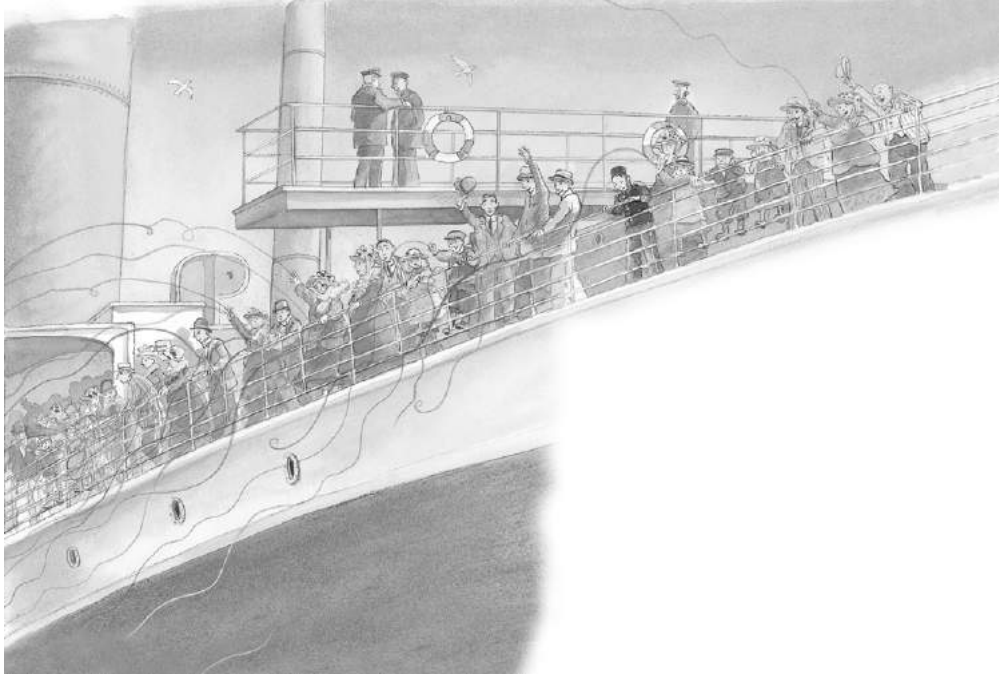
Lizziebeth turned to her mother and father. “I can, can’t I, Ma? Please Papa. Say yes, please.”

Neither objected. On the contrary, they looked delighted.

Each of them shook me by the hand. They were still reserved, but I saw a genuine kindness there, and a warmth in their eyes that I had not seen before. I crouched down and stroked Kaspar in his picnic basket. He looked up at me very intently. He knew what was happening, that we were saying goodbye. Lizziebeth led me to the door of the cabin. She clung to me for so long that I thought she’d never let go. The ship’s siren was sounding. I broke away from her and ran up on to the deck, brushing away my tears.

I’ve thought a lot about this since, about why I gave Kaspar away like that, on the spur of the moment, and about what I did next too. I remember standing there on deck with everyone waving, with the siren blasting and the band playing, and I knew then I couldn’t go back to my old life, to my little attic room at the Savoy, that I should stay with Kaspar and Lizziebeth, and that I just didn’t want to leave the ship, this wonderful ship, this magical floating palace. When the final call went out for any last visitors and porters to leave the ship, I stayed on board. It was that simple. I ran to the rail and began waving with all the other passengers. I was one of them. I was going. I was going to America, to Lizziebeth’s land of the free, where I could be anything I wanted to be. It really wasn’t until I saw the *Titanic* moving away from the dockside and saw the widening gap of sea in between, that I realised quite what I had done, what a momentous decision I had made, that there was no going back. I was a stowaway on the *Titanic*.





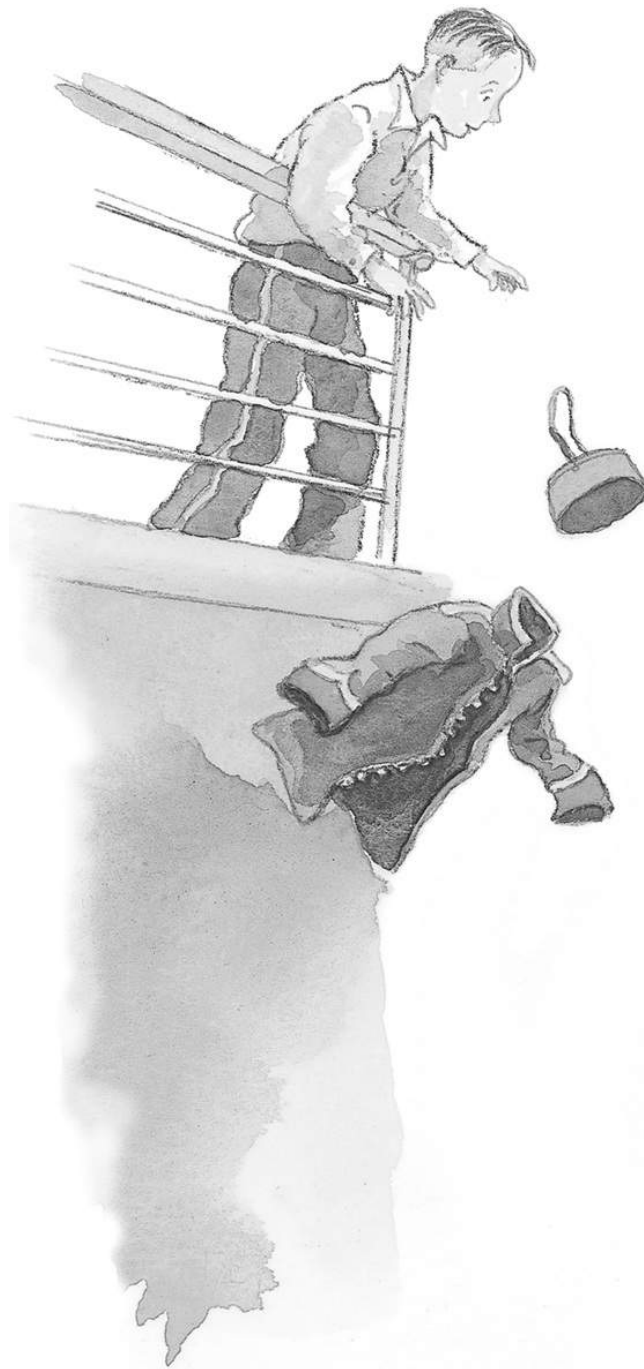
“We’ve Only Gone and Hit A Flaming Iceberg”

My life as a stowaway didn’t last long. It took me a while to understand that I was in the First Class part of the ship; and when I did, I discovered it wasn’t at all easy to blend in with the First Class passengers all around me. Everyone was in their travelling finery, and dressed as I was in my uniform of a Savoy bell-boy, I stuck out like a sore thumb. They even moved differently, as if they belonged there, as if they had all the time in the world. Maybe you need a lifetime to learn how to look nonchalantly wealthy.

For a while the uniform actually helped. I could pass myself off as a steward, and of course that was easy enough for me. I knew well enough how to touch my forelock, how to help old ladies down the stairs, how to point out to people where to go – even if I hadn’t a clue where anything was.



For the first hour or so, as the other passengers promenaded the deck, exploring the ship, that was what I did too, until I began getting some strange looks from some of the crew and the other stewards who clearly thought my uniform a bit strange. I knew that sooner or later I'd be rumbled, that my luck couldn't hold out for long if I went on pretending to be one of them. I also realised that if I stayed in First Class I was bound to bump into one of the Stanton family, and I wasn't at all sure how they would respond if they discovered that I had stowed away. I could see the steerage passengers all crowded on the lower deck at the stern end of the ship. They were more my own kind I thought, I'd be safer there. So that's where I headed. I took off my tunic and cap, and when no one was looking dropped them over the side. Then I vaulted over the rail, and tried to mingle in among the steerage passengers as best I could.



We were well out to sea by now, the last of England fast disappearing over the horizon. The sea was flat calm, like a silver blue lake. No one was paying me any attention. They were all enjoying themselves far too much to know I was even there. You only had to use your eyes and ears to know that these steerage passengers came from all over the world. There were Irish, Chinese, French, Germans, Americans and quite a few London cockneys too. I was feeling much more at home already. I went below deck, and after a long search, at last, found

myself an empty berth in a dormitory at the bottom of the ship. There were a few men in there, but they paid me little attention.

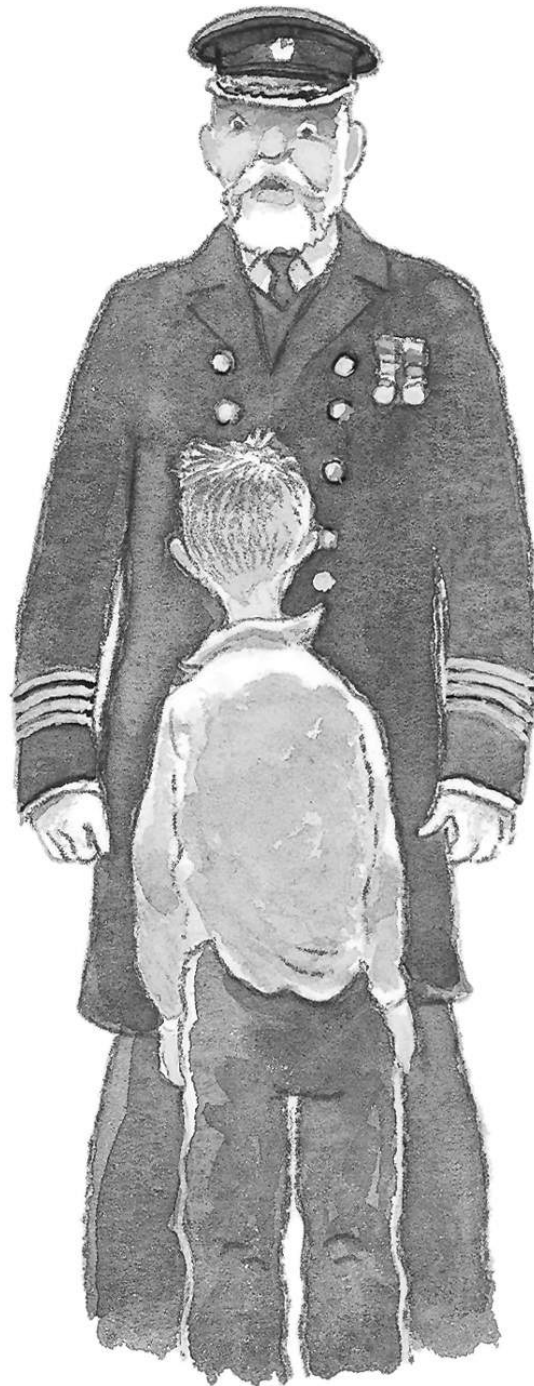
I was lying down, my hands behind my head, my eyes closed, the ship's engines throbbing through me, believing absolutely I had got away with it, when everything went badly wrong.

I heard voices, loud voices, voices of authority. I opened my eyes and saw two sailors coming through the dormitory. "We're looking for a stowaway. Have you seen him? He's kind of a Japanese-looking fellow." One of them stopped by a table where some men were sat about playing cards. "Has he come through here? Little fellow he is. We know he's down here somewhere."

I think I would have been fine if I hadn't panicked. I could have just pretended to be asleep. I didn't look Japanese. They wouldn't have bothered me. But I didn't think. I got up and ran, and they came after me hollering at me to stop. I took the stairs to the deck three at a time. Once up there I hid in the first place I found – of course it was the most obvious, and therefore the most stupid place I could ever have chosen – a lifeboat. Inside I saw the Japanese man sitting at the far end, knees drawn up under his chin, rocking back and forth and gnawing at his knuckles. And that was where, only minutes later the two of us were discovered, caught like rats in a trap. We were not treated at all kindly as we were hustled along the decks, but at least I felt we had the sympathy of the steerage passengers. All the booing and jeering seemed directed more at our sailor escorts than at us. Both of us were taken before the Captain – Captain Smith he was called – and there were three other men there already. So there were five of us in all, all stowaways, an Italian I remember who spoke very little English, the Japanese man and three Englishmen, myself among them. From behind his desk the Captain looked at us wearily out of deep-set, sad eyes. With his great beard and calm bearing, he looked every inch a sea captain. He didn't curse us or berate us as the sailors had.

"Well, Mr Lightoller." he said to the officer standing beside him. "So, we've got five of them, have we? Not as many as I'd feared. What shall we do with them then? Where do we need them most, would you say?"

"Down below in the engine room, Captain," the officer replied. "Stokers. We're short of a dozen stokers at least. And if you want to make full speed as you say, if you want to make the crossing in record time, as you say, then we could do with them down below. Looking at them, I'd say they were a bit on the thin and spindly side, but there's nothing we can do about that."



The Captain looked right at me. "Why did you do it?" he asked me.

I told him the truth, part of it anyway. I had nothing to lose. "Because I didn't want to leave the ship, sir. She's so beautiful, and everyone says she's very fast too. And I've never been on a ship before."

"Well, I have, son," laughed the Captain. "Dozens of them. And you're right, this one is fast, the fastest ship that ever sailed, and what's more she's unsinkable too. Very well, Mr Lightoller, you will set these men to work their

passage to New York as stokers. It will be hot work and hard, gentlemen, and for this you will be fed and looked after well enough. Take them away.”

So began the hardest three days I have ever worked in all my life. My body never ached so much, every bone, every muscle, every joint. My hands never bled so much either, open blisters on every finger. I was never so hot and dirty, never so completely and utterly exhausted. The stokers about me were strong men, big men, muscle-bound and sinewy. Stripped to the waist as we were I felt like a sparrow among eagles. The pounding thunder of the engines in my ears was deafening, the blast of the furnaces scorched my skin. But for all this discomfort I somehow found it the most exciting and invigorating place I had ever been. Every time I looked up and saw those great boilers, those great pistons driving, I marvelled at them, at the power and the beauty of it all. And believe it or not, as I shovelled coal for hour after hour in that stifling heat, there was only one thought that kept me shovelling: it was *me* driving these mighty engines, Johnny Trott. I wasn't just a bell-boy anymore. I was a man among men, and our muscles were firing the boilers that were powering the engines that were turning the screws that were driving the fastest ship the world had ever seen across the Atlantic. I felt proud of the work I was doing.

My fellow stokers ribbed me mercilessly from time to time, for I was the baby among them. I didn't mind. They ribbed the little Japanese man too till they discovered that, small though he was, he could shovel more coal than any of us. He was called Michiya, but we all called him Little Mitch – and he was little, littler even than me. Maybe because we had been fellow stowaways, or maybe because we were both about the same size, he became quite a friend.



He spoke no English at all, so we conversed in gestures and smiles. We managed to make ourselves well enough understood. Like the rest of them I was black from head to toe after every shift. But Captain Smith was true to his word, we were all well enough looked after. We had plenty of hot water to wash ourselves clean, we had all the food we could eat and a warm bunk to sleep in. I didn't go up on deck that much. It was a long way up, and when I did have an hour or two off I found I was just too tired to do anything much except sleep. Down there in the bowels of the ship I didn't know if it was night or day – and I didn't much care either. It was just work, sleep, eat, work, sleep, eat. I was too tired even to dream.

When I did go up on deck I looked out on a moonlit sea, or a sunlit sea, that was always as flat as a pond and shining. I never saw another ship, just the wide horizons. Occasionally there were birds soaring over the decks, and once to everyone's great excitement we spotted dozens of leaping dolphins. I had never known such beauty. Every time I went up on deck though, I was drawn towards the First Class part of the ship. I'd stay there by the rail for a while, hoping against hope I might see Lizziebeth come walking by with Kaspar on his lead.

But I never saw them. I thought of them though as I shovelled and sweated, as I lay in my bunk in between shifts, as I looked over that glassy sea. I kept trying to summon up the courage to climb over the railings and find my way again back to their cabin. I longed to see the look of surprise on Lizziebeth's face when she saw I was on board. I knew how pleased she'd be to see me, that Kaspar would

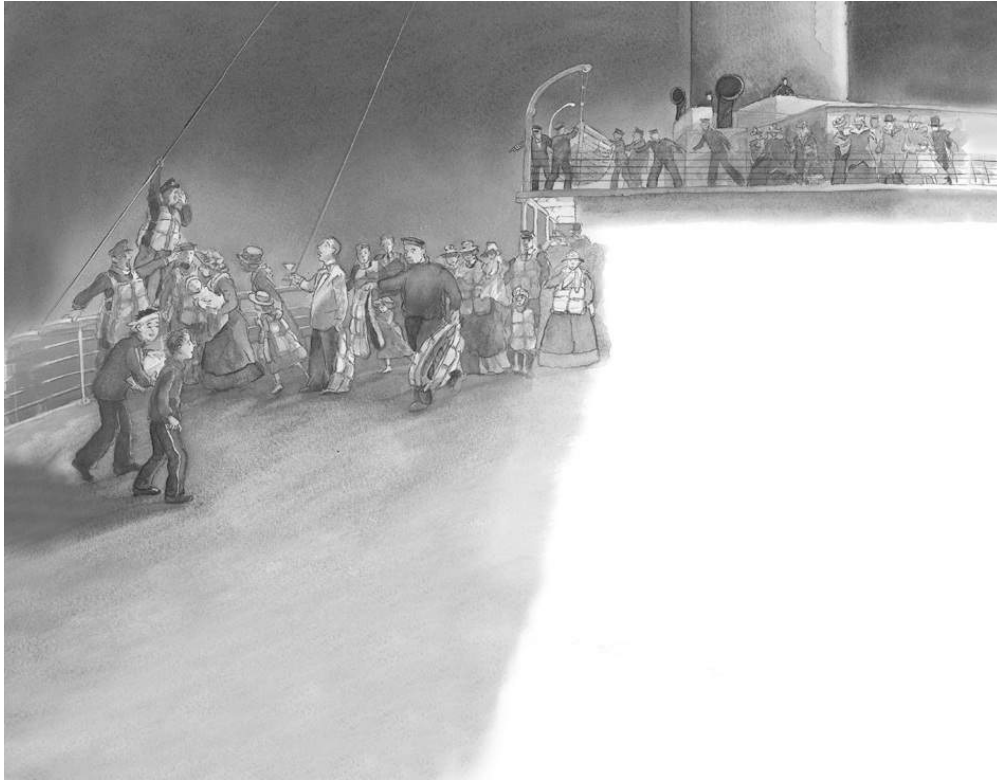
swish his tail and smile up at me. But about Lizziebeth's mother and father I couldn't be at all sure. The truth is that I still believed they would think badly of me for stowing away as I had. I decided that it would be better to wait until we got to New York, and then I'd just walk up to them all and surprise them on the quayside. I'd tell them then and there that I'd taken Lizziebeth's advice and come to live in America, in the land of the free. They'd never need to know I'd stowed away.

I was half sleeping, half dreaming in my bunk, dreaming that Kaspar was yowling at me, trying to wake me. We were in some kind of danger and he was trying to warn me. Then it happened. The ship suddenly shuddered and shook. I sat up. Right away it felt to me like some kind of a collision, and I could tell it had happened on the starboard side. A long silence followed. Then I heard a great rushing and roaring of escaping steam, like a death rattle. I knew that something had gone terribly wrong, that the ship had been wounded. The engines had stopped.

Half a dozen of us got dressed at once and rushed up to the third deck, the boat deck. We all expected to see the ship we had collided with, because that was what we thought had happened. But we could see nothing, no ship, nothing but the stars and an empty sea all around. There was no one else on deck except us. It was as if no one else had felt it, as if it had all been a bad dream. No one else had woken, so it followed that nothing had happened. I was almost beginning to believe I had imagined the whole thing, when I saw Little Mitch come rushing along the deck towards us carrying something in both hands. It was a huge piece of ice shaped like a giant tooth, jagged and sharp. He was shouting the same thing over and over again, but I couldn't understand him, none of us could. Then one of the other stokers said it. "Iceberg! It's off an iceberg! We've only gone and hit a flaming iceberg!"







Women and Children First

I never saw the iceberg, nor did any of us stokers, but we soon met one of the crew who was there when the ship struck, and who had seen it all. He said the iceberg was at least a hundred feet high, looming above the ship, and not white like icebergs are supposed to be, but dark, almost black. But it had been a glancing blow, he said, no cause for alarm, no need for panic. And no one was panicking. No one was rushing anywhere. By now more and more passengers were beginning to appear on deck, to find out what was happening, just as we had. I saw a couple strolling by arm in arm. They looked completely unconcerned, as if they were simply taking the air. Even after the collision, like everyone on board, they clearly still accepted, as I did, the absolute assumption – and one that had after all been confirmed to me in person of course by Captain Smith himself – that the *Titanic* was unsinkable, that everything would be all right.

It was when the ship began to list, and this happened quite soon, that the first doubts began to creep in. But only when I saw men and women gathering in

numbers on deck, and putting on their life-preservers, did I truly begin to understand the dreadful danger we were now in, and only then did I think of Lizziebeth and Kaspar in their stateroom on deck C. It took me a while to locate the right corridor, and when I did I had some difficulty in finding my way to number 52. There was no time to stand on ceremony. I hammered on the door, yelling for them. A moment or two later Mr Stanton was standing there, in front of me, his face grey with anxiety. He was fully dressed, with his life-preserver already on, as were the rest of the family.

They looked at me as if I'd come from another planet. I just blurted it out. "I stowed away." That was all I said by way of explanation. There wasn't time for any more, and now it didn't matter anyway.

"Are we sinking?" Mrs Stanton asked me. She was quite calm and controlled.

"I don't know," I said. "I don't think so. But I think we should get out on deck."

Mrs Stanton was picking up her bag.

"We must take nothing with us, my dear." Mr Stanton spoke to her very gently but firmly, as he took it from her.



“But all my precious things, my mother’s necklace, my photographs,” she cried. “You and Lizziebeth are all that’s precious,” he said quietly. He turned to me. “Johnny, you will take care of Lizziebeth.” Lizziebeth’s hand had crept into mine. It was cold. She looked up at me, her eyes full of bewilderment. She seemed still only half awake. It was only as we were leaving the cabin that she seemed to begin to comprehend what was going on. She grabbed her father’s arm suddenly. “Papa, what about Kaspar? We can’t leave Kaspar.”

“We leave everything behind, Lizziebeth, and I mean everything.” Mr Stanton spoke very firmly to her. “Now follow me and stay close.” Staying close was not easy because the corridors and gangways were full of people, and many of them

were carrying or dragging heavy bags. Lizziebeth kept saying it again and again, to me now, “What about Kaspar? We can’t leave him Johnny, we can’t. Please. All those people, they’ve got bags, they’re carrying things. Please.” She was trying to tug me back all the time, but I knew there was nothing I could say to comfort her. I had to ignore her and keep going.

As we got up on to the Boat Deck and out into the cold air I realised that the ship was listing noticeably more severely than before. I saw dozens of post bags being piled up on deck, and abandoned luggage everywhere. Boats were being lowered away, and the band was playing. Everywhere people were gathered in small groups, huddling together against the cold, some with blankets round their shoulders. A few were praying aloud, but most stood in silence, waiting patiently.

I recognised Mr Lightoller, the officer we’d seen in the Captain’s cabin, going about the deck, organising, spreading calm as he went, and explaining to everyone that it would be women and children first, that when all the women and children were safely away in the lifeboats, then the men could leave. When he turned to Mrs Stanton and told her it was her turn to get into one of the boats, she clung to her husband and refused.



“I won’t leave my family,” she said. “We belong together, and if it’s God’s will, then we will die together.”

Mr Stanton took her gently by the shoulders and, looking deep into her eyes, he spoke to her very softly, almost in a whisper. “You will take Lizziebeth, my dear, and you will do as the officer says, and go to the boat. Johnny Trott and I will come after you, I promise you. Go, my dear. Go now.”

At that moment Lizziebeth broke free of my hand and ran for it. I knew straight away that she was going back for Kaspar. I went after her at once, and caught her at the top of the gangway. She struggled against me, but I held her tight. “I can’t leave him!” she cried. “I can’t! I won’t!”

“Lizziebeth,” I said. “Listen to me. I must take you to the boat. It’ll be gone

soon. You have to go with your mother. You have to save yourself. Leave Kaspar to me. I'll find him. I'll save him."

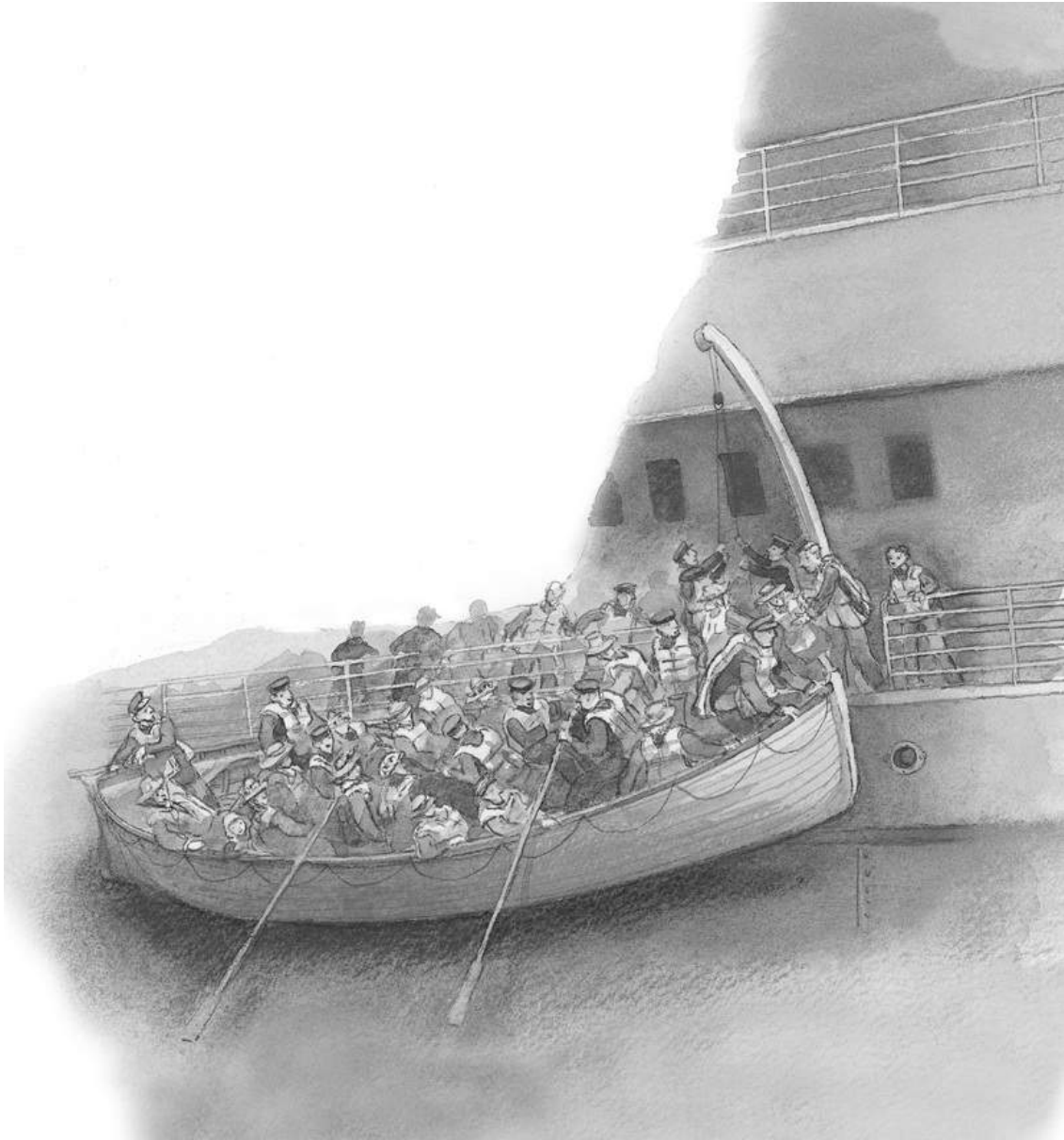
She looked up at me, her eyes full of sudden hope. "You promise me?"

"I promise," I told her.

"And you, Johnny, what will happen to you?"

"I'll be all right, there's plenty of boats," I said.

When we got back to the railings, the lifeboat was nearly full and almost ready to launch, but I could see the crew were having the greatest difficulty in lowering it. With the help of Mr Stanton and a sailor we helped Lizziebeth and her mother into the boat. But still the boat could not be lowered. One of the crew was slicing away at the rope with his knife, cursing as he did so, and cursing even louder when he dropped his knife into the sea below. There were several lifeboats in the water already and rowing away from the *Titanic*. I glanced towards the stern and saw it was a great deal higher than it had been before. I could feel the great ship settling ever lower into the sea.



I caught Lizziebeth's eye then. She was willing me to do it, and to do it now. I knew that if I left it any longer it may well be too late. I would show her there and then that I meant to keep my promise if I could. I turned to Mr Stanton beside me. "I'm going for Kaspar," I said. "I shan't be long." He shouted after me to come back, but I ignored him.

By now the decks were crowded with men, all of them corralled by the crew who had made a human cordon to keep them back as the last of the women and children were being helped into the boats. But there was no pushing, no shoving. I saw among them dozens of my fellow stokers, most of them black with coal dust, and all unnaturally quiet. As I pushed my way through them to get back

down below, one of them called out to me. “You should be in one of they boats, Johnny lad. You’re only a slip of a boy. You’re young enough. You’ve got the right.”

The gangway was packed with passengers trying to make their way up on deck, some of the older and more infirm still in their nightgowns. One of the sailors who was trying to help them tried to stop me going down. “You can’t go. There’s water coming in everywhere down there, the whole ship’s flooding fast.” I dodged past him. “Idiot!” he yelled after me. “You blithering idiot! You go down there and you won’t come back up again!” I ran on.

After losing my way in the warren of corridors, I reached the right corridor on deck C and I knew then that the sailor had been right. The sea-water was ankle deep, and rising all the time. And once I opened the door to number 52, I saw the carpets were already under water. I looked around me frantically for Kaspar, but couldn’t see him anywhere, not at first. It was Kaspar himself who told me where he was, yowling at me from the top of the wardrobe. I looked around for the picnic basket to carry him in, but couldn’t find it. I reached up and took him off the wardrobe, and held him tight; but then, as I went out, I had the presence of mind to snatch a blanket off the nearest bed. All the way back along the corridor, I was wrapping Kasper up in the blanket, not against the cold, but to stop him clawing at me, for I knew that even if he wasn’t frightened now, he very soon would be.

But as I ran back down the corridor I was beginning to realise that the blanket had another use, and a much more essential one too. If no luggage was being allowed in the boats, I reasoned, then they would hardly accept a cat. This was why, by the time I got back up on deck again, Kaspar was well hidden deep inside the blanket. And now he was beginning to yowl.

“None of your fuss, please Kaspar,” I whispered to him. “Quiet now, and stay quiet. Your life could depend on it.”



I pushed my way through the stokers, ducked under the cordon of crewmen, and saw to my great relief that the lifeboat was still hanging there. But then I found my way suddenly blocked by an officer in a peaked cap, who grabbed me by the shoulder. "No you don't, lad. No men allowed in the boats until all the women and children are loaded," he said. "I can't let you on. I can't let you pass."

"He's not a man," someone shouted from behind me. "He's only a kid, can't you see?" All around me the stokers were suddenly clamouring at him to let me through, and they began pushing angrily against the ring of sailors desperately trying to hold them back. I could see the officer was taken by surprise at the

sudden rage of the crowd, and that he was hesitating.

I saw my chance. “I’m not going on the boat,” I told him. “I just went to fetch a blanket. It’s for a child, a friend of mine. She’ll freeze to death out there without it.” I still don’t think he’d have let me through if Mr Stanton hadn’t come up at that moment and vouched for me.

“It’s all right. He’s my son,” he said to the officer, “and the blanket’s for his sister.” I was through. With Mr Stanton holding me fast round the waist I leaned across and handed the blanket, and the miraculously silent Kaspar, into Mrs Stanton’s outstretched arms.

“Be careful,” I told her as meaningfully as I could. She knew as she was taking it from me that Kaspar was inside the blanket. She hugged it to her and sat down again in the boat. I could see from the way Lizziebeth was smiling up at me that she knew it too.

Distress rockets were fired up into the sky, lighting the ocean all around us, lighting too the scattering of little white boats out on the open sea, each of them crammed with women and children.



I remember thinking how extraordinarily beautiful it all was, and wondering how something as terrible as this could be so beautiful. On board behind us the band played on, as Lizziebeth’s boat was finally lowered into the water. Mr Stanton and I stood side by side and watched from the railings as it was rowed slowly

away. "That was a fine and noble thing you did, Johnny," he said, putting his hand on my shoulder. "God will guard them, I know it. And for us there'll be a boat along soon enough to take us off. Mr Lightoller says they've seen the lights of a ship not five miles away. The *Carpathia*. She'll be on her way. They'll see these rockets for sure. They'll be alongside soon enough. Meanwhile, I think we should help with the women and children, don't you?" That was how we busied ourselves for the next hour or so, passing the women and the children into the boats.

I marvel now when I think of it, at the courage I witnessed around me that night. I saw one American lady waiting to get into a boat with her elderly sister, but she was told there was no room. She didn't object or protest in anyway, but merely stepped back and said: "Never mind. I will get on a later boat." I never saw her again. I saw no man ever try to push his way to the boats. To a man they accepted that it was perfectly right and proper for women and children to go first. I heard later that some men on the starboard side of the ship had tried to rush one of the lifeboats, and that shots had to be fired over their heads to drive them back. But I never saw it with my own eyes.

There were many heroes that night, but if there was one I remember best it was Mr Lightoller. He was everywhere, quietly ensuring the safe loading and launching of the boats, and picking out the seamen to row each one. I can hear his voice even now echoing in my head. "Lower away there. Lower away. Are there any more women? Are there any more women?" And one of the waiting men answered him back, I remember.

"No more women, Officer. There's plenty of men though, but I don't see plenty of boats."

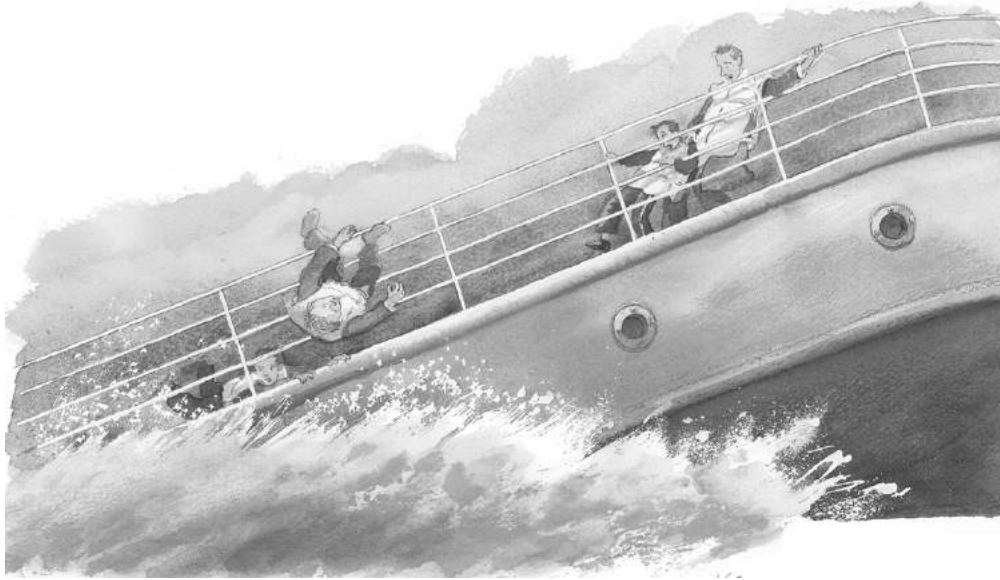
It was something every one of us now had come to realise, that there were hardly any boats left to take the rest of us off, and that many of the lifeboats that remained could not now be launched because of the severe list of the ship. When I saw the sea-water come washing over the bow, and rushing down the deck towards us, I knew that our chances of survival were fading fast. Like so many others, I scanned the horizon desperately for the lights of the *Carpathia*. We were all aware by now that she was the only ship close enough to come to our rescue. But there were no lights to be seen.

The *Titanic* was sinking fast, and we knew now we were going down with her. With every minute that passed now the list to port was telling us the end was near. The deck was at such an angle that it was well-nigh impossible to keep our footing. We heard Mr Lightoller's voice ringing out. "All passengers to the

starboard side.”



So that's where Mr Stanton and I went, slipping and sliding, clutching at each other for support, until we reached the rail on the starboard side and clung on. Here we looked out at the sea, and waited silently for our end. There was nothing more to be done. "I should like to say," Mr Stanton said, his hand resting on my shoulder, "that if I am to die tonight and I cannot die with my family, then I'd rather die in your company than any other. You're a fine young man, Johnny Trott."



“Will the sea be cold?” I asked him.

“I fear so,” he replied, “but don’t worry, that’s all to the good. It will all be over very quickly for us both.”



“Good Luck and God Bless You”

It was our blessed good fortune that Mr Stanton and I were there on the Boat Deck at the time the last boat was being lowered. It was not one of the large wooden lifeboats – they were all gone by now – but one of the boats with canvas sides, some twenty or more feet long, with a rounded hull. This one was stored below a funnel and there were some men trying to manhandle it down on to the deck, a couple of crew among them. One of them was shouting at us: “This is the only boat left, this is our only chance. We need more hands here!” Wading through water that was waist-high by now, Mr Stanton and I and a dozen other men did all we could to help them heave the boat up and over the rail. All of us knew this was our last hope. How we strained and struggled to launch that lifeboat, but it was too heavy and too cumbersome for us. There weren’t enough of us, and we were very soon exhausted by our efforts. We couldn’t do it. The *Titanic* was groaning and gasping all about us. She was going down at the bow, fast.

I looked up to see a great wave come rolling along the decks towards us, a

lucky wave as it turned out. It swept the lifeboat overboard and we went with it. The shock of the icy sea drove all the breath from my body and left me gasping for breath. I remember trying to swim frantically away from the ship, and then looking back and seeing one of the huge funnels breaking away and falling down on top of me, toppling like a giant tree. As it hit the water I felt myself sucked under and swirled away downwards into a whirlpool of such power I was sure it would take me to the bottom with the ship. All I could do was to keep my mouth pursed, tight shut, and my eyes open.

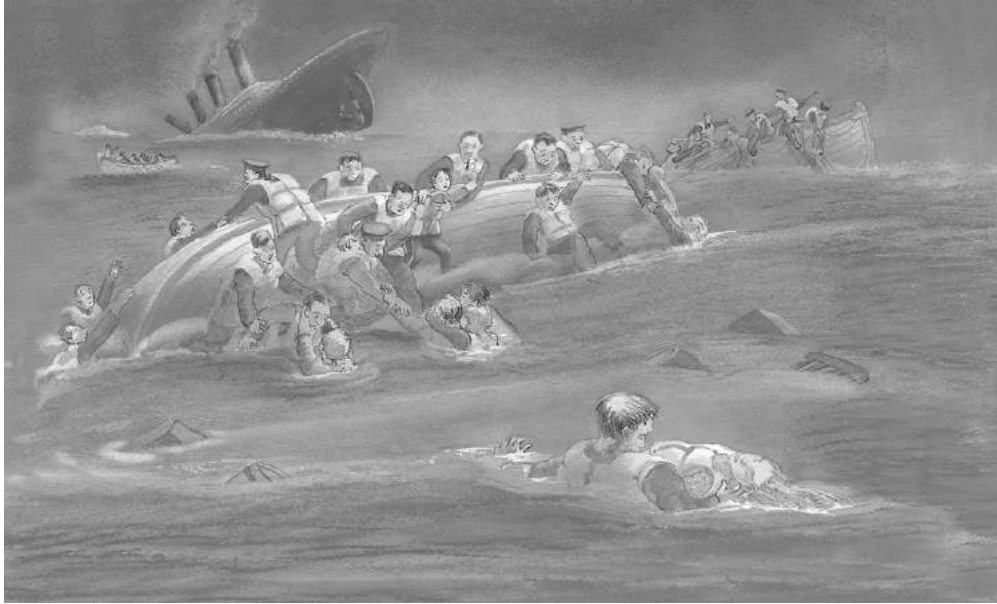
Suddenly I saw Mr Stanton above me, his feet caught in a rope.



He was kicking and struggling to break free. Then, miraculously, I was

released from the whirlpool, and found I could swim up towards him. I managed to free him from the rope, and together we swam hard for the surface, for the light. How deep we were by now I had no idea. All I knew was that I had to swim with all my strength, and not to breathe, not to open my mouth. What I learned that night was what every drowning man learns before he dies, that in the end he has to open his mouth and try to breathe. That is how he drowns. When at last I had to take a breath the sea rushed in and choked me, but at that very moment I broke the surface, spluttering, coughing the water out of my lungs. Mr Stanton was in the water nearby, calling for me. We saw the upturned lifeboat nearby, and swam towards it. There were bodies floating in the water, hundreds of them. The cold was cramping my legs, sapping what little strength I still had. If I didn't reach the boat, if I didn't get out of the water and soon, I would be as lifeless as those bodies all around me. I swam for my life.

There were other survivors clambering on to it when we got there, and I couldn't see how there'd be room for us as well. But helping hands hauled us both up out of the sea and we joined them there, half standing, half lying back against the upturned hull of the lifeboat, and clinging to one another for dear life. Only then did I really begin to take in the horrors of the tragedy I had been living through. The shrieks and cries of the drowning were all around me. I caught my last sight of the great *Titanic*, her stern almost vertical, slipping into the sea. When she was gone we were left only with the debris of this dreadful disaster strewn all around the ocean, and those terrible cries that went on and on. And there were swimmers in the sea all around us, every one of them, it seemed, heading our way. Very soon we were swamped with them and we were turning them away, yelling at any others who came near that there was no room. And that was true, horribly true. The buoyancy of our boat was already under threat. We were low in the water as it was, and all of us would be lost if we took on any more. What I have never forgotten is that even in their desperate plight many of those swimmers seemed to understand the situation perfectly, and accept it. One of them – and I recognised him as one of the stokers I'd worked alongside – said to us, his voice shaking with cold: "All right then, lads, good luck and God bless you." And with that he swam off in among the bodies, and the chairs and the crates, and disappeared.



I never saw him again.

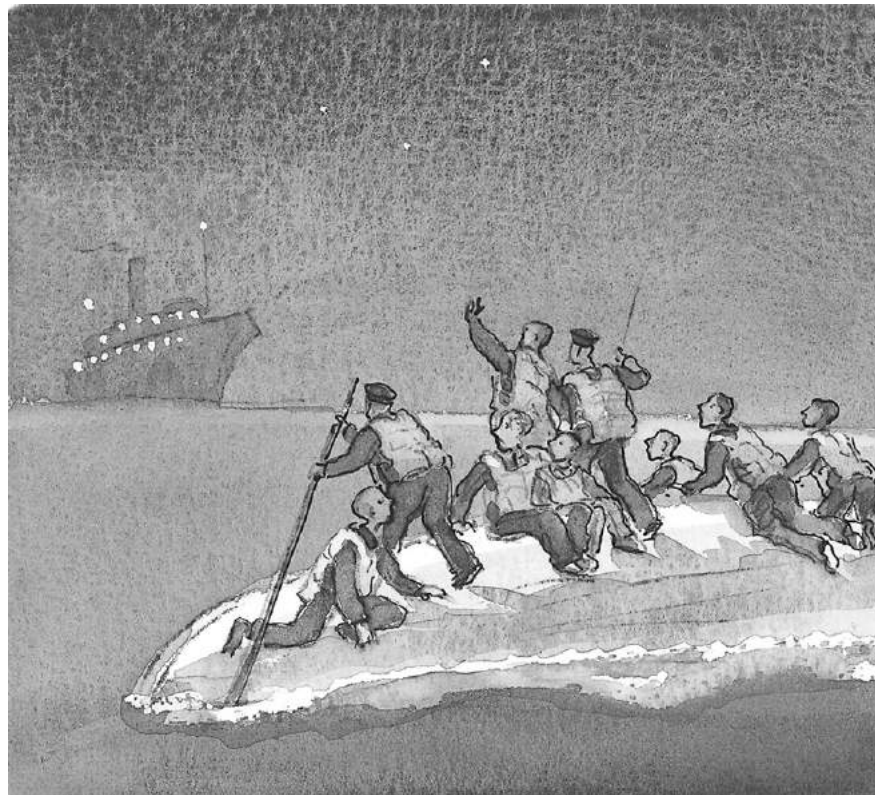
I will carry to the grave the guilt of what we did to that man and to so many others. Like so many survivors I have lived through that night out on the open ocean in my dreams, again and again. Mr Stanton and I did not talk much, each of us too busy with our own doubts and dreads, too busy just surviving. But side by side we endured together. I know that for me it was memories that kept me going. I think I relived most of my life that night: Harry the cockroach in his matchbox, the Countess Kandinsky sweeping into the Savoy in her ostrich feather hat, taking her bows at the opera that night, Kaspar curled up on her piano as she sang, Lizziebeth beaming up at me as she fed him his liver, Lizziebeth on the roof of the Savoy, Lizziebeth and her mother in the lifeboat with Kaspar hidden in his blanket.

Around us the ocean was silent and empty now. There were no more cries for help, no more last messages to mother, no more appeals to God. We looked, and we never stopped looking, for the lights of a ship on the horizon that might bring us some hope of rescue. Our lifeboat had floated away from all the others by now and from all the wreckage that had littered the ocean. We were quite alone and quite helpless. From time to time one of our number – there were about thirty of us, I think – said the Lord's Prayer, but for the most part we were silent.

The growing fear for all of us as the night passed was the sea itself. At the time the ship went down the ocean was completely calm, just as it had been ever since we left Southampton. But now all of us could feel that a swell was building, and we all knew that if the waves worsened our fragile craft would be

bound to sink beneath us. Sleep too was a danger. Already one of the older passengers had simply fallen asleep and slipped into the sea. He went down without a struggle. I saw him go, and I knew then that very soon I would be going the same way. I wasn't afraid of dying, not any more. I just wanted to get it over with. Often I felt coming over me an irresistible wish to surrender myself to sleep, only for Mr Stanton to shake me back to my senses.

It was Mr Stanton too who first saw the lights of the *Carpathia*. His cracked voice shouted it out to the rest of us. Some did not believe it at first because the rise and fall of the swell intermittently hid the lights from us. But soon they were quite unmistakable. A great joy surged through every one of us, giving us new strength and new determination. Not that any of us cheered, but when we looked at each other now we could manage a smile. We knew we had a chance to survive. Those lights of hope, lights of life, for that's what they were for us, drove away the darkness of our despair, and the agony of the cold too. Mr Stanton's arm came round my shoulder. I knew he must be hoping what I was hoping for, that his wife, and his daughter, and Kaspar might be there on the *Carpathia*, and safe.



We did not know it at the time, but we were the last survivors to be picked up by the *Carpathia*. I went up the rope ladder ahead of Mr Stanton. My legs were

so weak that I wondered often as I climbed whether I could make it or not. I could see that my hands were gripping the ladder, but I couldn't feel them. It wasn't strength that got me up that ladder, it was nothing but the will to live. Then with Mr Stanton and all the others from the lifeboat we were all taken below into the warm, given dry clothes and swathed in blankets. We sat there drinking warm, sweet tea. It has been my favourite drink ever since.



There was chaos on board. It was no one's fault. The crew of the *Carpathia* were doing their best, but they were overwhelmed, they were busy just coping as best they could. Whoever we asked, no one seemed to have any definite news of anyone. Lists of survivors were being compiled, we were told.

Mr Stanton asked the sailors repeatedly for news of his family, but there was no one who recognised their description. Every one of us on that ship was looking for someone. Many sat silent, already knowing the worst, lost in grief. Joyous reunions were few and far between. Fearful and hopeful, we went looking for Lizziebeth and Mrs Stanton and Kaspar. We searched the ship from bow to stern. They were nowhere to be found. We found bodies lying on the deck, though, wrapped in blankets. We checked these too. I came across one little girl, about the same age as Lizziebeth, and was sure it was her at first, but it was not.

We looked everywhere we could think of, asked again and again the same question. The last lingering hope left to us was that they might still be out there at sea in their lifeboat. The two of us went to the ship's rail. But all the lifeboats we saw floating around the ship were already empty. We scanned the sea all around, searched the horizon. There was nothing. At that moment of utter despair we heard a yowling from behind us. We turned. They were there, all three of them, shrouded in blankets, only their faces showing. It was a strange and wonderful reunion for all of us. We stood there on the deck for many long minutes, our arms around one another. It was during those moments I really felt

for the first time that I had in some way become one of them, one of the family.

Crowded in a cabin below with other survivors, we slept and told our stories and slept again. Lizziebeth and her mother owed their survival, they told us, to a small Japanese man who spoke no English and a brave French lady who fortunately spoke both Japanese and English, so could translate. Through her, the Japanese man made it quite clear to everyone that they should do what he was doing and row. If they rowed they would keep warm, he said, and keeping warm could save their lives. So that's what they did, taking it in turns all night long. Even Lizziebeth rowed. She sat on the French lady's lap and rowed. Because of that wonderful man's example, Mrs Stanton said, not one of them had died of the cold in that lifeboat. His example and his cheerfulness had kept their spirits up all through the longest, coldest night of their lives, and when they reached the *Carpathia*, he was the last out of the lifeboat.

I knew even as she was telling us that it had to be Little Mitch. I went searching for him at once, and found him after a while on his own, looking out over the railings at the empty sea. We greeted each other as old friends, which of course after all we had lived through, we most certainly were. I was up on deck with Little Mitch a few days later, as the *Carpathia* steamed slowly in to New York Harbour. That was when we first set eyes on the Statue of Liberty. He turned to me with a big grin on his face, and said just one word: "America!"



A New Life

That was how Kaspar and I came to America, as stowaways, as survivors from the *Titanic*. When we docked in New York we came down the gangplank of the *Carpathia* together, the Stanton family and Kaspar and me. Mr Stanton had “a discussion”, as he called it, with the immigration authorities, and as a consequence of this I was allowed to go and stay with them in their house in Greenwich Village. From the very start I was treated as if I was one of them. I was told I should never again call them Mr and Mrs Stanton, no more “Sir” or “Madam”. It would be Robert and Ann from now on. I found this very difficult at first – old habits die hard – but it became ever more natural as the weeks passed.

But then Lizziebeth fell sick, very sick. The terrible cold of that night on the ocean had reached her lungs, and she’d caught pneumonia. The doctor came often to begin with, a taciturn man who did little to relieve our anxiety. Kaspar stayed with her all through her illness, scarcely ever leaving her bed. All the rest of us would take it in turns to sit with her. Then one morning I came in and she was sitting up in bed, with Kaspar on her lap, and smiling at me. She was her sunny self again. But for some time afterwards she still had to stay in her room

and rest, which she didn't care for at all, not one bit.

Lizziebeth claimed that it *had* to be Kaspar who had brought luck to all of us. Because of Kaspar, she said, they had survived the night in the boat, and because of Kaspar she had recovered from her pneumonia.



I had a big argument with her about that. Much as I loved Kaspar, I never much believed in superstitions. You might as well say, I told her, that it was Kaspar who had brought us bad luck in the first place, the worst luck, that maybe it was because Kaspar was on board that the *Titanic* had sunk in the first place. “Nonsense,” Lizziebeth retorted. “It was an iceberg, not Kaspar, that sank the *Titanic*!” I think I discovered then, if I hadn't before, that I could never have an argument with Lizziebeth and expect to win, that one way or another she would always have the last word.

During Lizziebeth's convalescence, when she still wasn't allowed out of the house, I got to know Robert and Ann a great deal better. It took a while for me to feel completely at ease with them when we were alone, and I think they sensed it. They took it upon themselves to give me a good time, to show me New York. We went to Penn Station, visited the Statue of Liberty, and the zoo – all of which made Lizziebeth very jealous – and once we went collecting horseshoe crab shells on a beach on Long Island. Best of all, I learned to ride with Ann in

Central Park. She took me riding almost every day. I hadn't been on a horse before, so I had a lot to learn, but Ann was full of encouragement. "You ride so well, Johnny," she told me once, "as if you'd been born in the saddle. I'm very proud of you." The truth is that I loved being with them whatever we were doing. I felt as if I was a son for the first time. Having a mother and father of my own was better than I had ever imagined it could be. I was having the time of my life.

In the evenings I'd be up in Lizziebeth's room, playing with Kaspar if he was awake, and learning how to play chess with Lizziebeth when he wasn't. I liked chess, although I never managed to win a single game against her. As for Kaspar, he had the run of the place as I did, and very soon had occupied the piano in the drawing room and made it his own. Everyone in the house, Lizziebeth's governess, the servants too, all simply adored him. Like me, he couldn't have been happier. Only one cloud hung over me, the knowledge that sooner or later all these golden days would have to end, and I'd have to leave. How I dreaded that day.



One evening, some months afterwards, I was called down into the drawing room to find the family all lined up in front of the fireplace. Lizziebeth was in her dressing gown. Kaspar was sitting on the piano watching me, his tail swishing. Lizziebeth was looking at me conspiratorially – clearly she knew something I didn't. Her mother and father on the other hand were looking very serious and stiff, rather as they had been when I'd first seen them that time back in their rooms at the Savoy Hotel. This is it, I thought, this is when they tell me my time's up, that I have to go back to London, to my job as a bell-boy in the Savoy.

Robert cleared his throat. He was going to make some kind of a speech. I

prepared myself for the worst. “Johnny, the three of us have come to a decision,” he began. “You know how much we have enjoyed having you with us here as our guest. Lizziebeth has told us of your circumstances back home in England, that you have no family as such to go back to...” He hesitated, and that was when Ann spoke up.

“I guess what we’re trying to say, Johnny, is that after all that has happened, and knowing you now as well as we do, and what a fine young man you are, we would very much like you to consider not returning to London, but instead staying here and making your home with us in New York. We’d be really proud to have you live here as one of the family, if you’d like it that is. What do you say?”

I remember Kaspar and Lizziebeth both looking up at me, waiting for me to say something. It took me a while – not to make up my mind – I did that instantly, but to get over my surprise and find my voice.

“Oh come on, Johnny Trott, say yes, please,” Lizziebeth cried.

“OK,” I replied – it was a new expression I’d picked up in New York. I was so overwhelmed that it was all I could bring myself to say. But it was enough. Everyone hugged me then, and we all cried a little, except Kaspar who had sprung up on the piano, and was busy washing himself.

So, by the greatest of good fortune, I acquired a new life, a new home, and a new country. They sent me back to school, which at first I didn’t care for. I thought I’d finished with all that – I’d never been much good at books and reading and all that. But Robert read stories to us all in the evenings, and through him I came to like books a lot better than I had. Gradually school became much easier, and sometimes even enjoyable. They teased me a bit at first on account of my London cockney accent, and so to start with I felt a bit alone. But someone put it about that I was a survivor from the *Titanic*, and after that I had all the friends I could handle. We spent long summers in Maine, sailing up there on the *Abe Lincoln*. Lizziebeth and I went walking in the woods and fishing, and everywhere we went Kaspar came with us. They were great days, days I shall remember all my life.

I was to have gone off to college, to William and Mary in Virginia, where Robert himself had once been a student. I never got there. In Europe the First World War was raging, and my old country was fighting for her life. So when in 1917 America sent troops over to fight in France, I went with them. And who did I find marching alongside me up to the front? Little Mitch. We just picked up where we’d left off all those years before on the *Titanic*, on the *Carpathia*, and

were best friends from then on.

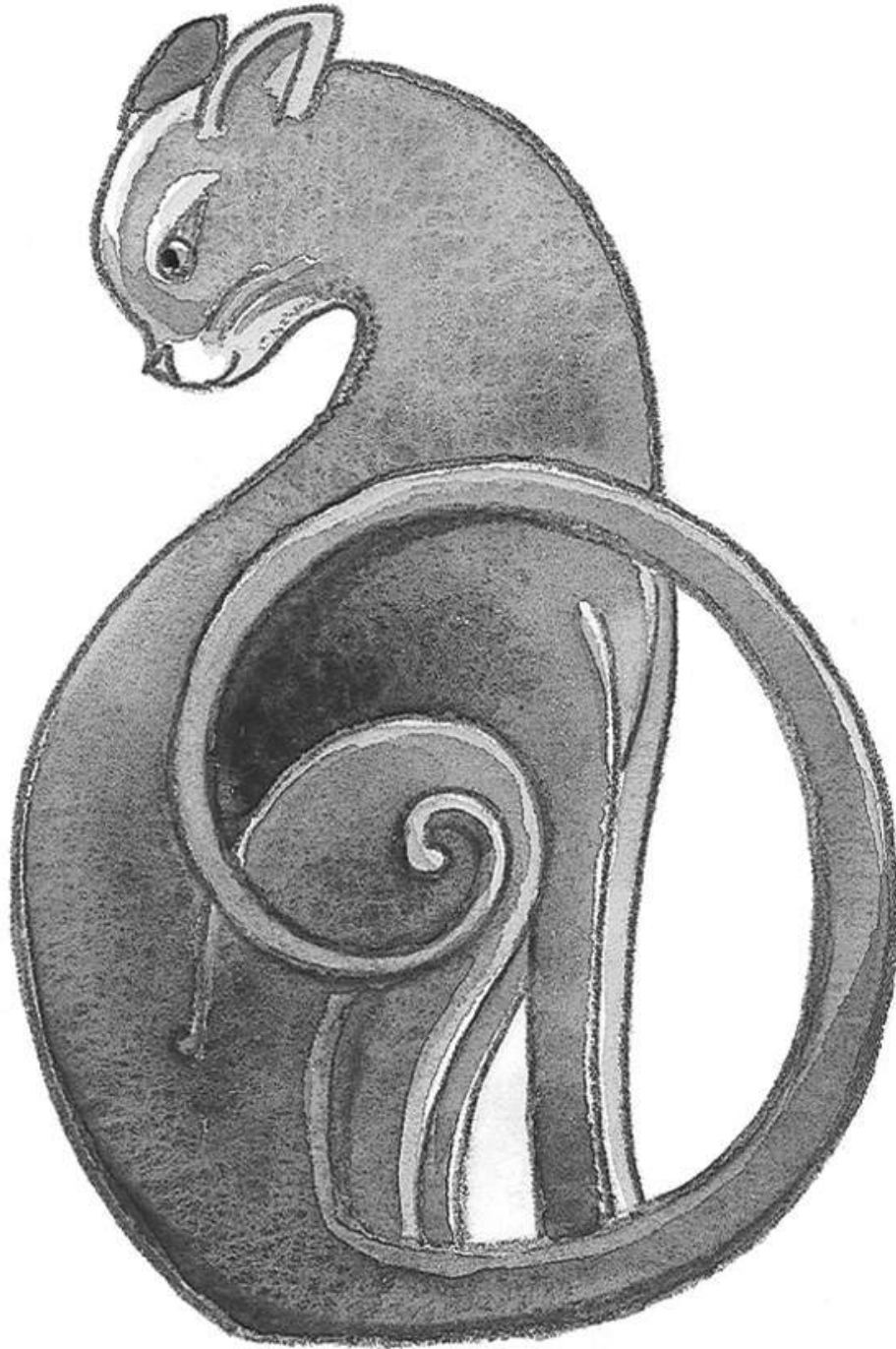


While I was at the front I'd get letters every week from Lizziebeth, who was away at boarding school by now. I'd look forward to every one of them because I could hear her voice in her writing, see her face as I was reading her words, and that cheered me more than I can say, when all around me in France I saw nothing but horror and death. And with her letters Lizziebeth would sometimes send me little sketches, and once a beautiful drawing of Kaspar sitting there looking at me, willing me to come home it seemed. I kept it with me in my tunic pocket, along with a photograph of her and me by the seashore in Maine. Lizziebeth always said afterwards, when the war was over, that it must have

been the drawing of Kaspar that had kept me safe and brought me home. I'm not sure she was right about that, but she insisted on having it framed and put up in pride of place in the front hall. When no one's looking, I do reach out and touch it sometimes. So I suppose that I must be just a little superstitious. But I'm not admitting that to her.

Right after the war Mitch came to work with me in Robert's publishing business – he had become quite a family friend by now. We worked together in the packing room in the basement – Robert said we had to learn the business from the bottom upwards. So we did, literally. For me, books became a part of my life. I didn't just pack them, I read them voraciously, and very soon began to write stories of my own. And while I was writing, Lizziebeth would be up in her attic studio, drawing or painting or sculpting, animals mostly. On our holidays in Maine we wouldn't climb trees any more, or go diving off the quay, she'd sit on the rocks by the seashore with her sketchbook out, and I'd scribble away nearby, and Kaspar would wander between us to remind us he was there. We would often talk of the old days in London, of Mr Freddie and Skullface, and the great roof rescue. And more than once she said what fun it would be to go back to visit. But I didn't think she was serious.

Then just before her seventeenth birthday she announced to us that she was too old now to be given birthday presents. Instead she was going to give us something, providing, she added, that we didn't mind giving it away. None of us knew quite what to make of this, until she took us out into the front hall. And there it was. Sitting on the table, below the famous sketch she had sent out to me in France during the war, was a magnificent sculpture of Kaspar, his neck arched, his tail curled around him. "I carved it out of ash wood," she said, "and then I painted it jet black. And do you know what I want? I want to take it back to London, and give it to the hotel where we stayed, where I first saw Kaspar and Johnny. I want it to be there for ever. It's where Kaspar belongs. Kaspar could come too. He may be old, but he's fit as a fiddle. Well?" she said, beaming brightly at us. "When do we go?"



We went six months later, and Little Mitch came with us too. We wanted him to come, to show him where it had all happened, where the whole story had begun, a story he was part of, that had changed all our lives for ever. I won't pretend that any of us much enjoyed the crossing of the Atlantic. There were too many terrible memories, but we kept them to ourselves, and never once mentioned the *Titanic*. In fact we had hardly ever mentioned the *Titanic* in all these years. It was what bound us inseparably, and what distanced us from others

who had not been there, but we had rarely spoken of it among ourselves. All together again on the wide Atlantic, we faced our fears, and took strength from one another's silence.

Mr Freddie was there to greet us at the front door of the Savoy, and when we went inside, the staff were waiting to welcome us. Kaspar yowled from his basket as they all clapped us in. So I took him out to show everyone. He loved all the attention, and to tell the truth, so did I. Mary O'Connell was still there, head housekeeper now, instead of Skullface. She gave Ann a huge bunch of red roses, and cried on my shoulder as she hugged me. As for the bell-boy who took us up in the lift, he was a cockney lad, just like me, wearing the same uniform, with his cap worn at the same jaunty angle. He showed us into the Countess Kandinsky's old rooms, with windows looking out over the Thames down towards the Houses of Parliament. Kaspar made himself at home at once, resuming his place on the piano and proceeding to washing himself vigorously. He was as happy as I'd ever seen him.

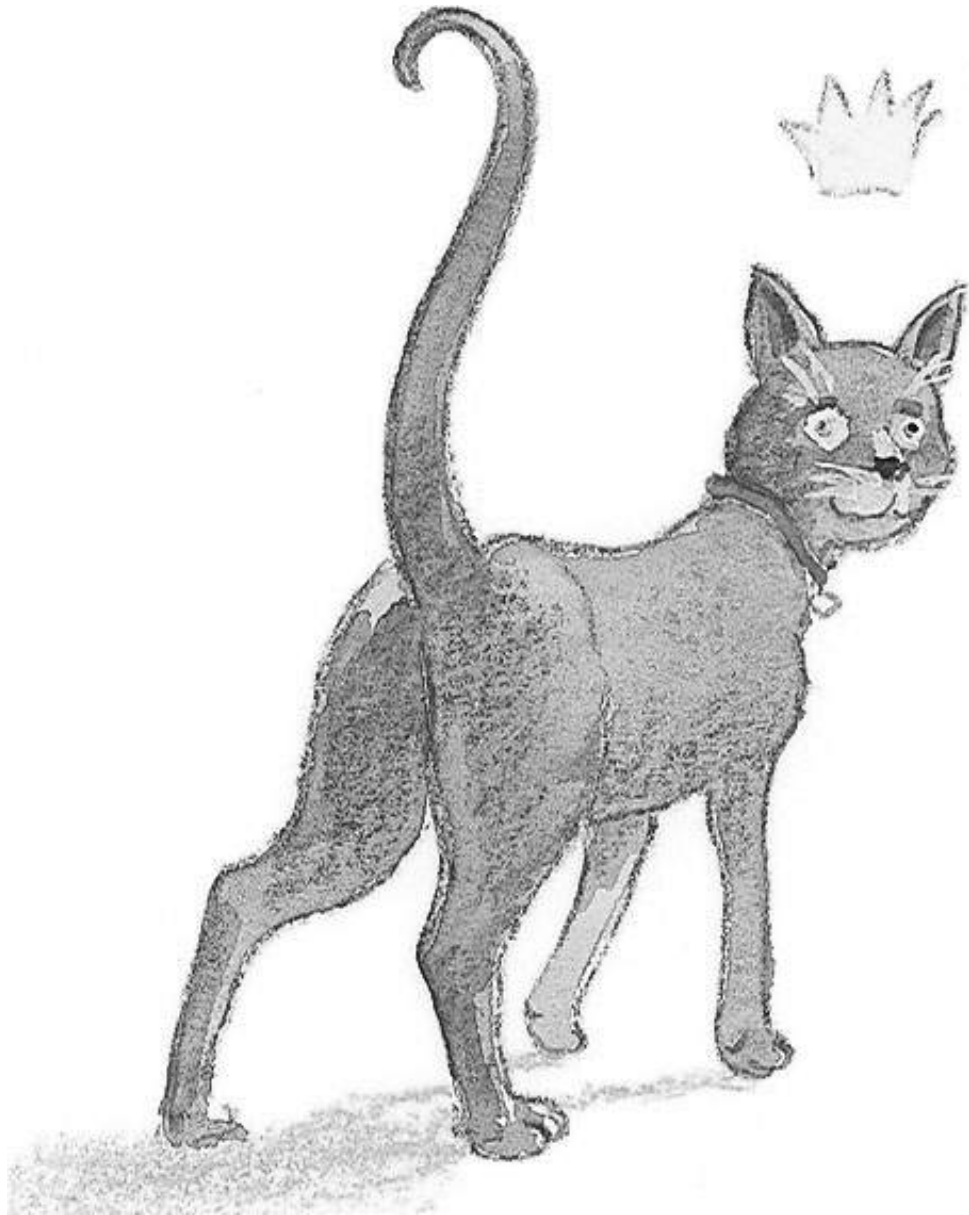


He slept on the window ledge in the sun all the rest of that day. He'd been doing a lot of sleeping lately.

We had an unveiling ceremony outside the American Bar the next morning, and much to Lizziebeth's delight, everyone seemed to like the sculpture as much as they loved Kaspar himself. He was there at the ceremony, but wandered off during the speeches. I watched him go, waving his tail as he went. It was the last

I ever saw of him. He just disappeared. Everyone searched the hotel, over and over again, from the basement to the attic corridor. He was nowhere to be found.

It's well enough known that old cats go off to die when they're good and ready. I think, and Lizziebeth thinks, that's what he must have done. We were sad, of course we were. He was the cat that had brought us together, had survived with us, and he was gone. But in a way, as I told Lizziebeth, trying to comfort her, he is not gone. He's sitting there proudly outside the American Bar. You can go and see him for yourself, if you like. He's still there, looking very pleased with himself, and so he should be. After all, he is Prince Kaspar Kandinsky, Prince of Cats, a Muscovite, a Londoner and a New Yorker, and as far as anyone knows, the only cat to survive the sinking of the *Titanic*.



And then...

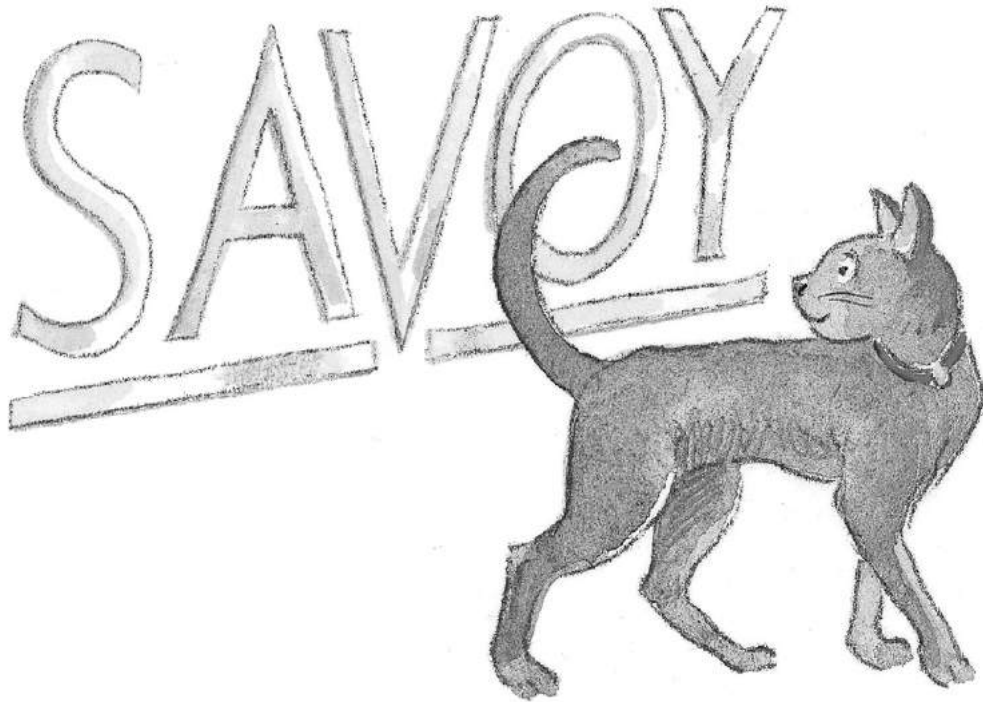
...only a year or so after our visit to London, we received a letter from Mr Freddie.

Dear Johnny and Lizziebeth,

I'm writing to tell you of a strange happening. Several guests at the hotel have reported sighting a black cat wandering the corridors late at night. I took no notice at first, but it has happened time and again, and I thought you ought to know. And just yesterday, a lady staying in your rooms, the Countess Kandinsky's rooms, reported seeing a reflection in the mirror of a

grand lady in an ostrich-feathered hat, carrying a black cat in her arms. When she was offered the opportunity to be moved to another room, she said she'd rather stay, that they were kindly ghosts, like good companions. Mary and the others send love. Come and see us again one day, before too long.

Yours, Freddie



Postscript

I'm a story detective. I hunt down clues because I need evidence to write my stories. So what was the evidence behind the writing of Kaspar?

A year ago I was asked to be Writer-in-Residence at the Savoy Hotel in London. This involved putting on some literary events and staying for three months at the Savoy. My wife Clare and I had a bed the size of Ireland, and breakfast every morning looking out over the Thames. Everyone in the hotel was very kind. We were treated like royalty – which was great!

Then one day, in the corridor next to the American Bar, I met Kaspar, the Savoy Cat. He was sitting there in a glass showcase – a sculpture of a huge black cat – very elegant, very superior. I made enquiries, as detectives do, and found out why he was there.

One day, almost a hundred years ago, thirteen men sat down to a dinner party at the Savoy. One of them scoffed loudly at the suggestion that thirteen might be an unlucky number, said it was so much tosh. Only a few weeks later, he was shot down in his office in Johannesburg, South Africa. Thereafter The Savoy decided that they would never again allow thirteen people to sit down together for dinner. They would always have a fourteenth chair, and sitting on the fourteenth chair, there would be a specially carved sculpture of a lucky black cat. He was known as Kaspar.

My first clue.

My second clue: I came down to breakfast one morning, and was walking down the red carpeted stairs into the River Restaurant, when I looked up and had a sudden sense of déjà vu. The whole decor and atmosphere reminded me of pictures I'd seen of the restaurant on the Titanic. I knew then my story would be about a cat called Kaspar, who would live at the Savoy and become the only cat to survive the sinking of the Titanic.

But it was the people who lived and worked at the Savoy who gave me my last and my most vital clue. I discovered that they came from every corner of the globe. And I soon discovered also that their lives were very different from the lives of the guests they looked after. It would have been very much like this, I thought, in 1912, at the time the Titanic went down.

My evidence was complete. A little dreamtime, to make some sense of all the clues, and I could begin my story, about how Kaspar was brought to the Savoy

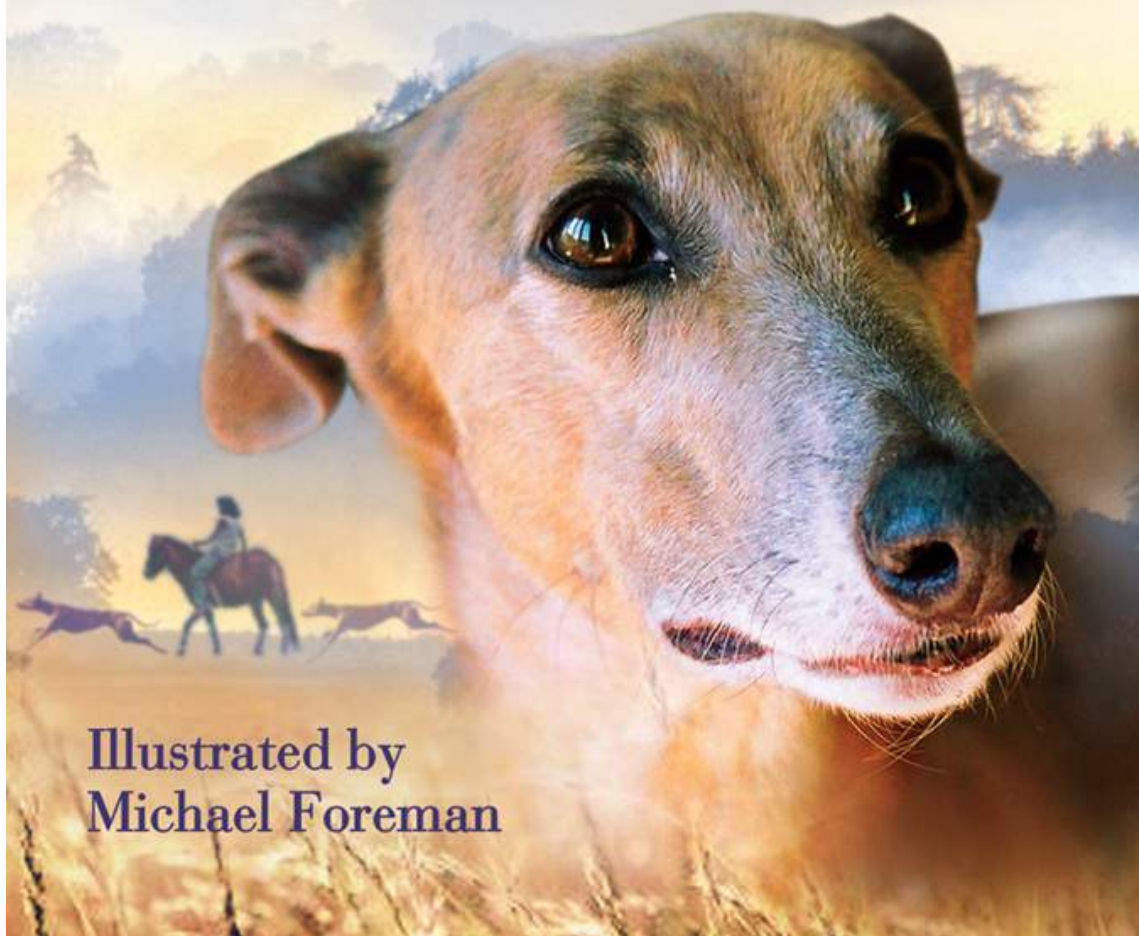
by a very famous diva – an opera singer, a Countess from Russia...You know the rest by now, unless you've read this postscript first – I'll be very cross with you if you have!

MICHAEL MORPURGO

michael morpurgo

Born to Run

The many lives of one incredible dog



Illustrated by
Michael Foreman

Born to Run

michael morpurgo



Illustrated by Michael Foreman



HarperCollins *Children's Books*

To Simon, Alison, Rose, Amy, Hazel and Otto

Contents

Dedication

“Best Mate for ever”

“Be Fast, Brighteyes, Be Very Fast”

“Knick Knack, Paddywack”



“Best Mate for ever”

Part of Patrick's walk to school, to St Thomas' Junior School on Porthcressa Road was along the canal, past the brown sauce factory which somehow smelled both sweet and sour at the same time. That walk along the canal where the barges chugged by, where the ducks dipped and drank, was the only part of going to school that Patrick looked forward to at all. There was so much he was dreading. He sat there on his bed and thought about the school day ahead of him, wishing he didn't have to live through it. The radio was burbling downstairs as it always was, and his dad had burnt the toast, again.

Patrick thought of Mr Butterworth, his teacher and football coach, whose literacy homework – that stupid story about someone you meet standing in a shopping queue – he still hadn't finished, and who this time was bound to make him stay in after lunch and finish it. That meant that the head teacher, Mrs Brightwell, would probably find him there, and so he'd be in double trouble. She was always on at Patrick about being untidy or running in the corridors, or daydreaming or using what she called 'lazy words', such as 'cool' or 'wicked', or worst of all, 'whatever'.

If she ever heard anyone saying 'whatever' she'd practically explode, especially if you shrugged your shoulders at the same time. The trouble was that just at the moment and for no good reason, 'whatever' happened to be Patrick's favourite word. He knew it irritated his mum and dad as well, knew how much Mrs Brightwell hated it, but the word would just pop out as if it had a mind of its own, and with it came a shrug. There was nothing he could do to stop himself, and of course all too often Mrs Brightwell would be right there, and she'd blow up. After it was over, everyone would turn round and laugh at him. That was what Patrick dreaded most about school, being laughed at.

He dreaded Jimmy Rington too, Jimbo to his friends, and Patrick wasn't one of them, not since the day before when he'd let in *that* goal, the goal that had lost the cup final against Burbage School. It hadn't been Patrick's fault, not entirely. It was the kestrel's fault as well. The thing was, he'd been watching for the kestrel on and off for days. The bird was roosting high up on the chimney of the brown sauce factory. Patrick loved to see him come swooping down and hover there over the long grass at the edge of the playing field. Patrick could have watched him all day and every day. Once he'd caught sight of the kestrel he

couldn't take his eyes off him. It wasn't his fault that he came gliding over the football pitch at just the same moment the Burbage centre forward let fly with a speculative long range shot that Patrick should easily have saved.

There was all the sudden shouting, as the ball rocketed past him into the net, and he was left diving after it despairingly, ending up flat on his face in the mud. When he looked up, there were Jimmy Rington and the others running towards him, yelling and screaming: "Loser! Loser!" Mr Butterworth said it wasn't the end of the world, but to Patrick it certainly felt like it. So Patrick had a lot of worrying to do that morning.

He was late down to breakfast as a result. He barely had time to feed Swimsy, his goldfish, and shovel down his Cocopops, before his mum was kissing him goodbye on top of his head as she passed by behind him, talking as she went, not to him at all, but to Patrick's dad, about not forgetting to get the car serviced. Then she was out of the door and gone. Minutes later Patrick was being hustled into the car, and his dad was telling him to be careful crossing the road by the school, to wait until the lollipop man said he could cross – this was what he said every morning.

Patrick was dropped off by the bridge as usual, and found himself alone at last and walking along the canal. Suddenly it didn't matter any more about Jimmy Rington or the goal he'd let in, or saying 'whatever' or Mrs Brightwell's volcanic temper tantrums. He breathed in the sweet and sour smell of the brown sauce factory. It was strange, he loved the smell, but hated the taste of the actual sauce. Shading his eyes against the sun, he looked up at the chimney to see if his kestrel was there. He wasn't, but Patrick didn't mind, because there were some ducks cruising past him, and another nearby with his bottom in the air, and that always made him smile. A moorhen scurried across the towpath in front of him and disappeared into the long grass.

He hitched up his school bag and felt suddenly all bright and breezy, until he saw the swan some distance ahead of him, standing there on the towpath, looking at him, waiting for him. That worried him, because Patrick knew this swan, knew him all too well. They had met once before. It looked like the same one who had blocked his path on the way to school only a couple of weeks ago. He'd come running at Patrick wings outstretched, neck lowered to attack and hissing like a hundred snakes. Patrick had had to run into the undergrowth to escape him and had fallen into a patch of nettles. So Patrick did not like this swan, not one bit. Yet somehow he was going to have to get past him – it was the only way to get to school, and he had to get to school. The question was how

to do it.



Patrick stood there eyeing the swan, just hoping that sooner rather than later the swan would decide it was time to go back into the water. But the swan stayed steadfastly where he was, glaring darkly at him, his great black feet planted firmly on the towpath. He was showing no signs of moving anywhere.

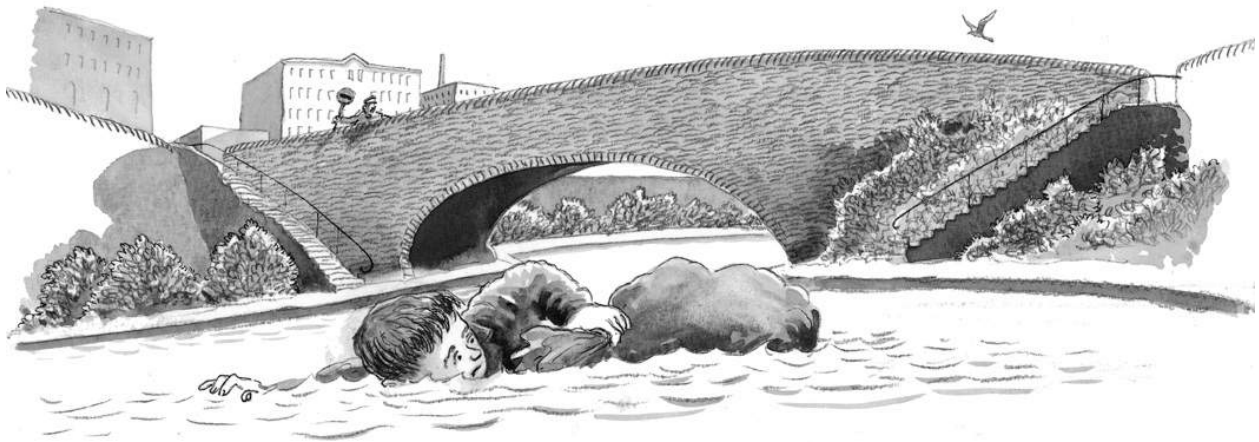
Patrick was still wondering what to do, when out of the corner of his eye he saw something floating out in the middle of the canal. It was bright green and looked plastic – a sack of some kind. He probably wouldn't have paid it any more attention – a sack's not that interesting, after all – if he hadn't heard the squeaking. It sounded as if it was coming from the sack itself, and that didn't make sense.

Patrick thought at first it might have been the piping of ducklings or moorhen chicks – he'd heard them often enough on the canal. But then he remembered that there weren't any chicks around, not any more, because it was autumn. The whole place was carpeted with yellow leaves, gold leaves, red leaves. They were all around his feet. Spring and summer were over. No, it really had to be the sack itself that was squeaking.

It was still early in the morning and Patrick's brain must have been working very slowly, because several moments passed before he realised that there was something alive inside the sack, and even then it wasn't only the squeaking that convinced him. The sack, he noticed, wasn't just drifting gently along like everything else, the leaves, the sticks, all the other flotsam in the canal. It was turning of its own accord, as if it was being propelled from the inside. There was definitely something inside it, and whatever it was seemed to be struggling against the side of the plastic sack, kicking at it, trying to escape from it and squeaking and squealing in terror. He had no idea what it might be, only that it

was alive and in danger of drowning. The canal wasn't that wide. It was dirty but it wasn't wide. He could do it.

Patrick didn't think about it any more. He shrugged off his school bag and leaped into the canal. He knew he was a good enough swimmer, so he wasn't worried about drowning, only about getting cold and wet. He didn't want the canal water in his mouth either, so he kept it tight shut. Just a few quick strokes out into the canal and he'd grabbed the sack, turned, and was swimming back again. Suddenly the bank seemed a long way away, but he got there.



Climbing out was the most difficult part because his clothes were heavy and clinging, and the sack was slippery in his hands, difficult to hold on to. He felt suddenly very weak, felt the cold of the water chilling him to the bone. But with one huge effort he heaved himself up, enough to hook one leg up, on to the bank, and then he was out. Standing there, dripping from everywhere, he untied the sack and opened it. There were five puppies inside, leggy, gangly looking creatures, skeletal almost, all of them trembling with cold and crawling over one another, squirming to get out, mouths open and squeaking frantically. They were like no puppies Patrick had ever seen before.



He had two choices, and he knew neither of them were any good. He could go home at once and leave the puppies in his bedroom – he had a key, he could easily let himself into the flat. There'd be no one home, but at least they'd be warm there. This way he could change his wet clothes too. He could feed them when he got back after school. The trouble was that it would take for ever to get there and back, and by the time he got to school he'd be so late that Mrs Brightwell would probably have one of her eruptions and he'd be in detention for a week, and she'd be bound to send him home with another cross letter for his mum and dad.

She certainly wouldn't believe his excuse: "Please Mrs Brightwell, sorry I'm late, but I had to jump into the canal on the way to school to rescue some puppies." If he didn't have the puppies with him, and he'd already changed into dry clothes, she'd be bound to think he was making the whole thing up. She hated excuses anyway, especially incredible ones. She'd go ballistic.

Or he could go straight to school all wet and smelly from the canal, only a little bit late and carrying the puppies with him. At least she'd have to believe his story then, wouldn't she? But then he thought of what Jimmy Rington would say when he walked into school all dripping and sodden, how everyone would laugh at him. They'd never let him forget it, that was for sure. And then there was that swan he had to get by, still there blocking his path, still glaring at him.

In the end it was Mr Boots, the lollipop man, who made up Patrick's mind for him. Patrick was standing there, numb with cold, still wondering what he should do, when he saw Mr Boots come hurrying along the towpath, lollipop stick in his hand, his white coat flying. Patrick had never much liked Mr Boots. He wasn't called "Bossy Boots" for nothing. He was a bit full of himself, a bit puffed up and pompous. And there was something about him Patrick had never quite trusted. He was a bit of a phoney, Patrick thought. But all the same he was glad

to see him now.

Mr Boots arrived breathless. For a while he could only speak in gasps. “You jumped in!” he spluttered. “Whatever d’you want to go and do that for?”

By way of an answer Patrick showed him what he had in his sack. Mr Boots bent over to look. Then he was spluttering again. “Blow me down! Puppies, greyhound puppies they are. Little beauties!” He looked up at Patrick. “You could have drowned yourself, doing that. Look at you, you’re soaked to the skin. You’ll catch your death standing here. Best get you into school and fast. I’m telling you, when Mrs Brightwell hears about this... You come along with me. Here, you can take my lollipop stick if you like, and I’ll carry your school bag and the puppies.”

As the two of them hurried along the towpath a barge came chuntering past. “Been in for a bit of a dip, have you, son?” laughed the man at the wheel. But Patrick paid him no attention – he had his eye on that swan. He felt a little more confident though, because he had the lollipop stick to wave now. As it turned out he didn’t need it. The swan moved aside as they came hurrying towards him and swam out into the canal, riding the wake of the barge. Then they were up the steps from the towpath and across the road into the school playground.

Patrick knew he was already late the moment he walked through the door. There was no one about. They’d all be in assembly by now. He’d be in really big trouble. He felt like running off home there and then. But he couldn’t, because Mr Boots had him firmly by the hand and was walking him down the corridor towards the hall. He could hear Mrs Brightwell’s voice now. She was making one of her important announcements, and by the sound of her she was in full flow and already cross about something. *Not a good moment to interrupt her*, Patrick thought. Mr Boots stopped at the door to straighten his tie and smooth down his hair – he didn’t have much of it, but what he had he liked to keep immaculate. Then, clearing his throat, he threw open the double doors, and in they went.

Everyone turned and gawped. Up on the platform Mrs Brightwell stopped in mid-sentence. A deep hush fell around them as they walked the entire length of the hall up towards Mrs Brightwell. Every step Patrick took seemed to squelch louder than the one before, and all the way the puppies in the sack were squealing and squeaking.

Mrs Brightwell did not look at all pleased. “Mr Boots,” she said, “what is this? Why is Patrick standing there dripping all over my assembly hall? What on earth has happened?”

“Actually, it’s a bit of a long story, Mrs Brightwell.” Mr Boots sounded typically self-important. “You had to see it to believe it. There I am, just minding my own business on the crossing outside the school, when I hear this splash. So I look over the bridge, and what do I see? Only young Patrick here in the canal swimming like a fish. Well of course I think he’s fallen in, and he’s drowning. So I start running, don’t I? I mean I’ve got to save him, haven’t I? But then I see he’s not drowning at all. He’s got hold of this sack and he’s swimming like billy-o for the bank. And I’m thinking to myself: *You’re off your tiny rocker, my son, taking a dip in that filthy old canal just to fetch out a dirty old plastic sack.* Luckily for young Patrick here I was on hand to help him out, cos he wouldn’t have made it on his own, that’s for sure.”



You fibber! Patrick thought. *You great big fibber!* But he didn’t say anything.

Mr Boots hadn’t finished yet. He was enjoying his moment in the limelight. “So Patrick’s standing there now on the bank, all shivering and shaking, and that’s when I have a little look inside the sack, don’t I? And what do I find? It’s full of puppies, that’s what, five of the little beggars, and if I’m not mistaken, which I’m not, they’re greyhounds, about seven weeks old by the look of them. We’ve got brindles in there, blacks and a fawn one too. I go down the greyhound track from time to time, so I know my greyhounds. I’m what you might call a greyhound connoisseur. They’re lovely pups too, fine dogs. And young Patrick here jumped in the canal and saved them. I saw him with my own eyes. He’s a bleeding hero, if you ask me – ‘scuse my French, Mrs Brightwell – but that’s what he is, a bleeding hero.”

Patrick had never heard such a depth of silence as he heard in that hall when

Bossy Boots had finished. Then one of the puppies squeaked, and suddenly they were all at it, a whole chorus of squealing, yelping puppies. “Aaah, sweet,” said someone. Someone else started giggling, and soon there was laughter and clapping too, rippling round the hall. Within moments the assembly hall was loud with cheering and whooping – one or two were yelping like puppies. Patrick stood there soaking in the applause and feeling about ten foot tall. Even Mrs Brightwell was clapping now. Patrick saw there were tears in her eyes as she beamed at him. That was the first time, Patrick thought, that she’d ever beamed at him. He’d never seen her cry before either; he didn’t know she could. Suddenly he found himself really quite liking her, and that hadn’t happened before either.



As the applause died away at last, Mrs Brightwell came down off the platform, and peered into the sack. “One. Two. Three. Four, five, and they’re all alive because of you, Patrick. What you did was very special. You risked your life to save them. I think that’s about as special as it gets.” She looked into the sack again, shaking her head sadly now. “Beautiful creatures. Beautiful, but unwanted it seems. So sad, and so wicked too.”



Her voice was trembling with anger as she spoke to the whole school. “It’s difficult to believe, children. I won’t hide from you what must have happened. Someone tried to get rid of these puppies, tried to drown them in the canal. And if Patrick here hadn’t jumped in and...” For a moment she could hardly speak. “And we mustn’t ever let the wicked people have their way, must we Patrick? That’s why we must report this at once to the Police.”

She had her hand on Patrick’s shoulder now. Although he was still all aglow inside, he must have been shivering, because Mrs Brightwell suddenly noticed it. “Goodness gracious,” she said. “We’re standing here nattering away, and this poor boy is half frozen to death. We’ll have three loud cheers for Patrick, children, and then we’ll get him into a hot shower and warm him up. He’ll be needing some dry clothes too – we’ve got plenty in the lost property cupboard. Three cheers then for Patrick and his puppies! Hip, hip!”

Patrick walked out of the assembly hall that morning on Cloud 9, the three cheers and one for luck ringing in his ears. But the best moment of all was when he caught Jimmy Rington’s eye. He was looking somewhere between gutted and gobsmacked, which made Patrick feel he was up there and floating on Cloud 109.

Everything was a bit of blur after that. Patrick had the longest, hottest shower of his life in the teachers’ bathroom. He shivered all the cold out of him, and washed away the slime and stench of the canal. They found some clean, dry clothes, along with a school sweatshirt that was far too big for him, and a pair of trainers that were too small for him. Mr Butterworth found a cardboard box and a blanket for the puppies, and set it down by the radiator in Mrs Brightwell’s room, which was where Patrick spent the next hour or so, kneeling by the box, playing with them, watching them bask in their newfound warmth. He loved them licking his fingers and chewing on them. They had sharp little teeth, but Patrick didn’t mind.

There was one that Patrick loved at once more than the others, the fawn one. To Patrick he wasn't fawn at all. He was golden, and his eyes were hazel brown and shining. But it wasn't what he looked like that mattered most to Patrick. He loved him because every time he put his hand into the box, the fawn puppy was right there looking up at him, almost talking to him with his eyes. Patrick understood at once that this was the one who needed him most. So he talked to him, told him where he lived, about his mum and dad, about Swimsy, about how he'd always wanted a dog of his own, and now that he'd found one he was going to take him home, and they'd go up on the park where he could run as far as he wanted to, for as long as he wanted to, that he'd look after him for ever and ever. And Patrick knew the puppy was listening to every word, believing and trusting everything he said. That was when Patrick picked him up for the first time and took him on to his lap.



Patrick promised him then and there that he'd never ever let any harm come to him again, that he was his friend for life, his best mate for ever. He gave him a name too. He thought and he thought, but he just couldn't come up with a name that seemed to suit him – Lucky, Jack, Bob, Rex, Henry, nothing worked – which was why, in the end, he didn't give him a proper name at all. Instead he called him the only name that kept coming into his head, again and again, Best Mate. Best Mate seemed pleased enough with it, and Patrick was sure the puppy was already beginning to recognise his name every time he repeated it. And the more he said it, the more Patrick knew this was just the right name for him, that it suited him perfectly, because this dog was his dog, his best friend, nobody else's.

Patrick didn't know it, because no one had told him, but they'd phoned his dad at work. In fact, as it turned out, they'd called a whole lot of people. His dad

and the police, the school nurse and a reporter from a local newspaper arrived all together. Everyone said how wonderful he'd been, which Patrick liked a lot, and everyone wanted to ask him questions, which he liked less. The policewoman was full of questions: about where exactly he'd jumped in, whether he'd seen the person who'd thrown the sack into the canal, or noticed anyone running away. The school nurse felt his head and took his pulse, and asked him whether he'd swallowed any canal water. She kept on asking him how he was feeling. Lots of them asked how he was feeling. So he told them. He said he felt fine, but that he wanted to keep Best Mate and take him home after school, that he knew he didn't have room at home for all five. The others could go to the rescue centre, couldn't they? He only wanted one, he was happy with one, just so long as it was Best Mate.

Then his mum came running in all of a fluster. They'd called her at work too. So by now there was quite a gathering in Mrs Brightwell's office, and Bossy Boots was telling anyone who would listen about what had happened, about how lucky it was for Patrick that he'd been there to help him out of the canal. Patrick thought of telling everyone that actually he'd helped himself out of the canal, but he couldn't be bothered – it just didn't seem that important to him. All that really mattered now was taking Best Mate home with him and looking after him. His mum kept hugging and kissing him. Patrick wasn't so keen on that, not with everyone else there. So in the end he turned and walked away. He was tired of all the talk, all the chatter going on around him. He wanted to be alone with Best Mate.

But they wouldn't leave him alone. Within a couple of minutes he found there was someone else crouching down beside him. He had on a blue uniform and a peaked cap. He explained he was from the RSPCA. He spoke with a very soft understanding voice, the kind people use when they know you're not going to like what they're about to say – a bad news voice. He had come to take the puppies away, he told Patrick, and look after them for him. "We'll find good homes for them all, Patrick. OK?" he said.

"I've got a good home," Patrick replied. "So I can keep one of them, can't I?" He looked up at his dad, "We can, can't we, Dad?" But his dad wasn't saying yes and he wasn't saying no. He was looking down at the floor and saying nothing. His mum was biting her lip. She wouldn't look at him either. That was the moment Patrick realised for the first time that they might not let him take Best Mate home with him.

His dad was crouching down beside him now, his arm around him. "Patrick,"

he said, "we've talked about this before, about having a dog, haven't we? Remember what we said? We can't keep a dog in the flat. Mum's out at work most of the day. You know she is, and so am I. It wouldn't be fair on him. That's why we got Swimsy instead, remember? You did such a brave and good thing, Patrick. Mum and me, we're so proud of you. But keeping one of these pups just isn't on. You know that. He needs space to play, room to run in."

"We've got the park, Dad," Patrick pleaded, his eyes filling with tears now. "Please, Dad. Please." He knew it was hopeless, but he still wouldn't give up.

In the end it was Mrs Brightwell who persuaded him, and that was only because he couldn't argue with her. No one argued with Mrs Brightwell. "Tell me something, Patrick," she said, and she was talking to him very gently, very quietly, not in her usual voice at all. "You didn't save those puppies just so you could have one, did you?"

"No," he replied.

"No, of course you didn't," she went on. "You're not like that. You saved them because they were crying out for help. You gave them their lives back, and that was a truly wonderful thing to do. But now you have to let them go. They'll be well looked after, I promise you."

Patrick ran out then, unable to stop himself sobbing. He went to the toilet, where he always went when he needed to cry in private. When he got back, the box and the puppies had gone, and so had the man in the peaked cap from the RSPCA.

Mrs Brightwell told Patrick he could have the rest of the day off school, so that was something. His mum and dad took him home in the car. No one spoke a word all the way. He tried to hate them, but he couldn't. He didn't feel angry, he didn't even feel sad. It was as if all his feelings had drained out of him. He didn't cry again. He lay there all day long on his bed, face to the wall. He didn't eat because he wasn't hungry. His mum came in and tried to cheer him up. "One day," she told him, "one day, we'll live in a house with a proper garden. Then we can have a dog. Promise."

"But it won't be Best Mate, will it?" he said.

A little later his dad came in and sat on his bed. He tried something different. "After what you did," he said, "I reckon you deserve a proper treat. We'll go to the football tomorrow. Local Derby. We'll have a pizza first, margherita, your favourite. What d'you say?"

Patrick said nothing. "A good night's sleep is what you need," his dad went on. "You'll feel a lot better tomorrow. Promise." Everyone, Patrick thought, was

doing an awful lot of promising, and that was always a bad sign.

From up in his room Patrick heard them all evening whispering urgently in the kitchen below – it was loud enough for him to hear almost every word they said. His mum was going on about how she wished they didn't have to live in a flat. "Never mind a dog," she was saying, "Patrick needs a place where he can play out. All kids do. We've been cooped up in this flat all his life."

"It's a nice flat," said his dad. "I like it here."

"Oh, well then, that's fine, I suppose. Let's stay here for ever, shall we?"

"I didn't mean it like that, you know I didn't."

It wasn't a proper row, not even a heated argument. There were no raised voices, but they talked of nothing else all evening.

In the end Patrick bored of it, and anyway he was tired. He kept closing his eyes, and whenever he did he found himself living the day through again, the best of it and the worst of it. It was so easy to let his mind roam, simply to drift away of its own accord. He liked where it was taking him. He could see Best Mate, now a fully grown greyhound, streaking across the park, and he could see himself haring after him, then both of them lying there in the grass, the sun blazing down, with Best Mate stretched out beside him, his paw on his arm and gazing lovingly at him out of his wide brown eyes. Patrick fell asleep dreaming of that moment, of Best Mate looking up at him, and even when he woke up he found himself dreaming exactly the same thing. And that was strange, Patrick thought, very strange indeed.

Best Mate was still lying there beside him, only somehow he looked much smaller than he had before, and they weren't outside in the park in the sunshine, and his nose was cold and wet. Patrick knew that because Best Mate was suddenly snuffling at Patrick's ear, licking it, then crawling on top of him and licking his nose as well. That was when he first dared to hope that this was all just too life-like to be a dream, that it might be real, really real. He looked up. His mum and dad were standing there grinning down at him like a couple of cats that had got the cream. The radio was on down in the kitchen, the kettle was whistling and the toast was burning. He was awake. This was happening! It was a true and actual happening!



“Mum rang up the rescue centre last night,” his dad was telling him, “and I went and fetched him home first thing this morning. Are you happy now?”

“Happy,” said Patrick.

“A lot, or a little?” his dad asked.

“A lot,” Patrick said.

“And by the way, Patrick,” his mum was saying as they went to the door, “your dad and me, we’ve been talking. We thought having a dog might make us get on and really do it.”

“Do what?”

“Get a proper house with a little bit of a garden. We should have done it a long time ago.”

And that was when the giggling started, partly because Best Mate was sitting down on Patrick’s chest now, snuffling in his ear, but mostly because he had never been so happy in all his life.

That same morning – it was a Saturday – they went out and bought a basket for Best Mate, a basket big enough for him to grow into, a bright red lead, a dog bowl and some dog food, and a little collar too with a brass disc hanging from it, engraved with his name and their phone number, just in case Best Mate ever got himself lost. In the afternoon they all walked up the hill through the iron gate and into the park, with Best Mate all tippy-toed and pulling on his lead. Once by the bench at the top of the hill Patrick and Best Mate ran off on their own, down to the pond where they scared the ducks silly, and then back up through the trees to the bench where his mum and dad were waiting. It was better than footie, bike riding, skate-boarding, kite-flying, better than all of them put together. And

afterwards they lay down on the crisp autumn leaves exhausted, and Best Mate gazed up into Patrick's eyes just as he had in the dream, so that Patrick had to squeeze his eyes tight shut and then open them again just to be quite sure that the whole day had really happened.



Best Mate grew up fast, no longer a cute and clumsy puppy, but a creature of astonishing beauty and grace and power, known and loved all over the park. Within the year they had found the small house they were looking for, with a walled garden at the back. It was nearer the park, but a little further away from school. That didn't matter. Patrick's dad dropped him off at the canal bridge as he always had done, and he'd walk along the towpath past the sweet and sour smelling brown sauce factory and up the towpath steps to the road, where Bossy Boots would be waiting with his lollipop stick.

Ever since Mr Boots had told his fib about helping him out of the canal that day, Patrick had always done his best to avoid him. But he had to cross the road every day, and when he did Mr Boots was always waiting, ready with some feeble joke or other about what had happened. "No dogs in the canal today, Patrick?" or "No early morning swim. Patrick?" And every time he'd laugh like a drain as he ushered him across the road.

In school they still talked about "The Great Puppy Rescue". They'd all written stories about it and painted pictures too. These were still up on the wall in the front hall with all the sports cups and the school photographs, along with a cutting from the front page of the local newspaper, laminated and in big print so that everyone could easily read it. "Patrick's Puppy Plunge" was the banner headline, and above it there was a photo of Patrick with Best Mate in his arms, with Mr Boots and Mrs Brightwell on either side of him, and a dozen other children around them, all grinning into the camera – except for Jimmy Rington,

who wasn't exactly glowering, but wasn't smiling much either.

So the hero-glow hung around Patrick all that year, which of course he quite liked. No one called him "loser" any more. No one laughed at him any more. So sometimes he even looked forward to school these days. The little greyhound had changed his whole life around, at school and at home. Best Mate was always there with his mum to meet him when he came out of school every afternoon. So everyone got to cuddle and pet him. Maybe this was why the legend of The Great Puppy Rescue was not forgotten – after all Best Mate was there to remind them of it every day. All the teachers seemed to love him too. Mrs Brightwell in particular made a great fuss of him and Patrick loved that – it made him feel very special.

What he didn't like so much was that Bossy Boots was now making out that he'd jumped into the canal himself to help rescue Best Mate. Worse still he was always trying to persuade Patrick's mum to race him, that he was too good a greyhound to be kept at home just as a pet. He told everyone that Best Mate had champion written all over him. This of course only added to the sparkle of the legend, and it was a legend that was changing. The star of the legend had been Patrick at first, but it was Best Mate who was the star now. Patrick didn't mind this in the least. On the contrary, as far as he was concerned Best Mate had always been the star. Every time Patrick came out of the school gates and saw him waiting there for him he felt so proud.

Stories went around the school – spread mostly by Mr Boots – of how Best Mate had been seen running up on the park at full stretch, how no one had ever seen a dog run that fast. Everyone knew that Patrick and Best Mate had become completely inseparable, how Patrick never needed to put him on a lead any more, nor muzzle him; how he'd walk close beside Patrick down the street, his cheek touching Patrick's leg. As faithful and fond as a guide dog, Best Mate was instantly protective, and even fearsome if he ever felt that anyone, dog or human, might be a threat to Patrick. The gentle eyes would flash, the hackles go up along his neck and back, and every muscle in his body would be suddenly tense and taut, ready to spring. But it took only a word or a glance from Patrick to calm him down at once. They spent so much time together that each seemed to understand the other instinctively by now, so much so that up in the park it was hardly ever necessary for Patrick to whistle for Best Mate, or call him back. He just came of his own accord.

At home and at school everyone could see how happy Patrick had become since the day of The Great Puppy Rescue. "Less anxious, less isolated, more

outgoing, more confident,” Mrs Brightwell had written in her school report. And it was true. Patrick laughed more these days, joined in more. Every story he wrote in his literacy class somehow managed to involve a dog, usually a greyhound. But Mr Butterworth didn’t mind. Patrick was writing pages and pages these days, instead of just a scrappy paragraph or two. In most of the pictures he painted, you could find a greyhound somewhere. And his bedroom wall was covered with pictures and photographs of Best Mate.

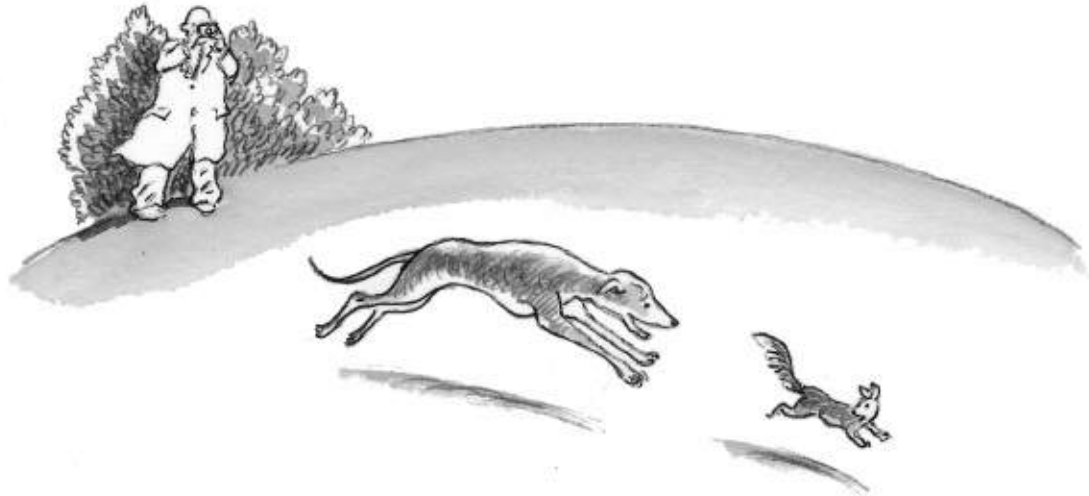
Patrick spent every hour of his spare time and all his pocket money on him. He’d bring home chews or biscuits for him, whenever he went to the shops. He polished his name disc so that it gleamed, groomed him every evening, and even cleaned his teeth for him sometimes, so his breath wouldn’t smell. He’d make sure his food was just how Best Mate wanted it, but he would never stay to watch him eat it, because he knew Best Mate liked to do this in private. So he’d give him a pat and leave him to it. No one minded at all that Patrick had become one-track minded, because he was so obviously happy.

Settled now in the new house, Best Mate had long since outgrown his basket – they had completely miscalculated how big and tall he was going to grow. But they didn’t need to get another one, because he now occupied the sofa. A “giraffe-dog” Patrick’s dad called him. His mum didn’t mind too much because he was a clean-living dog. He left no hairs behind him, and brought very little dirt in from the garden or back from the park. He did bury his bones sometimes under the cushions on the sofa, but Patrick usually found those and got rid of them before his mum discovered them.

Best Mate would lie there quite happily on the sofa for most of the day waiting to fetch Patrick home from school, longing for his daily run in the park. They’d walk together up to their favourite bench, right at the top of the park. From there Patrick could watch Best Mate run, whichever way he went. Once into his stride this “giraffe-dog” would be transformed into a “cheetah-dog,” and people would simply stand and stare as he streaked away into the distance. From time to time other dogs would try to chase him, try to keep up, but none of them had the speed nor the stamina to stay with him for long. He could outrun and outsmart all of them. He could jink like a gazelle, bound like a springbok. And Patrick was always waiting for him by the bench when he came back.

Every time Patrick watched him run he could feel his whole body warming to the roots of his hair with the sheer thrill of it. And whenever Best Mate came haring back to him over the park, Patrick was filled with a surge of such pride and joy that he felt like whooping with exultation, which he very often did. Best

Mate would stand at his side then resting for a while, leaning into him, his nose searching out Patrick's hand for comfort and reassurance. But sooner or later he'd see a terrier scampering past, or a crow landing nearby, or a squirrel's tail twitching in the grass, and he'd be off like a rocket again. Patrick knew it was the chase he loved best, but just the chase. He never used his great teeth for killing. They were for smiling with only, but the crows and the squirrels didn't know that.



More than once Mr Boots came up to the park to watch Best Mate go through his paces. He'd take photographs of him too, and Patrick didn't like that. He thought Bossy Boots should ask him first, but he never did. Some of Patrick's friends from school would be up there too sometimes, playing football, Jimmy Rington as well. But whenever Best Mate got into his stride, they'd very soon stop playing and just stand there and stare. Like Patrick, they would all be holding their breath in awe as Best Mate fairly flew over the ground. It was powerful, it was beautiful, it was wonderful.

But the day it happened – Best Mate must have been about eighteen months old by now – the two of them were almost alone together in the park. That was because it was later than usual, almost evening by the time they got there. Patrick's mum had made him stay in to finish his homework first. So Patrick wasn't in a very good mood and grumbled about it to Best Mate all the way up the hill to the park. He cheered up though when he saw the swallows were back and skimming over the grass. He loved to watch them, and he knew Best Mate loved to chase them. So it was strange when, instead of taking off after them, Best Mate stayed by his side, looking up at him and licking his lips nervously.

“Off you go, boy,” Patrick said. “What’s the matter with you? Go on! Go, go, go!”

But Best Mate didn’t move. There was a low growl in the back of his throat, which was very unlike him. His ears were laid back on his head, and his whole body was trembling.

“It’s all right,” Patrick told him, stroking his neck to calm him. “It’s just a little darker than usual, that’s all. Nothing to worry about. Lots of smells to chase. Off you go.” He bent down and kissed him on top of his head. “You’ll be fine, promise. Go on! Go, go, go!”

Best Mate looked to him once more for reassurance. At that moment a swallow swooped down over their heads, and skimmed away over the grass – it was as if he was teasing Best Mate, taunting him. Best Mate didn’t hesitate. He was gone, gathering speed with every bounding stride, his neck straining, following the swallow’s every twist and turn. “You’re so beautiful,” Patrick breathed. Then he shouted it out so that the entire world could hear. “You’re beautiful! Beautiful!” He watched Best Mate racing away down the hill and then disappearing into the trees. It was the way he often went, his favourite run. He’d circle the lake at the bottom, scatter the ducks, scare the geese, and come running back through the trees, pounding up the hill towards Patrick. A few minutes later, Best Mate still hadn’t come back. That was a little unusual, but Patrick wasn’t worried. Best Mate might have got himself a bit lost in the gathering gloom, he thought. So he whistled for him, and called him. But he didn’t come and didn’t come, and now Patrick knew something had to be wrong. All his worst fears jostled in his head. Best Mate was wandering lost through the streets. He’d been run over, stolen, drowned, savaged by another dog, poisoned. However loud Patrick called and whistled no dog came running up the hill towards him through the dusk. He could hear no answering bark, only the distant roar of the traffic.

So Patrick ran down the dark hill, following where Best Mate might have gone, through the trees, around the pond and back up the hill towards the bench, stopping every now and again to call for him and listen and look. He couldn’t whistle any more by now because he was crying too much. He saw no one in the park, no dogs, only shadowy ducks and geese cruising out on the dark water of the pond.

Patrick realised then that he needed help. He ran all the way home. His mum and dad came at once. The three of them searched the park with torches all night long, called and called until they knew it was pointless to go on any longer. It

was dawn by the time they got home, all of them hoping against hope that Best Mate had found his own way back. He hadn't. Patrick sat at the bottom of the stairs with his head in his hands, while his dad phoned the Police. They took a description of Best Mate and said they would do their best to keep an eye out for him. They'd call back if they found him. No call came.

A further search of the park by daylight only made things worse for Patrick. Everyone else's dog was up there bounding around, scampering through the grass, fetching sticks and balls and frisbees. Patrick told everyone, asked everyone. No one had seen Best Mate. It was as if he had simply vanished off the face of the earth.



Muzzled and caged in the back of a van, I had long hours to think about everything that had happened to me that evening on the park, about how stupid and gullible I had been to allow myself to get caught. And then there were more long, dark hours to remember how happy my life had been before I was so suddenly snatched away from everyone and everything I loved. The memories of it all kept repeating themselves in my head like a recurring nightmare I longed to wake from, but could not. I was trapped inside this nightmare, and could see no possible way of ever escaping from it.

In the van there was pitch black all around me. I had no idea whether it was night or day, no idea where I was being taken, only that I was a prisoner, that with every hour that passed I was being driven further and further away from home and from Patrick. I had tried yelping and barking, tried scratching at the door. Now I lay there curled up in my misery, exhausted and dejected, the van shaking and rattling around me. I closed my eyes and tried to think myself home, to blot out the terror I was living through, tried to make myself believe that I was back on the sofa at home with Patrick, that none of this had happened. But that was when the nightmare would begin, and I would have to live through

everything that had happened all over again.

Patrick had finished his homework. He came over to the sofa and stroked me just where I liked it best, under my chest, which for some reason made one of my back legs kick out involuntarily. Patrick giggled. I think he loved doing it as much as I loved him doing it. Then he was putting my coat on me, and we were out of the warmth of the house and into the street, trotting together up the hill and through the gate to the park. This was the moment I longed for every day, to be out there with Patrick. Soon I'd be in the park and running, running, running, but I'd never set off till he gave me the word.

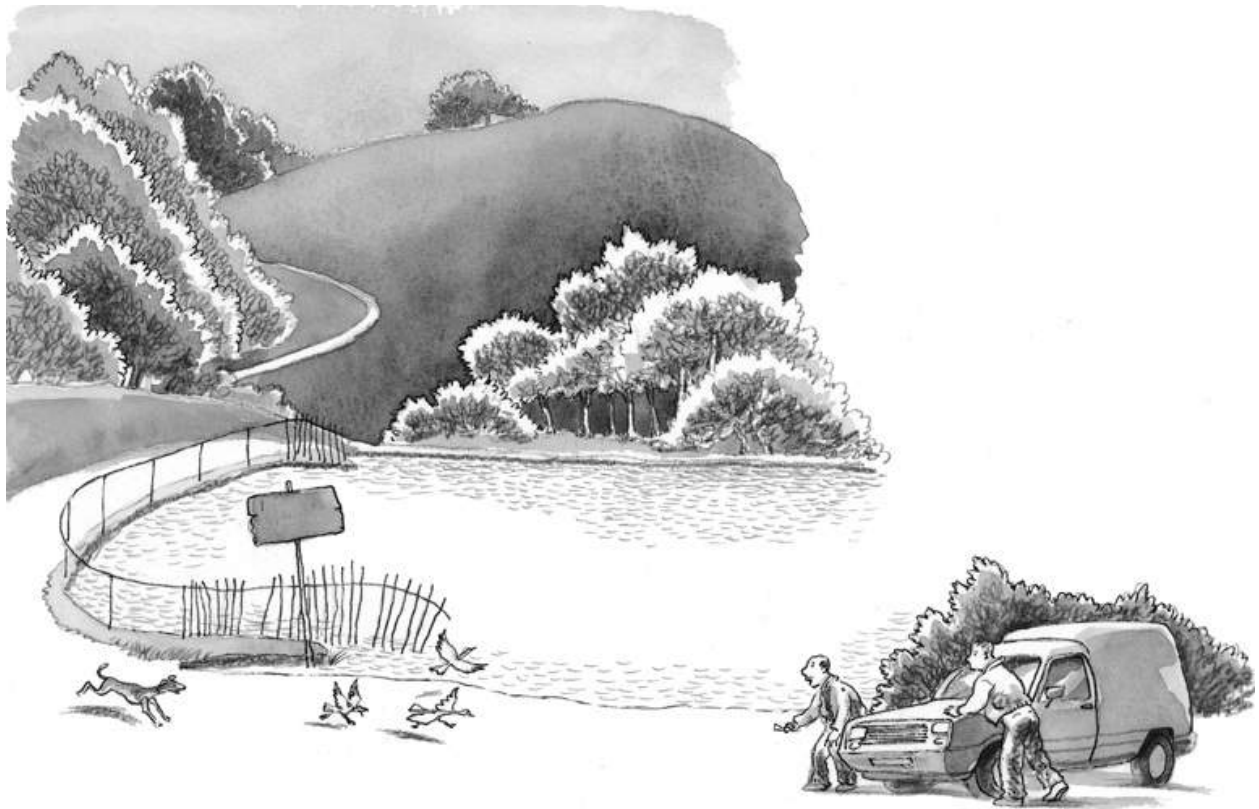
Patrick always had to speak the words first. "Off you go, boy," he'd whisper. "Go on! Go, go, go!" I didn't really need telling. I was just waiting for him to say it. When I ran, I ran for the sheer pleasure of the chase, to feel the spring in my legs and the power surging through me, to feel the wind, to scatter the crows, to leave all the other dogs far behind me. But I ran for Patrick too, because I knew he was there watching me, and that the faster I ran the more he'd be loving it, and the more he loved it, the more I did too. Coming out of the trees and back up the hill towards him I'd put on my best show, lengthening with every stride, because I could feel his pride in my running, and his love for me as I came up to him, as he smoothed my neck. That was the best moment of all, when both of us were jubilant together, exultant together.

But this evening, I didn't want to run. Even when he said the words I didn't want to go. In the end I ran only because Patrick wanted me to. It wasn't just the dark that worried me, though it's true I've always been rather nervous of the dark. It was a feeling I had deep inside me that there was some kind of danger lurking out there in the park, that I'd be safer if I stayed with Patrick. Maybe it was also because there weren't any other dogs about, I don't know. I did wonder why they weren't there. I did think too that running wouldn't be so much fun without a dog or two to race against. I could chase the swallows, and I loved that, but it wasn't quite the same. They weren't company. Besides, I could never beat them. To be honest I never even got near them, but that didn't stop me trying.

Anyway, once I was off and into my running I forgot all that, forgot all my worries. I raced away from Patrick, away down the hill towards the pond. There were two men standing there beside a white van, and one of them I recognised at once. In fact I wasn't at all surprised to see Mr Boots. He was often there on the heath watching me. I'd seen him a few times down by the pond just recently, another man with him. They'd be watching me through binoculars, like Patrick's

dad sometimes did.

They were both there this time too, and this time, as he had once or twice before, Mr Boots whistled me over. I went because I liked him. I liked him because he always gave me a biscuit, and I can never resist biscuits. He'd never done me any harm. When I went up to him he patted me and I waited for my biscuit. He gave me one, but as I ate it he reached out suddenly, grabbed me by my collar, and held on to me. I thought that was odd, because he hadn't done that before, and it all became stranger still when my head began to swim, and my legs buckled underneath me. I found myself lying down at his feet then, Mr Boots holding me fast on the ground, not that I could have struggled anyway. I had no strength left for that.



“Don’t you worry,” Mr Boots was saying. “He’s right out of it. He couldn’t hurt a fly.”

“You haven’t given him too much stuff, have you?” said the other voice.

“Course not,” Mr Boots told him. “I know what I’m about, don’t I? He’ll be right as rain in an hour or two, you’ll see.”

“He’d better be,” said the other. “I’m getting out of here before that ruddy kid comes looking for him.” He was undoing my collar now. “Here, you’d better

lose this, chuck it in the pond. I won't be needing his phone number, will I? Nor his name."

"What about my money?" Mr Boots asked. "£500 was the deal."

They argued loudly about it for some time. "£400, take it or leave it."

Then Mr Boots was shouting at him: "That's robbery that is, daylight bleeding robbery!"

"That's rich coming from you, Bootsy," said the other, "from a dog thief. And mind you get rid of that collar."

They were still arguing as they put a muzzle on me, tight, so tight that it hurt. I heard Mr Boots storming off, swearing and cursing as he went. Then I was dumped in the back of a van, and the door slammed after me. I drifted in and out of sleep for some time, I think, before waking up properly, before I really understood that my nightmare had been no dream, that everything was true, that I was not home again on the sofa with Patrick.

It was not the cold nor the blackness all around me that frightened me most, that made me tremble and whimper as I lay there. It was the fear of the unknown that truly terrified me. Where was I being taken to? Why had they done this? What was going to happen to me? Would I ever see Patrick again?





“Be Fast, Brighteyes, Be Very Fast”

For Becky the only good days were when Craig wasn't at home, and she wasn't at school. So that Sunday morning had been a good day, so far, just her and her mother alone together, like it used to be three years ago, before they'd moved out of town and come to live out on the moor miles away from all her friends and so much that she had known and loved. It wasn't that she didn't like being in the countryside. She did, when Craig wasn't there, and when she could get away on her own. She'd ride out on Red to the top of High Moor, galloping most of the way. Once up there she'd clamber up on the rocks and stand there leaning into the wind, revelling in it.

This was her place, her rock, the only place she could talk to her father, tell him everything. His spirit was in the wind, she was sure of it, in the air she breathed up there, in the rocks themselves. He was as real to her as the wild moorland ponies, the browsing cattle and the shifting sheep. It was a place of rising larks and wheeling buzzards in the summer, of wind-buffed crows in the winter. Whatever the season, Becky knew her father was always there with her, always listening, and that soothed, for a while at least, the aching loneliness inside her. And that was also why she loved being around the kennels with the greyhounds. They got her out of the house and away from Craig, and they were her friends too. They listened and they understood.

Becky and her mother had been working together around the kennels all that morning, feeding the greyhounds and exercising them, bedding up the calves and the lambing ewes in the farm yard. They hadn't argued at all, and that was because Craig was not around, and because they hadn't even talked about him. If he wasn't there and he wasn't mentioned, they were fine together. Craig had left the night before in his van. He was going to fetch another dog, a top dog, a sure-fire champion, he said. So for a while at least Becky and her mother had been left to themselves. All the kennel work was done and the two of them were mucking out Red's stable together. Becky was singing away to herself as she shook out the straw, while her mother tossed the hay up into the rack.

“I wish you were always this happy,” said her mother.

“I would be,” Becky replied, “if it wasn't for him.”

“If it wasn't for him, Becky, we wouldn't be here. You should remember that sometimes. We came from a pokey little room with a bathroom the size of a

postage stamp – have you forgotten? And now we’ve got all this, the farmhouse, the moor, Red, the dogs, everything.”

“So I suppose I have to be grateful, do I?” Becky could feel the anger in her rising. She tried to hold it back. “We were all right before, Mum, when there was just the two of us. We had all we needed.”

“Listen, Becky, I really don’t want to argue with you,” said her mother. “I just want you to try a little harder to like him, for my sake. I mean, the minute he walks in you go out, and you hardly ever speak to him.”

“That’s because I’ve got nothing to say.” Becky was tearful already. “Nothing he’d want to hear, anyway. I mean, what do you want me to do, Mum? Do you want me to tell him what I really think of him? Do you? ‘Listen up, Craig, you bully my mother, make her cook for you, clean for you, work like a slave on your farm – me too when I’m not at school – and you never do any work yourself. Tell me Craig, when did you last clean out the kennels? Oh yes, and another thing, why do you put me down all the time? Either I’m a “stropky teenager” or a “spoilt brat,” or I’m “dressed up like a Barbie doll”. Excuse me, Craig, what business is it of yours, and how come you keep telling me what to do anyway? I mean just who do you think you are? You’re not my father.’”

She paused for breath and calmed down a little. “Come on, Mum,” she went on. “You know all he thinks about is money and betting and racing his greyhounds. And do you know what? He doesn’t even like the dogs. And what’s more he doesn’t even want me to like them. He does all he can to stop me. ‘Don’t pet them,’ he says. ‘Bad for them,’ he says. ‘They’re racing dogs, athletes, not poodles, not pets.’ He just uses them up, Mum, and when they don’t make him any more money, when they don’t win, he just gets rid of them. I’ve tried, Mum. I really have. I just wish you’d never met him, that’s all. I don’t know what you see in him. I really don’t.”

Becky knew her tirade had gone too far, that she’d spoilt the day, that it would make her mother cry, and that she’d hate herself later for making her unhappy again. But to her surprise, her mother didn’t cry this time. Instead she went very quiet.

“You don’t understand,” said her mother after a while. “He was good to me, kind to me. We had fun together. I needed some fun.”

“Didn’t last though, did it, Mum?”

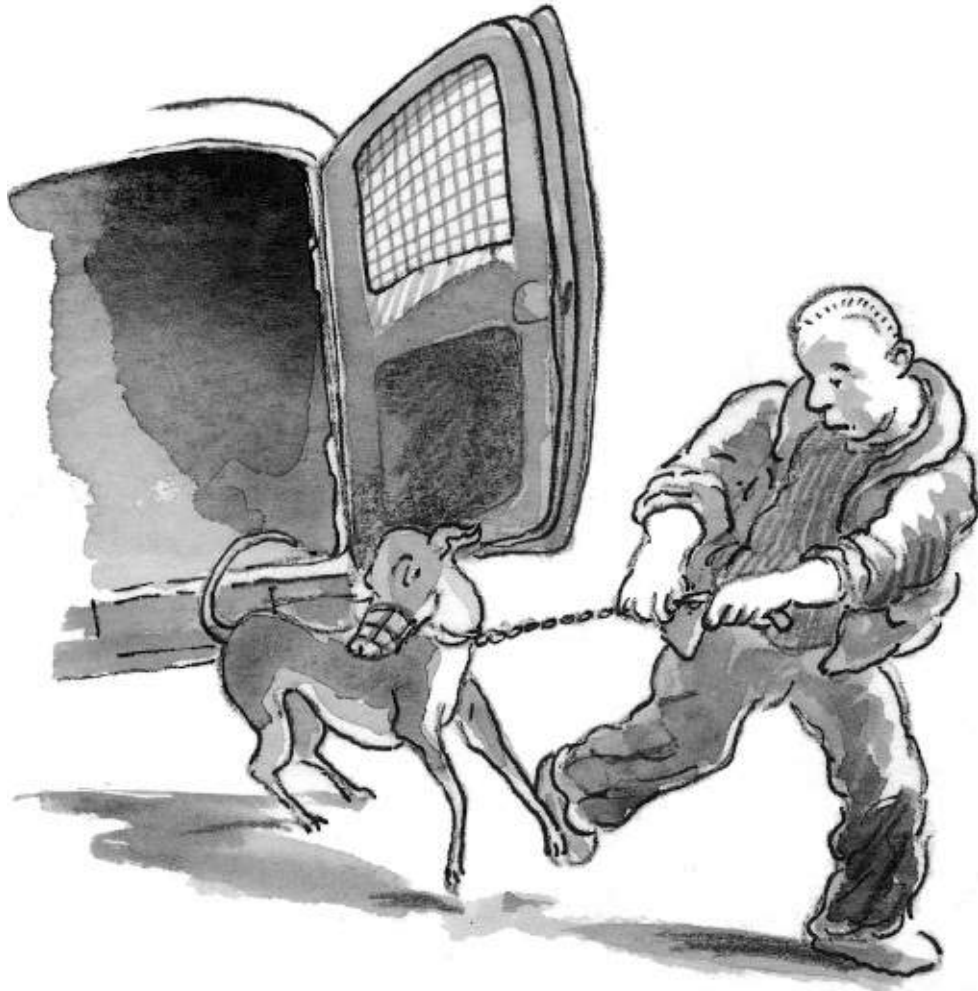
Her mother didn’t reply. For a few moments she just busied herself filling up the water buckets. Then she went on. “It’s not all bad though, is it, Becky? At least you’ve got the dogs. You love the dogs, don’t you?”

“Of course I do.”

“Well then. And we’ve still got each other. How does the song go? *Always Look on the Bright Side of Life.*” And they both began to hum it together.

Becky’s mother smiled across at her then, and Becky knew there was a lot she was saying in that smile, maybe that she didn’t entirely disagree with much of what Becky had said, but that she just couldn’t say it, not yet, maybe not ever. The dogs were suddenly barking from the kennels across the yard. That was when they both heard the van come crunching down the farm track, and rattle over the cattle grid into the yard. They looked at one another, and Becky knew then that her mum was dreading his return as much as she was. Craig was back.

They looked on from the stable door as Craig slipped a choke-chain around the dog’s neck, and hauled him out of the back of the van – Craig was never gentle with his dogs. That was when he caught sight of them. “Well, what d’you think? Smart dog, eh? Looks the part, doesn’t he? He may be a bit small at the moment, but he’ll grow. He goes like the wind, I’m telling you. I got him cheap too. Few months time, and he could be as fast as Alfie, maybe faster.” The dog tried to escape, but Craig jerked on the chain and yanked him back. “Come here, you little beggar you! You see. He can’t wait to get running. It’s what he’s made for. You know what you’re looking at? A champion. I mean it. This one is the real thing. He is going to win and win. And that means money, lots of it. You’ll see.”



The greyhound, light fawn with a small white patch on his chest, stood there trembling at the end of his chain, looking about him nervously. "Here Becky!" Craig waved her over. "Don't just stand there gawping. Get over here. Put him in with Alfie. I want Alfie to teach him everything he knows about racing. And you'd better give him something to eat while you're about it. Which reminds me. What's for lunch? I'm starving."

Becky hesitated very deliberately. She objected to being bossed about, and wanted him to know it. So she took her time, leaning the dung fork against the wall, and then wandering very slowly across the yard towards him, staring him out as she came. She disliked everything about him, his loudness and his brashness, how he always had to be the centre of attention. She hated looking at him even, so she tried not to. He wasn't ugly or gross, it wasn't that. It was just that he always looked so full of himself.

"Well, take your time, why don't you?" He said, handing her the chain. "And no spoiling him, you hear me? None of your namby pamby nonsense." Becky

knew exactly what was coming next. "He's a racing dog, an athlete, not a poodle, not a pet."

"What's he called?" Becky asked him.

"Call him whatever you like. Just look after him."

Moments later Becky found herself alone in the yard with the new dog. As she walked him towards the kennels all the other dogs, all fourteen of them, had their noses through the bars, scrutinising the newcomer, some of them up on their hind legs and yelping in excitement. Becky laughed. "Don't you know it's rude to stare?" she told them.

She crouched down by Alfie's kennel so that she could introduce them properly through the kennel gate, so they could get to know one another slowly. Alfie was a giant of a greyhound, black and white with a slightly greying muzzle.

"Meet Alfie," she said, reaching through the bars to stroke his ears. "He's the fastest dog we've got, aren't you, Alfie? Won sixty-two out of eighty races, haven't you? A real champion. But I'm not supposed to stroke you, am I? I do though, don't I? I pet them all because I like it, and because they like it. Alfie and me, we're very special friends, aren't we, Alfie? We go up on the moor together with Red, don't we? Long walks, long talks."

She felt the new dog shivering and shaking against her leg. He was terrified or cold, or both. "Don't you worry. Alfie won't hurt you." She took his face in her hands then and looked deep into his eyes. "So what am I going to call you? You've got to have a name. Can't not have a name, can you? You've got one already, I bet. Every dog's got a name. I wonder what yours is. Wish you could tell me." She thought for some moments, and then it came to her. "Brighteyes. That'll do. You'll be Brighteyes. How d'you like that? Craig'll give you some stupid racing name... 'Bucks Fizz' or 'Speedy Gonzalez'. And down at the track they'll give you a number – they always do. But here you'll be Brighteyes." She kissed him on his head and whispered: "Be fast, Brighteyes, be very fast, and they won't take you away from me. Never forget that."

Becky stayed there watching the two dogs for some time, Alfie circling Brighteyes, checking him out, and all the while Brighteyes stood in the middle of the kennel trembling from head to tail. After a few minutes Alfie seemed satisfied, because he came and stood alongside him then, very close, their shoulders touching. Becky could see that the two of them were friends already. Alfie stood almost a head higher. He was resting his chin on Brighteyes' neck, and this must have been a great comfort to Brighteyes because very soon the

trembling stopped altogether.



Within days it was as if they had known each other all their lives. They'd become quite inseparable. Whenever Becky let them out Brighteyes would stick to Alfie like a shadow. Very soon she was so confident Brighteyes wouldn't run off that she was able to take both dogs with her when she went out riding on Red, something she liked to do as often as she could. That first morning she took them out together, they raced way ahead of her, almost side by side, but always Alfie leading by a neck and Brighteyes following. However fast Becky rode, they raced ahead faster, hurdling the rocks and streams, pausing only to let her catch up.

They ended up on the very top of High Moor. The dogs sat beside one another next to her on the bank, their panting almost synchronised, as Red grazed the grass busily below, scarcely ever lifting his head. The dogs were both looking at her quizzically. "You're right," she told them. "Dad's up here, isn't he? You know it too, don't you? This is my favourite place in the whole wide world, because Dad's here, because I feel free. That's why you like it too. You love to run free. It's what you were made for. You weren't made for that horrible dog track. This is where you belong, like I do."



In fact, Becky had hardly ever been to see the greyhounds racing. The few times she had gone she'd hated every minute of it. She loathed having to watch the dogs she knew and loved treated simply as numbered racing machines, so many of them quite evidently terrified by all the bright lights and the noise of the crowd, of the blaring loud speakers, and the deafening music. Beside them in the stand, Craig would bellow and roar, whether his dogs won or not. It didn't matter if it was a winning triumph or a losing disaster. Either way he'd go berserk, and then afterwards he'd drink too much with his cronies, while Becky and her mother and the dogs had to sit and wait in the car park for him.

On the way home, especially if he'd lost heavily on the dogs or the betting, he'd start shouting at her mother, and if Becky tried to intervene he'd turn on her too. Craig could be very frightening at times like these, and Becky didn't want to be near him. So, more often than not, she'd tell her mother she had homework to finish, which was sometimes true, and stay at home. She'd make sure she was in bed with the lights out by the time they got back. She could tell right away at breakfast the next morning whether the dogs had won or not, whether Craig had lost money. If he'd had a bad night, he'd sit there in an angry and sullen silence. He'd start nasty and he'd stay nasty all day. Neither Becky nor her mother were allowed to forget it. He'd snap at them and find fault with everything they said or did. So Becky certainly preferred it when the dogs won.

But there was another reason why she always wanted the dogs to win. It had taken a while for her to grasp what was really going on. If ever a dog began to lose too often, she knew that sooner or later it would happen. The battered grey Land Rover would come rattling down the farm track into the yard. Whenever it came Becky did her best to stay out of the way. She dreaded it every time. If she asked about it or objected to it, it would send Craig into one of his rages. So, filled with guilt, she'd keep quiet, go to her room and watch from her window.



Craig would usually talk with the driver for a minute or two. Becky hadn't ever really seen his face properly. Most of it was hidden by a flat cap. He wore dirty blue overalls, and shuffled rather than walked over to the kennels. Every time the chosen dog was hauled out of his kennel, Becky could see that he understood what was going to happen to him, because he'd fight against it, pulling on his chain, desperately trying to break free. The other dogs seemed to sense it too. They'd set up a plaintive chorus of yelping and whining that lasted

long after the Land Rover had disappeared up the track.

Becky asked her mother again and again where the dogs were being taken to, and who the man in the dirty blue overalls was. Her mother couldn't say much about it, and that was what was so worrying for Becky. All her mother would tell her was that once a greyhound's racing days were over, he was taken off to an animal rescue centre, and from there they went to good homes where they'd be well looked after. But then often she'd add something that Becky had never been able to believe. "Craig's very generous," she'd tell her. "He gives the rescue centre a big donation every time they take a dog away. He's good like that – you just don't see that side of him, you never have. You mustn't worry so much." But Becky did worry, because she was quite sure by now that Craig didn't have a generous bone in his body, that her mother seemed completely blind to how Craig really was, how he felt about his dogs, and how ruthless he was with them.

To Becky, who had spent so much time with the greyhounds, it was all utterly heartless and cruel, an outrage. Every time she had to watch them being dragged away like that, just because they could not longer win races, made her hate Craig even more. He never warned her when it was going to happen, nor which of them was going to be taken off next in the battered grey Land Rover, never to be seen again. So she never had the chance to say goodbye properly. She dreaded that one day Alfie might stop winning, might just get too old for it, might injure himself, and then he'd be taken away too. She knew that one day it was going to happen. It was just a question of time. Brighteyes was younger of course. Maybe he had a longer future, but their futures always ended the same way.

It was something her mother said to her one evening when they were alone that changed Becky's mind about going along with them to the races. "You handle the dogs so much better than I do, Becky," she said. "They know you better. They like you better. I've watched you with them. They run like the wind when you're around. They always win more. I know they do. And besides," she went on, "it'll make Craig happy to see you take more of an interest. And I'd like it too, to have you there, I mean. You'd be company for me."

Becky thought about it for a long time. Craig was entering Brighteyes for more and more races these days, trying him out, testing him, always with Alfie. Becky hated watching them being driven off in the van. She missed them when they were gone. It was that more than anything that changed her mind. She wanted to be with them all she could. And if her mother was right, maybe she really could help Alfie and the others run faster and keep winning. That was enough for Becky. She'd go. She'd ignore Craig, just pretend he wasn't there.

The journeys to the dog tracks on race nights were long and tedious, all the way to London sometimes, to Walthamstow for the big races, and Craig was his usual boorish and beastly self every time. But it did cheer her mother up to have her there, and anyway Becky usually managed to keep her distance from Craig. She was always in the back of the van with the dogs, happy just to be with them. The evenings she looked forward to most were when Alfie and Brighteyes were running – Craig liked to run them together. He had put them through their paces every day up on the moor behind the house. They could all see how the older dog was bringing the younger one on every time they ran, how quick and strong Brighteyes was becoming, improving with every race, how he would never let Alfie get away from him, but stuck to his shoulder all the time, like an unshakeable shadow.

In race after race all over the country they came in first and second, usually but not always Alfie crossing the line first by just a whisker. It was a winning streak which went on for nearly a year. Craig could not believe his luck – he'd never before raked in so much prize money, nor so many trophies for the sideboard back at the farmhouse. He was doing just as well out of his betting too. But all the while other dogs in the kennels came and went. Every couple of months or so Becky saw the battered grey Land Rover come rattling down the farm track. She wept every time it happened. She just hoped, and now she prayed too, that Alfie and Brighteyes would go on winning for ever and never have to be taken away.



By this time the two dogs were quite inseparable. Try to take one out of the kennel and not the other, and they would both make a terrible fuss, an ear-splitting hullabaloo of yowling and whining and yapping that upset every dog in the kennels. Brighteyes stood as tall as Alfie these days, though he was not as powerfully muscled. For each other, and for Becky too, they had become soul mates. She would never go without them when she rode out on Red. And if ever Craig and her mother went out and left her alone in the house for an evening, she would bring them in from the kennels. She liked to let them have the run of the house, to jump up on the sofa beside her. It was strictly against Craig's rules to have any of the dogs inside the house, but Craig's rules were of no account to Becky when he wasn't there.

She loved these evenings, just the three of them with the log fire blazing and her music on. She'd often find herself talking to them, confiding in them all her deepest thoughts. She was lying there one evening with Alfie and Brighteyes sprawled beside her on the sofa, when she began to feel all her pent-up grief welling inside her, until she was so utterly overwhelmed by waves of sadness that the whole story came pouring out of her, about her father, about what had happened on that terrible Sunday morning nearly three years before. It was a secret she had never shared with anyone before, not even her mother, a secret that had haunted her every day since.

"Whichever way you look at it," she told them, through her tears, "it was my

fault. I made it happen. I was the one who had two mugs of hot chocolate the night before and finished all the milk. That was why there was no milk for breakfast. Mum was away visiting Nan, who hadn't been too well. Before Nan died, she got this emphysema thing. She couldn't breathe very well and she used to get panicky. So sometimes Mum went over to be with her at weekends. That's why there was just Dad and me at home, and I'm lying in bed upstairs trying my best not to wake up. Dad shouts up to me and says we've run out of milk, and will I get up and fetch some from the corner shop down the road, while he does the breakfast. But I'm really sleepy and just not feeling like getting up at all, so I pretend I'm still asleep and I haven't heard him.

"The next thing I know I hear the front door open and he's calling upstairs, all jokey and sarcastic. 'I'll go myself then, shall I, Sleepyhead? Oh, and don't you worry yourself about your poor old dad. He doesn't mind going out in the rain and getting himself a good soaking just because his daughter's pigged out on the hot chocolate again last night. You have a nice lie-in, why don't you? Back soon!'

"And then he's gone, and I snuggle down the bed again, feeling a little bit guilty, but not that much, and before I know it I'm dropping off to sleep again. I don't know how long I'm asleep, but it's the front door bell that wakes me. So I go downstairs, a bit fed up, thinking that Dad's forgotten his key accidentally on purpose, just to get me out of bed, and there's the police standing there, two of them, one woman, one man, and they're both looking as if they don't quite know what to say. Then the policeman asks me if my mum's in, and I tell him that Dad'll be back soon, that he's just gone down the shop for some milk. I see them looking at one another, and the policeman takes off his cap and asks if they can come in for a moment.

"That's the first time I think something's wrong – it's just the way they look at each other. But they won't say what it is, nor who they want, nor what the matter is. They just ask where Mum has gone and they say they'd like to speak to her, so I give them her mobile number. The policeman goes out and leaves me with this policewoman who tries to smile at me and make conversation, but she can't do either, not really. So we're just sitting there, the two of us – it seems like for hours – while he's phoning up and stuff, and still Dad doesn't come back and doesn't come back, and I'm wondering why, and knowing by now that something really bad must have happened to him, or maybe to Mum. I keep asking what's going on, but she won't say.

"Then Mum comes in and I can see she's been crying, and she takes me

upstairs and we sit on the bed together, and she tells me. It was a lorry that did it, ran out of control at the bottom of the hill, mounted the pavement outside the shop just when Dad was coming out with the milk. But it wasn't the lorry that killed him. It was me, using up all the milk to make my hot chocolate, me staying in bed when he asked me to go."

All the time Becky was talking the dogs' eyes never left her face. "I've never talked about it to anyone else, except Dad of course. I've talked to him lots of times, up on High Moor, and he's all right about it. He says it wasn't my fault, but then he would say that, wouldn't he? Because he wants me to feel better about it. He told me I should tell Mum, that she won't be upset, and just to get on with my life. But I can't forget it, and I can't tell Mum either, because I know she'll hate me for ever, like I hate myself. And anyway, I don't reckon Mum thinks about Dad that much any more, not with Craig around. She hardly ever talks about him. Sometimes I think she's deliberately trying to forget him. Maybe it's the only way she can put up with horrible Craig. She doesn't even like me talking about him, says it upsets Craig.

"“So what?” I say.

"“We've got to move on,” she says – she's always saying that. ‘What's happened has happened. We've got to put it behind us. No use crying over spilt milk.’

"She really did say that once, honest. I think of it all the time, the spilt milk on the pavement outside the shop. I never saw it, but I think of it and I wish I didn't. I so want to tell her everything just like I've told you, but I can't, I just can't. And I don't think I ever will."

Becky cried herself to sleep soon afterwards, and her mother and Craig found her still sleeping there on the sofa when they came back, Alfie and Brighteyes lolling beside her, their heads on her lap.



Craig wasn't just angry, he was apoplectic. "If you want to sleep with them," he was yelling right in her face, "then you know what you can do, you can ruddy well go and sleep in the kennels. But you're not going to do it in my house, you get me?"

Her mother tried her best to intervene on Becky's behalf, but that only made things worse. "There you go again," he was yelling at her mother now. "Always taking her side, letting her do what she likes. That's why she's like she is, can't you see? Her dad may have let her run wild and do what she liked. But this is my house and I make the rules here. She knows the rules. No dogs in the house. I've told her often enough, haven't I? And what does she do? She goes and sneaks them in when our backs are turned. And I wouldn't mind betting this isn't the first time either. If she wants to live here, she does what I say, simple as that. Are you hearing me, Becky?"

Becky looked him right in the eye. Anger gave her the courage she needed to answer him back. "I don't want to live here," she shouted at him, "I never did. I hate this house, and I hate you. And if you want me to sleep in the kennels with the dogs, that's fine. I'll sleep in the kennels. I'm not bothered. I don't mind. See if I care." And without another word she slammed out of the house, Alfie and Brighteyes following her across the yard.

A little later her mother came out and tried to persuade her to come back inside the house, to patch things up, and say sorry to Craig. But Becky wouldn't do it.

"I didn't think so," said her mother sadly, "which is why I've brought you out your duvet and a pillow."

So Becky spent that night curled up with the dogs at the back of their kennel, covered in her duvet and sharing a pillow with Brighteyes. And whenever Becky woke, which was often, he'd be there, awake and looking straight back at her. It was Brighteyes who helped her through the night, soothed her anger, and kept her warm.

The bitterness of that row blew over in the end, as all the others had. But the memory of it added to the growing residue of cold resentment between them. Despite all Becky's mother tried to do to maintain some kind of peace between them, the house became more and more a place of sullen silence. When she wasn't at school Becky spent as much time as she could up on the moor with Red and the two dogs, riding each time further and further away from the farm. Time and again she thought of riding off with them and never coming back. It was only the thought of how much it would upset her mother that prevented her from actually doing it.

But of course, whether she liked it or not, the three of them were still thrown together on the evenings when they went off to the dog races. For a while Alfie and Brighteyes kept on winning, one or other of them, regularly enough. But Becky could see, as everyone could, that things were gradually changing. More and more it was Brighteyes who was replacing Alfie as the favourite down at the dog track. He was unquestionably on his way to becoming top dog. Everywhere they went now the cameras were on him, and the bets were on him too.

The two dogs were still just as inseparable as ever, off the track and on it, only now it was Brighteyes who almost always came in first, with Alfie a whisker behind. Alfie was definitely off the pace these days, getting older, everyone said, not past it but certainly past his best. No one could deny he was as eager as ever. His speed out of the traps was electric. In full stride he was still magnificent, but his stamina was failing him. He was having to strain every muscle and sinew to stay with Brighteyes, who, as everyone could plainly see, was coming into his prime.

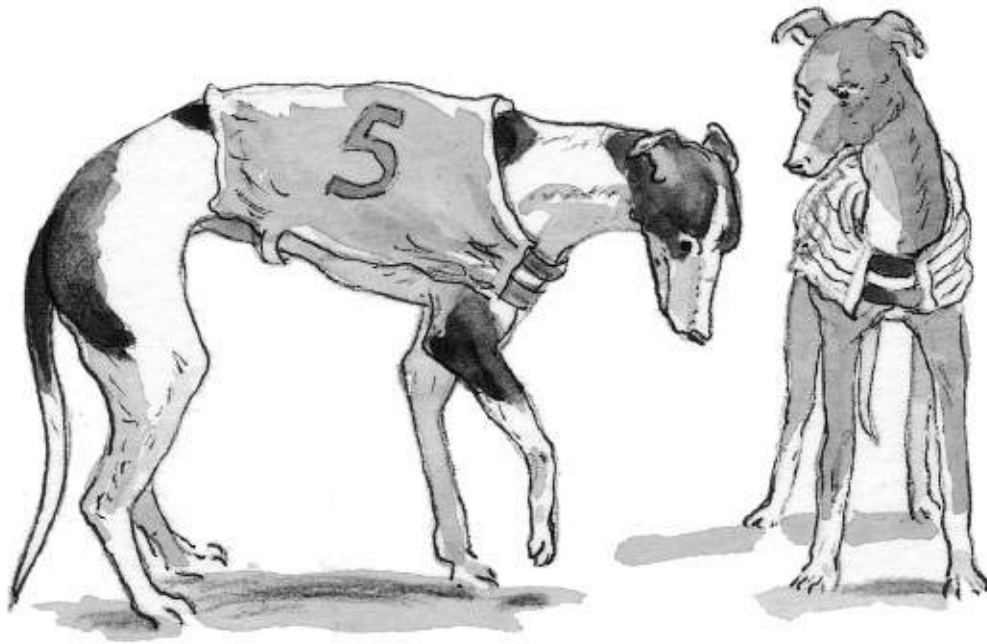


Down at the track Craig was king of the castle, top trainer, and revelling triumphantly in every moment of it. So long as one of his two champion dogs came first and the other came in second, so long as the prize money was still coming in, and the trophies too, that was all that mattered to Craig. For Becky though every race was a torment. She could see that Alfie was not the dog he had been. He was too tired. He was too old. Every time he ran, she thought it might be his last.

Becky was there at the track the evening Alfie broke down. He looked fine as she led him around the enclosure, full of himself and up on his toes. He was the first out of the traps, as usual, kept tight around the bend and powered ahead, with Brighteyes just behind, but moving up alongside him. It looked to Becky, and to everyone else, like another double win, another one-two. The only question was which of them would finish first. All the other dogs were out of it. Then, with no warning whatever, Alfie simply stopped running, slowed to a limping walk and stood there panting under the glare of the lights, as every other dog streaked by him.

Brighteyes had run on for a few paces when it happened. But then, as he found himself suddenly alone, he slowed, stopped and looked about him. He saw Alfie standing there alone on the track and came running back towards him. The two famous champions stood side by side on the track, bewildered and alarmed, but still together. By the time Becky had vaulted over the barrier fence on to the track and was running over to them, the whole crowd had fallen silent in the

stands. They knew, as Becky did, that they were witnessing the end of a greyhound racing legend, that they had just seen the great Alfie run his last race.



The vet confirmed what everyone already suspected, that a bone in one of Alfie's hocks had broken. There was nothing that could be done. He might be able to run but he would never race again.

No one spoke in the van on the way home that night. Becky sat in the back with the dogs as usual, with Alfie's head on her lap. She waited until they got back later that night, until they were having a cup of tea in the kitchen, before she said anything. Still no one spoke. She'd been thinking about it all the way home. She had made up her mind to swallow her pride and beg.

"I've never asked you for anything before, have I, Craig?" she began. Craig didn't say anything. He just sat there stirring his tea and gazing into it morosely. "It's about Alfie. I'd really like to keep him. I mean, he's won you all that money, all those cups. He's run his heart out for you every time he's raced, hasn't he? And Brighteyes... if Alfie goes, it'll break his heart, and if he's unhappy then he'll never run his best, will he? I know him. Please Craig, I'll look after him. I promise I will."

The look on Craig's face was as scathing as the tone of his voice. "So now it's 'please Craig' all of a sudden, is it? That makes a change, I suppose. Well let me tell you something for nothing: a racing dog is only worth keeping as long as he can win. You heard what that vet said. Alfie's not even going to be able to race

again, let alone win. So he goes, just like the others. He's no different. I run a racing kennels here, right? I don't run a dog's rest home for lame greyhounds. So stop your whinging. He goes. Tomorrow. And there's an end to it."

"He'll go to a good home, Becky. It's all right," her mother said. "They all go to good homes, don't they, Craig?"

"Yeah, yeah," Craig muttered. He took a sip of his tea, then banged the mug down on the table. "There's no sugar in this," he shouted. "You know I always have sugar." Becky's mother, now clearly upset, pushed the sugar bowl towards him. He spooned the sugar in and stirred it. When he looked up, he saw both of them looking back at him waiting for a proper answer. "Of course they do," he snapped. "Good homes, all of them. I've told you, haven't I?"

"Please. Just this once." Becky would not give up. "Please, Craig. I'll never ask for anything ever again. Let me keep him please."

Craig drank his tea and said nothing for a while. "All right," he replied at last, "I'll think about it."

Becky's mother reached out and put her hand on his. "Thank you," she said, "from both of us." She looked hard at Becky.

"Yes. Thank you," Becky mumbled. It was hardly convincing, but it was the best she was prepared to do.

Early the next morning Becky saddled up Red in the yard for their morning ride. She wanted to take Alfie and Brighteyes with her as usual, but she could see that Alfie was still carrying his bad leg, hardly able to limp across the kennel. She knew Brighteyes wouldn't want to come without him, so she decided to leave them both behind.

She led Red over to their kennel and crouched down beside them. "It's all right, Alfie," she told him. "I've fixed it with Craig. You're staying. No one's going to take you away. And as soon as your leg's better you can come for a run on the moor. All right?" She smoothed his head and left them. As she rode out of the yard, she turned and saw them both standing there looking after her.

She could tell that Red wasn't happy without the dogs there. He kept stopping, lifting his head and whinnying for them, so it took her much longer than usual to get up to High Moor. She sat on her rock and told her father everything that had happened, how she'd bring the dogs up to see him again once Alfie was fit. Then, as she was talking, a strange thing happened. A white barn owl came floating out of nowhere, like a passing spirit. She flew away down the valley, harried all the way by a pair of cawing crows. Becky had never before seen a barn owl out in broad daylight like this. A shiver of dread came over her, and she

knew it wasn't the cold. She felt it was an omen of some kind, a warning, even a premonition of evil. She mounted up at once and rode hard all the way home.

As she came down off the hill behind the farmhouse Becky heard an engine starting up in the yard below. She recognised it as the engine of a Land Rover. She feared the worst at once, and knew now for sure what the barn owl had been telling her. She saw the battered Land Rover rattling up the track away from the farmyard, and heard from inside it the unmistakable sound of Alfie barking, of Alfie scrabbling at the door in his terror.

As Becky came riding into the yard Brighteyes was up on his hind legs, frantic to get out, yelping and whining. He was alone in his kennel.

Becky didn't confront Craig. She knew that it was too late, that there was no point. It gave her some satisfaction to hear from inside the house the sound of her mother at last standing up to Craig, telling him exactly what she thought of him, but for Becky it was no great comfort. It was too little and too late. She didn't go into the house at all, but spent the rest of the day in the kennel with Brighteyes where she knew she was needed. He was just like he had been when he'd first arrived. He was trembling violently. All day he wouldn't eat and he wouldn't drink, but stood with his head through the bars of the kennel, looking for Alfie, waiting for him.

By the time Becky rode out with Brighteyes the next morning, she still had not managed to get him to eat anything, and he'd drunk next to nothing either. Without Alfie there, Brighteyes never once raced ahead, never bounded away through the bracken like a deer. He loped alongside Becky and Red, his head hanging, all the spring gone from his step. Once up on High Moor he whined wistfully as he looked all about him. Then he came over and sat down beside Becky, his head laid on his paws. He never looked up at her, not once, as if he could not bear to, as if he felt she had betrayed him. She talked to him, stroked him, tried to comfort and reassure him, but he was inconsolable.

"Mum wouldn't lie to me," Becky told him. "So it must be like she said. He's gone to a good home. Alfie's fine. I know he is."

Brighteyes looked up at her then, and she knew absolutely that he did not believe her, that he knew something she didn't know, something dreadful and unthinkable, something he was desperately trying to tell her. Quite suddenly, as she was looking into his eyes, she understood. "It'll be me next," he was telling her. "I can't run without Alfie, and if I can't race I can't win. And if I can't win, they'll take me away just like Alfie."

She cried, throwing her arms around him. "I won't let them take you, not ever."

I promise you I won't. I promise." She rocked him gently, burying her face in his neck. "We'll stay together, you and me. No matter what. No matter what."

Becky wanted to stay out on the moor and ride as far as she could, for as long as the light lasted. Before she left High Moor she called out a goodbye to her father, as she always did. Where she rode that afternoon she did not know, and she did not care. She just rode. With Brighteyes beside her, she followed a tumbling stream from the pool on High Moor, along a rock-strewn track through a forest of stunted oak trees into a valley of scattered boulders and soggy marshland, until they came at last on to a narrow track with rushy fields on either side.

She could see in the distance now a ramshackle farmstead, a glowering place, where the mists hung over the fields, as if hiding some terrible secret. It looked deserted. She was in two minds as to whether she should go on or not, until she saw a chimney and smoke rising from it. Then from somewhere she heard a radio playing. Intrigued but still wary, she walked Red on past a field strewn with long abandoned farm machinery. Crows were perched there, dozens of them, and all were watching her silently as she passed.

Becky could see no one, but she sensed danger in this desolate place, and so did Brighteyes. His whole body tensed, his ears pricked. Then Becky saw the Land Rover parked outside the farmhouse, a battered grey Land Rover, just like the one that came to take away the dogs, that had taken Alfie away the day before. A gunshot rang out from beyond the farm buildings. Crows lifted off and scattered skywards, through the mists, cawing raucously. Red shied and reared, but somehow Becky managed to stay on. She dismounted, whispering to him, smoothing his nose, trying to settle him down again.

Brighteyes was growling from the back of his throat. He had seen the man before she had. The man was whistling as he came into view. He was pushing a wheelbarrow. He wore the same flat cap and the same dirty blue overalls. Becky could see quite clearly now what was in the wheelbarrow. A dead greyhound. Black and white. Alfie. It was Alfie. Becky's pulse was pounding in her ears. She stifled the scream rising inside her, as she watched him wheeling the barrow out into a nearby field. That was when Becky saw the mound of newly dug earth and a spade stuck into the top of it. Beyond this grave there were dozens of other mounds, some with the earth freshly turned, but most already grassed over.

A terrible grief and a fierce anger gripped Becky's heart as she looked out over this hateful killing field, as she watched Alfie being dumped into his grave. She turned and walked away weeping silently. She could feel Brighteyes beside

her, his face against her leg. One glance between them told her he had seen and understood everything. In the moments that followed Becky decided exactly what she had to do.



She took her time riding back over the darkening moor. She stopped off for a short while by her rock on High Moor, partly to postpone her return to the farmhouse for as long as she could, and partly to say goodbye to her father, to tell him what she was going to do. "I'll be back one day, Dad, I promise," she said as she left. "But I don't exactly know when."

Once back in the farmyard she led Red to his stable, fed him and said her last goodbyes. She took Brighteyes to his kennel and put out some food for him. "I won't be long," she whispered, getting up to go. "Then we'll be out of here, for good. I know you don't want it, but try to eat. You'll need it."

Craig and her mother were in the sitting room with the television on. To avoid them she went in the back door and up the back stairs to her bedroom, where she

sat on her bed to write the letter she would be leaving behind. She kept it short.

Dear Mum,

I'm going away with Brighteyes. I don't know where, just away. I know it's not your fault, but you promised me Alfie was going to be looked after. That's what he told you. That's what he told me. I can't even write his name, I hate him so much. Sometimes I've even hated you, Mum, because you take his side, because you won't stand up to him enough, even when he rubbishes Dad, and because you won't leave him even though you know he's a monster, and I just can't understand that.

I want to tell you what I've just seen, but I can't write it because I'll remember it too well. Just tell him that I know what really happened to Alfie, and to all the dogs when he sends them away, because I've seen it with my own eyes. And I'm not going to let it happen to Brighteyes. One day even Brighteyes will start losing, or he'll break down like Alfie and he'll be no use any more for racing. Then he'll do the same thing to Brighteyes as he did to all the others. So I'm taking him away before the Land Rover does. Don't worry about me. Brighteyes and I will look after one another.

I love you Mum, but I just can't be around him any more.

Becky

She folded the letter and slipped it under her pillow. Later her mother called her down for supper. She went because she didn't want to arouse suspicion, and because she was hungry, and because she didn't know when she'd be eating again. She tried not to look at Craig at all, but their eyes did meet once, and she stared at him, telling him with that one withering look just how much she loathed and despised him. She hardly said a word to anyone all through the meal, and afterwards went upstairs just as soon as she could. When her mother came to say good night, she pretended to be asleep. Hidden away in the bottom of her cupboard was her rucksack already packed, and all the clothes she was going to wear later that night were ready under her bed.

It was a long wait. Becky needed to be quite sure they were both fast asleep

before she made a move. When she got up at last, she trod lightly down the stairs. There was a blustery wind that night, that shook the house and rattled the doors and windows, so any sound she made was well camouflaged. She slipped silently out of the house. It was a clear, moonlit night. As she crossed the yard she began whispering to the dogs to let them know it was her. The last thing she wanted was for them to start barking. There was a whimper or two from them as she let Brighteyes out of his kennel, but nothing more. She put on his coat, and then, with Brighteyes close on her heels, she was running up the farm track and away. At the top of the hill she stopped for one last look at the farm below her. "I'm sorry, Mum," she breathed. Then she hitched up her rucksack, and set off down the road that would lead to wherever she was going. Where that would be she had no idea.

Up to this point her plan for their escape had been very specific in its detail. But now they were in unknown territory. All she knew was that she and Brighteyes were walking the road that led to the rest of the world, and they would follow wherever it went. Just so long as she didn't ever have to see Craig again, just so long as Brighteyes was with her and safe, she didn't mind.

For at least a couple of hours no car came by. The wind was chilling her to the bone, and up on the moor there was no shelter from it. She hadn't thought it would be this cold. She had her coat on and Brighteyes had his jacket on, but neither was enough to keep out the biting wind. And Becky had other worries too, that her mother might already have discovered she was gone, that Craig would be coming after them in the van. She knew she was going to have to hitch a lift, something her mother had always told her never to do. So when at last she saw headlights in the far distance, her first instinct was to duck down in the bracken at the side of the road and hide. But as the lights came closer, she could hear it wasn't a van, but a lorry of some kind. She felt confident enough then to run out and try to hitch a lift.

It turned out to be a cattle truck and the driver seemed friendly enough, even if he was a bit inquisitive. "Out late, aren't you?" he asked. Becky said she'd missed the last bus home, and she'd have to walk – the lie came easily.

He said he was on his way to a market "up country," to somewhere Becky had never heard of. She didn't know what "up country" really meant, but a ride to anywhere was a lot more inviting at that moment than freezing out on the moor. She could feel the warmth of the cab on her face, and "up country" sounded far enough away. They climbed in, Brighteyes curling up on the seat beside her, and at once making himself at home. The driver asked a few questions, but mostly

about the dog, then fell silent and just drove on into the darkness, listening to the radio.

Cocooned in the stuffy heat of the cab both Becky and Brighteyes soon fell asleep. When Becky woke, it was early morning and they were pulling into a petrol station somewhere on the edge of a town. The driver looked across at her, as he turned off the engine. “Bit young to be out travelling on your own, aren’t you?” he said.



“I’m eighteen,” Becky said quickly, “and anyway I’m not on my own, am I? I’ve got the dog and he’s got a bite.” But she knew he was suspicious, that she hadn’t convinced him, which is why, while he was paying for his petrol, she got out of the cab with Brighteyes and ran off.

There was a coach station in the centre of town and one coach waiting, engine running, to go. Becky didn’t care where to, as long as it was far enough away from Craig. She had some money with her, but not much – just £35.75, but that was more than enough to pay for the coach fare. She didn’t like to spend the money – she knew she’d need it later – but she had no choice. If she tried hitching again there could be more questions, awkward questions. On a coach at least she’d be with lots of other people. There’d be safety in numbers, and besides mostly people didn’t talk on coaches. That’s what she thought. She was wrong.

As it was, she found herself, with Brighteyes beside her, sitting on the back seat next to the most talkative and inquisitive old lady on the planet, who immediately asked where she was going. Becky made up some complicated story about visiting her granny in the city and that her granny loved the dog like another grandchild, which was why they were going together. The more Becky elaborated and extended her story, the easier she found it. Luckily the old lady seemed to believe her. She clearly liked her too because she gave her some of her cheese sandwich, and some for Brighteyes too. Then for the next couple of hours, she rambled on about her own grandchildren who were scattered all over the world from Australia to South Africa. She showed her photographs of them and some of their letters too. And then at last, to Becky's great relief, she dropped off to sleep.

Becky had never liked cities, but as the coach crawled through the traffic, into the heat of the city, she knew it was the right place to be. Here they could lose themselves with no trouble at all. No one could ever find them. So when she walked out of the coach station with Brighteyes, into the streets, where everyone seemed to know where they were going and were in a tearing hurry to get there, it made her feel suddenly very bewildered and alone. She saw a bus going by. The sign on the front said Stanley Park. "We'll go to the park," she said to Brighteyes. "Then you can have a run." She didn't want to spend any more money on fares so she followed where the bus went, which was easy because the traffic was heavy and slow, and there always seemed to be another Stanley Park bus coming by which they could follow as well. It was a long walk, but the buses told Becky she'd get there sooner or later, so she just kept going.

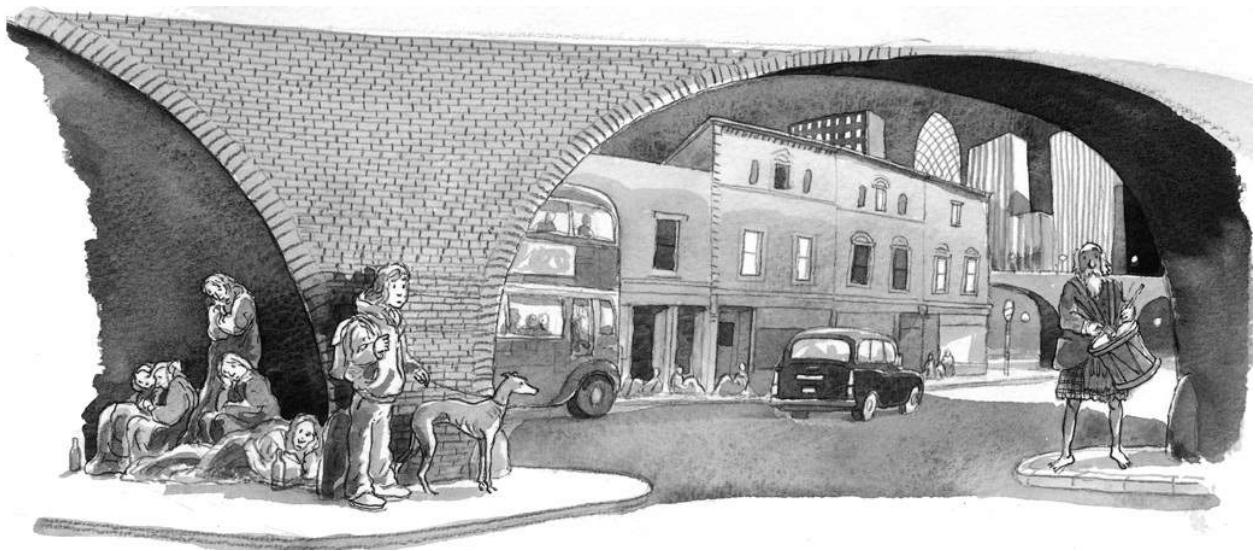
When they did finally walk out on to the grass of Stanley Park, Brighteyes seemed to know at once that he could take off, and he did. Other dogs – there seemed to be mostly poodles in the park that day – raced after him, trying to keep up with him. They couldn't get near him, but that didn't stop them trying, again and again. He dodged and weaved, running circles round all of them. Becky sat on a bench loving every moment of it, glowing with pride. The sun was out now and warming her through. She felt suddenly happy. She knew then as she watched Brighteyes gambolling about that whatever happened, she had done the right thing, and that her father would think so too.

It was this unexpected surge of happiness that made her get up and race after him, made her forget her rucksack. When she came back with Brighteyes it was no longer there on the bench where she'd left it. All her spare clothes were gone, a blanket from her bed at home and all her photos of her mother and father,

everything. All she had left was the money in one of her coat pockets, and a few biscuits for Brighteyes in the other. She sat down and cried then, mostly because she was so angry with herself. In that moment of despair, if she'd had her mobile with her, she'd most certainly have rung her mother right away, just given up and called the whole thing off. But she had left it at home deliberately, because she had known that sooner or later, she'd be bound to weaken.

Brighteyes stood there looking up at her, still panting after his run around. It was a knowing look, and one that Becky understood at once. "I know what you're saying," she said, wiping away her tears. "You're saying: no use sitting there feeling sorry for yourself. You're saying: I'm hungry." She gave him the last of the biscuits, then counted out the money she had left. "£8.32. Not much is it, Brighteyes? But we've got to eat. I'm hungry too." They shared a hot dog between them, had a long drink from a water fountain and set off across the park.

By evening the rest of her money was almost gone. Becky had bought a couple of apples, two bread rolls, some cheese and a blanket from a market stall, but all the while she was wondering how you go about finding a place to spend the night in the city when you haven't got enough money to pay for it.



As evening came on she was wandering the streets still looking for a quiet place to shelter, and this was when she discovered she wasn't the only one out there on the streets with nowhere to go. So many of the best places that were under cover and out of the wind – shop doorways, arcades, underpasses – were already occupied by the people of the street.

Some were playing a flute or an accordion. Some were sitting there begging

and others were already asleep in sleeping bags or under cardboard boxes. Many had dogs as well, who would bare their teeth and growl at Brighteyes as they passed by, or even lunge at him, snarling and snapping.

There were old men glaring at her with eyes like those of hungry, angry wolves, young men and girls no older than she was, lost in their sadness, looking but hardly seeing, their faces pale, their eyes sunken. There was one man standing on a corner begging. He was dressed in a kilt with bare legs and bare feet, banging away on a drum, chanting out his sad and angry mantra, "I'm homeless. I'm hopeless. You don't care, and I don't care. I'm homeless. I'm hopeless..."

She felt sorry for them, but was frightened of them too. More than once she was tempted to seek out the company of the younger ones, to try to share their bit of sheltered territory, but she was wary of approaching them. She knew instinctively that if she sat down with them she would sooner or later become one of them, become like them, and that was enough to keep her walking. Her legs ached, her feet ached. The wind was getting up all the time and with the darkness had come the cold. She had to find shelter, and soon.

She determined to keep clear of the street people, so she kept walking till she had left the lights and noise of the city centre behind her and found herself in quiet, tree-lined streets where there were small gardens at the front of the houses, and she could see lights on in the windows and people at home, people like her. These streets may have been darker, but she felt safer here somehow. There were just the two of them again now, so she could talk to Brighteyes freely. She knew he needed that, that he felt frightened and insecure in this strange world, just as she was.

"We'll find somewhere, Brighteyes," she told him. "Don't you worry, but it's got to be somewhere where there's no people, and no dogs either. We can have supper then. Bread and cheese. You don't like apples much, do you?" He padded along beside her, looking up at her whenever she spoke. "Better than being in that kennel, right? And better than being where Alfie is, that's for sure. We'll find somewhere. Soon, I promise." It helped Becky to talk, kept her spirits up when she needed it most, kept her hopes up when she felt at her most helpless.

After trudging along streets of terraced houses for an hour or so they came to a house which looked different from the others. There were no lights to be seen. Every window was boarded up. There was a builder's skip outside in the road. The place was obviously being renovated, so it had to be empty. Becky opened the little iron gate and peered into the front garden. An old garden shed stood in

the corner behind the hedge, the door open and swinging in the wind. There was no one about. It was worth a risk, worth a look.

The shed turned out to be a perfect hideaway, small and snug with a pile of sacks in one corner that made a perfect bed. Becky pulled the door to behind them, and they made it their own. They ate together, Becky sharing out the bread and the cheese. “One for you, one for me,” was the only way to do it fairly. Brighteyes was so hungry he barely chewed at all before swallowing, and then he was waiting for the next offering. Becky was ravenous too, but even so she forced herself not to eat it all at once, but save a little for later: just half a bread roll and half an apple. Not much, but something. It would do for breakfast.



As she was feeding Brighteyes, she talked to him, but in a whisper. “No one’ll find us here, not if we’re careful. We can creep in here every night. No one’ll know.” The blanket she’d bought was just about big enough to cover them both. Lying there in the dark, the shed smelt musty and damp, and it creaked horribly in the wind. Sometimes she could hear footsteps going by outside, and voices too, but none of that mattered to Becky. She was asleep almost at once.

She slept fitfully but deeply, in and out of episodic dreams, and in every one of them her father was there. He was up on the rock on High Moor, pushing her on a swing, and she was shrieking out to him: “Higher! Higher! Higher!” He was coming out of the shop with the milk in his hand, and the lorry was hurtling down the hill, heading straight for him. As she slept and dreamed, Brighteyes lay

there listening to her breathing, to the night noises of the city, all the while alert for danger, knowing it was out there somewhere, that he had to be ready for it, whatever it was.

Early the next morning, leaving the blanket behind in their hideaway, they stole out into the street and went down to the river. Geese came flying in, some ducks and a heron or two. Brighteyes sat watching it all intently, and didn't seem to want to come away when Becky called him. "We'll come back, Brighteyes," she told him. "I'm cold. I've got to keep walking, or I'll freeze."

So they walked on along the river until they came to a park with trees all around and ponds. There were swings here and slides, with children shouting and laughing and playing. For a while Brighteyes was happy just to watch them, his ears swivelling constantly as he listened. In the end he just couldn't resist it. He ran off to be with the children, bounding around them and barking playfully. Becky called him back, but it was too late. A couple of the children had taken fright and were running screaming to their mothers.

"He won't hurt," Becky told them. "Honest, he won't. He's really gentle."

But one of the mothers turned on her. "You keep him away!" she shouted. "You keep him under control, or I'll call the police."

"It should be on a lead anyway," said another of the mothers. "Should have a muzzle."

"He doesn't need a lead," Becky told them. "And he doesn't need a muzzle either. He was just having a bit of fun, that's all."

Then there were half a dozen angry mothers on their feet, yelling at her and Brighteyes, who stood there looking perplexed and upset. He turned and ran back to Becky. They left the park with abuse ringing in their ears.

It came on to rain later. So they went and sat in a bus shelter for a while, and that's where they finished the last of their food. Becky counted her money once again, hoping it was more than she knew it was, that somehow she'd made a mistake. She hadn't. It was still £1.56p. When a police car came by, slowing as it passed them, Becky kept her face hidden, pretending to be petting Brighteyes. They'd be on the lookout for her – she was sure of it. They'd have some kind of description of her by now: fifteen-year-old girl, green coat, jeans, woolly hat, with a light fawn greyhound with a tartan jacket. She might be able to hide her face but she couldn't hide Brighteyes. She thought the police car would be bound to stop, but it didn't. It was enough of a scare though to move Becky on, rain or no rain. The police car would be back to have another look any time, she was sure of it.

It took her a while to find the street again – she'd forgotten the name of it – and the house with the boarded-up windows and the skip outside. She'd decided that their garden shed home was the safest place to be for the moment, and the driest too.

One look from the end of the street, though, and her heart sank. The builders were there, two or three of them at least, carrying wood and bricks into the house. There was worse to come. As they walked by on the opposite pavement she saw that the skip looked much fuller than before. It took a moment or two for her to recognise what was in it – their garden shed, or what was left of it. She caught a glimpse of their blanket in amongst the wreckage of the shed. She was tempted to dart across the road to retrieve it, but the builders were constantly coming and going, and she didn't dare.

How far she wandered after that and where she went, Becky had no idea. She was lost now in a daze of misery and cold. At one point she went into a café and spent the last of her money on a mug of hot tea and a sticky bun. She gave half the sticky bun to Brighteyes who sat by her knee shivering and shaking uncontrollably. Becky made her tea last as long as she could. With nowhere else to go, staying in the warm was everything, and Becky knew that.

From where she was sitting by the window, she could see a phone box across the road. Just a few short steps, one call home, and she could be back there, tucked up in her warm bed. It would be so easy. But every time she was tempted she thought of Alfie: of Alfie and Brighteyes side by side, bounding over the moor; of Alfie alone in his kennel, carrying his hurt leg, limping towards her, the last time she'd seen him alive; then Alfie lying dead in that wheelbarrow. Use that phone, go back home and the same thing would happen to Brighteyes. She'd rather die first.

The lady behind the counter who had poured her tea had been watching her for a while now. Becky could feel it and had avoided looking at her, pretending instead to sip her tea which had long since been finished. But when she came over to her table Becky had to look up at her. She was about her mother's age, a black lady in a flowery apron. Becky expected to be kicked out, expected the woman to be angry. But she wasn't, not at all. "You want some more tea, girl?" she asked.

"Haven't got any money left," Becky replied.

"That's not what I asked now, is it? I said, you want some more tea?"

"Yes, please."

"And water for the dog?"

“Thanks.”

She brought both, as well as a whole plate of bread and butter and jam. As she put it down on the table, she bent down and spoke to Becky softly, so none of the other customers could hear her. “You want some advice, girl? Whatever it is, I’m telling you it can’t be that bad. You go home to your mum. She’ll be worried sick about you. You can’t stay here for ever, and there’s nothing out there ‘cept streets, and they’re not nice places for a young girl like you. You hear me? You be a good girl, and you go home now. And by the way, I got to say, that dog you got is the most beautiful dog I ever saw.”



Becky wanted to tell her everything at that moment, the whole story, and maybe she would have too, had the lady not turned away to serve someone else at the counter. After that she always seemed to be busy making tea or washing-up. Becky eked out her tea and bread and jam as long as she could. Brighteyes loved the strawberry jam in particular, and went on licking his lips and enjoying it long after he’d swallowed it down.

She stayed on in the café until the lady behind the counter told her she’d really have to go because it was shutting-up time. “You’re not going home, are you?” she said, as Becky went to the door. Becky shook her head. “I didn’t think you were. You got to do what you got to do, am I right? But you got to keep yourself warm, girl. Try the library, about a mile down the road. Nice and warm in there.”

So that’s where Becky headed. It was warm all right, but they didn’t allow dogs. It was the same with the museum. No dogs. She didn’t even get through

the front door there. She went and sat in a launderette for a while, but they kicked her out because she hadn't brought any washing to do. The waiting room at the bus station was empty and it was warm. She lay down on the bench with Brighteyes beside her and just hoped no one would come. She was half asleep when a bus inspector came in, and asked her which bus she was waiting for. She was too dozy to make up a credible story. She just couldn't think fast enough. So she told him the truth.

"I just wanted to stay in the warm," she said, "that's all. Got nowhere else to go."

"That's not my fault, is it?" he said, holding the door open. "Out, or I'll call the police."

Becky knew she had no choice, that it was no use arguing with a man like that. But all the same she took her time, very deliberately walking around the waiting room, looking at all the posters on the wall, studying the timetables and the maps, before sauntering past him without even an acknowledgment that he was there. She enjoyed her little show of defiance – it made her feel a little better about facing the dark, cold streets.

The rain had stopped by now, but the wind was icy. There seemed nowhere left to hide from it. All she could do was walk. It was already night before Becky came across the only refuge she could find, a disused multi-story car park with a high chain link fence all around, and a sign up outside: KEEP OUT. SECURITY PATROLLED She was desperate by now. She had to find some shelter, any shelter. So when she spotted a hole in the fence just about big enough to squeeze through, she didn't hesitate.

The place was filled with a hollow, eerie silence that frightened her, but it looked and sounded deserted. And most importantly it was dry and out of the wind. She found a tucked away corner down in the basement. Others had clearly discovered it before her. The place was littered with cardboard and plastic bags, and bottles, lots of bottles. Someone had lit a fire there too at one time or another, because there was a heap of ashes nearby. Brighteyes went to lie down at once on the cardboard and began cleaning himself. "That's what I like about you," Becky said. "Wherever you are, you just make the best of it, make yourself at home. But you're right: home is where you are, however horrible it is. So we'll make the best of it. Tomorrow I'll get some money, somehow. Then we can get a proper place and proper food." She went to sit down beside him, drew up her legs and hugged them to her. "I can do waitress work. Or kitchen work, washing-up and stuff like that. We'll go looking tomorrow. We'll be all right.

We'll be fine, you'll see." She lay down then and pulled him close, her head against his chest. She felt the warmth of sleep coming over her and let herself drift with it.

It seemed to Becky that she was woken only minutes later. Brighteyes was on his feet and growling. Somewhere in the car park there was the sound of footsteps. Whoever it was, was coming closer. The light of a torch danced on the ceiling, then on the walls, then it was shining straight at her. Dazzled now, Becky put up her hands to protect her eyes.

"That's my place you're sleeping in. What the bleeding heck do you think you're doing here?"

The man's voice was rasping and angry, his words slurred with drink. Becky couldn't see his face. But suddenly out of the glare of the light came a dog, charging at her, his barking angry and loud, a terrifying war cry that echoed through the building. Before Becky could move, Brighteyes leaped at the dog, and then both were at each other yelping and snapping. Rough hands grabbed Becky and yanked her to her feet. "What've we got here then? A little girlie?" Becky could smell the stink of his breath. She kicked at him, and heard him cry out. Then she shook herself free of him and ran, calling for Brighteyes, screaming for him. She could hear the two dogs still fighting somewhere ahead of her in the darkness, and ran towards them. She could see them now rolling on the ground, locked together in ferocious combat, snarling and tearing at one another.



Becky didn't hesitate. She rushed forward and tried to pull them apart. She managed to get hold of Brighteyes round his neck and drag him away. But the other dog came after her, and that was when she was bitten. She felt the teeth sink into her wrist and shake it, tugging at it, twisting it. She tried to break free, but the dog would not let her go. She could hear the man stumbling towards her, dropping his torch as he came, cursing loudly and roaring at her like a wild animal. Terrified, Becky lashed out at the dog, punching him hard on his nose again and again till he let her go. Suddenly free, she and Brighteyes ran for it, out of the basement, the whole car park resonating with angry shouting and barking. Then they were out in the open, back through the gap in the fence and away.

They kept running down the dark and empty street until Becky could run no more. Her head was swimming. Her wrist throbbed and her legs were so weak she could scarcely walk. She felt the blood dripping from her hand, knew that she'd been badly hurt, that she needed help; but all she could think of now was to keep going, to find somewhere to hide in case the man came after them.

Then she was aware of lights all about her. She found herself wandering aimlessly through a deserted shopping centre, which was where she came across some large recycling bins under an arcade. She was staggering by now, and

knew her legs could not carry her much further. This was as good a place as any to hide. She crawled in behind the bins with Brighteyes and they huddled there silently, Becky rocking herself, trying to forget the agony in her wrist, trying to calm her panic. She could see now that Brighteyes too was wounded, that one of his ears was badly torn. She tried to reach out to him, but found she could not lift her arm. She tried to talk to him, and found her voice echoing strangely in her head. When she found herself lying on the ground, she couldn't work out how she'd got there, because she'd been sitting up a moment before. She tried to sit up again and couldn't find the strength. Brighteyes was swimming in and out of her vision. She tried to stop herself from fainting, but there was nothing she could do.

When the binmen came first thing the next morning, they discovered a girl lying semiconscious behind the bins. She was bleeding badly. Standing over her was a fawn coloured greyhound who, from the look of him, had been in a nasty fight. They wouldn't have found her at all, they'd have driven off without ever seeing them, they told the paramedics, if the greyhound hadn't come over and barked and barked at them, until they took some notice of him, and then he'd deliberately led them back to where she was. The paramedics told them that in that case, if the girl lived – and that was doubtful because she'd lost a lot of blood – it would be the greyhound who had saved her life.





I'm a running dog, a chasing dog, a racing dog. I'm not a fighting dog. I never in all my life had a fight before that night. My speed had always got me out of trouble before. This time I didn't have a chance to use it. He came at us out of nowhere, leaped straight at my face, teeth bared and snarling. He may have been small but he was all aggression, all muscles, all teeth, and I realised at once that he'd rip my throat out if he could. So I fought back with all my strength because I knew I was fighting for my life. It was him or me.

For a while I gave as good as I got, but I very soon understood that I was neither strong enough nor cunning enough. I was up against a street fighter, a killer dog. As we tussled and tore at each other, I could feel my strength ebbing fast. If Becky had not pulled us apart when she did, it would have ended much worse for me. As it was I got away with a bloodied ear. Becky was not so lucky.

I didn't really know how badly hurt she was until we were through the fence, and running through the streets, until I looked back and saw she was staggering rather than running. I stopped to wait for her. She was leaning against a lamp post now, so I ran back to her. "It keeps bleeding," she said. She was breathing hard and clutching her wrist. "It won't stop bleeding."

We walked on after that, Becky talking all the while, but after a time I realised she wasn't talking to me at all, but to herself. And she wasn't walking straight either. She kept bumping into me, kept stumbling off the pavement. Several times she ended up on her hands and knees, unwilling or unable to get up. I would try to encourage her to her feet again, and on we'd go, until at last we came into the glaring light of shop windows. She found a hiding place in behind

some bins and crawled in, calling me after her.

She clung to me. "I'm so tired, Brighteyes," she whispered, "so tired." She was finding it difficult to talk at all now. She leaned her head back against the wall, closed her eyes and rested a while, before she opened them again. That was when she noticed my ear. "Oh, Brighteyes," she cried. "What have I done to you? We can't go on like this, can we? In the morning I'm going to take you to a rescue centre somewhere – I'll ask around – a proper one, not Craig's kind, and I'll leave you there. I don't want to do it, Brighteyes, you know I don't; but there's no other way. They'll look after you. They'll find you a good home. Then I'll ring Mum, and she'll come and fetch me. I may not see you again, but at least you'll be safe, won't you? And that's the main thing."

A moment later her eyes closed again and she slumped sideways to the ground. I tried waking her because I suddenly felt very alone without her voice to comfort me, but she was not sleeping as she usually slept. She was lying there unnaturally still, dead to the world it seemed, her face pale, paler than I'd ever seen it, white almost. I curled up beside her, my head resting on her shoulder. She needed to be warm, I thought, and so did I. But both of us were so cold by now that between us we had no warmth to share.

I was woken by the rumbling of a lorry nearby, and the sound of men's voices. There was the clatter and crash of breaking bottles. They were emptying the bins. To begin with I stayed hidden where I was. Becky had not woken. I could not understand why not. With all the noise of the lorry and the binmen so close by, their voices so loud, I knew something was very wrong. Nothing I did made any difference. She would not wake.

I ran out from behind the bins, barking at them. They seemed taken aback at first, frightened almost, which wasn't what I intended at all. I stood there, barking for a while, then ran back behind the bins and out again, trying to make them come and see, trying to make them understand. It was a while before they did, before one of them approached me. He was quite wary of me. He crouched down and reached out to pat me. "What's your problem, son?" he asked, stroking my neck now. "Nasty looking ear. You've been in a bit of a punch-up, haven't you?"

This time when I ran off behind the bins, he followed me to where Becky was lying. "Jeez!" he shouted. "Call the ambulance! Call 999 fast! There's a girl back here, and she's hurt bad! Quick!"

I stayed with Becky until they came and took her away. I tried to jump up into the ambulance with her, but they wouldn't let me. "No dogs in the ambulance

I'm afraid. Not allowed. Hygiene rules," said the lady who'd been looking after Becky.

"He saved the girl's life," said the binman. "You said so yourself. You could make an exception, couldn't you? Where's he going to go?"

"Sorry," she said, getting into the ambulance. "I suggest you take him to the police station down Willoughby Road. They'll look after him."

The binmen tried to hold on to me but I wouldn't have it. I broke free and took off after the ambulance as it raced away down the road, lights flashing, sirens blaring. Sometimes it almost got away from me, but whenever it ran into traffic and had to slow down, I'd catch up with it. Dodging the cars or the people on the pavements, I just about managed to keep it in sight.

I had lost Patrick, my first best friend. I had been stolen away from him and would never see him again. I had lost Alfie, who'd been like a father and brother to me. I did not want to lose Becky, who was doing all she could to save my life. So I ran after the ambulance, as if Alfie was at my side. There was no way I was going to let that ambulance get away. When it turned off the road I followed it down the driveway. When they carried Becky into the hospital I tried to go in after her, but they wouldn't let me past. They shouted at me and waved me away. So I went and sat on the grassy bank below the car park, and waited. Becky had gone in. Sooner or later she would have to come out again. I would wait for her. She had not deserted me. I would not desert her. Besides, I had nowhere else to go.

All day I had a lot of attention from passers-by, and some of it came with gifts of chocolate or biscuits or crisps, all of which I accepted gratefully and quickly snaffled up. Children came and sat beside me for a while, patted me and talked to me. I liked that. But all the while I didn't take my eyes off the entrance to the hospital, watching everyone come and go, looking all the time for Becky, waiting for her to come out. She had gone in, so she had to come out. I would stay until she did.

As dark came down there were fewer and fewer people about, and no children at all. I missed them. Ambulances came and went. I did see the lady who'd carried Becky into the ambulance, the one who hadn't let me go with her. She didn't see me though. She was too busy driving her ambulance. I tried again and again to sneak in through the door and find Becky, but I got chased out every time. I was getting tired, and I was so, so cold. I felt like going off and finding myself somewhere to shelter out of the wind, somewhere I could curl myself up tight and sleep. But I knew I mustn't. I knew Becky could come out at any

moment. I had to stay where I was and stay awake.



I'm not sure which came first, the thought that I was hungry or the smell of food. Suddenly I found there was an old man sitting down beside me. He didn't smell like anyone else I had ever met. In fact he didn't smell like a man at all. He just smelled of food, and it was the kind of food I liked a lot. He put something down in front of me on the grass. "Baked tatty, with my best cheese filling," he said. "I thought you could do with it, warm you up. You're shaking like a leaf. Go on, help yourself." I was hungry all right, but I still hesitated. "Oh I see," the old man went on, "so you're the shy sort, just like Paddywack. He'd never eat with anyone looking either. I won't look, promise."

The potato was full of melted cheese. It was delicious and gone all too soon. I licked the grass until there was no trace of it left.

"Glad you liked it," he said. "You've made quite a stir round here. Everyone's been talking about you all day. Lynn told me about you when she came for her tatty at lunchtime – one of my best customers she is. She told me how you followed her ambulance with that girl in it all the way here, going like the clappers she said. Turbo-charged. But I've been watching you. You've been sitting right here all day long, haven't you? You've been waiting for that girl to come out. Lynn told me her name. But I forget. I forget a lot these days, specially names. She won't be out for a while you know. Lost a lot of blood apparently. But she'll be all right, don't you worry. Lynn says she's a real survivor that one. Like you, I reckon. But you can't sit out here all night. Big

frost tonight, minus four they said on the radio. There's no point you sitting here. They won't let her out now, not at night-time. They'll keep her in for another day or two at least, I should think."

That was when he leaned towards me, peering at me more closely. "Nasty ear you've got. It needs cleaning up. Here, I've got an idea. Why don't you come and sleep in my tatty van? You'll be snug as a bug in a rug. Baking it is in there. Well it would be, wouldn't it? It's what it's for, the Tattyvan. You don't know what I'm talking about, do you? I've got this old van. Looks like a sort of travelling potato, a motorised tuber, you might say. I converted it myself. My Tattyvan I call it, and I'm Mr Tattyvan when I'm out on the road. I'm Joe really, to my friends I mean.

"I go all over the place, baking potatoes and selling them – cheese filling, chilli, coleslaw, tuna mayo – take your pick, I make it all myself. The hospital here is one of my best pitches. Paramedics like Lynn, doctors, nurses, ancillary workers, visitors, patients, they all love my tatties. Well they would, wouldn't they? It's good healthy food, and cheap too. But tomorrow's my last day. Time has come for something different."

He pulled his bobble hat down over his ears and hugged himself. "I'm fruzzed sitting here." He got to his feet. "Are you coming then?" He was whistling for me as he walked away. Then he turned round and saw I wasn't moving. "So you're going to stay there and wait for her, are you? Loyal, faithful. I like that in a dog. I like that in people too. Just like poor old Paddywack. You've got a lot in common you two." And then he was gone away into the darkness.

I felt suddenly very alone. I liked the gentleness of his voice and his quiet kindness. I thought I'd seen the last of him but he was back in a few minutes and this time he was carrying a blanket. "Here," he said, wrapping it around me. "This'll keep you a little warmer. I'll be back in the morning. See you then." And he was gone again.

It was a long and lonely night, and the coldest of my life, only interrupted by the occasional wailing siren as another ambulance drove up. I never fell asleep, not once, because the cold didn't let me. I kept watch on that door, hoping all the while that Becky would come out, but she didn't.

By first light Joe was back again and I was so pleased to see him. He brought me a bowl of warm milk, and I lapped it eagerly, filling myself with its warmth. He sat down beside me and rubbed me with his bobble hat until I wasn't shivering and shaking any more. And he talked to me the whole time.

"What am I going to do with you?" he was saying. "I mean, you can't sit out

here for ever, can you? I could take you down to the rescue centre, I suppose. That ear of yours needs seeing to.” He tried to reach out and touch it, but I wouldn’t let him. “They’d clean it up. They’d look after you, that’s for sure, find you a good home. But you want to stay, don’t you? You want to wait for her.”

He was still sitting there, still talking, still rubbing me, when I looked up and saw someone I recognised walking towards us. It wasn’t Becky. It was her mother.

“So there you are,” she said to me. “They told me in the hospital I’d find you out here. I see you’ve found yourself a friend then.”

Joe had got to his feet by now. “Yours is he?” he asked.

“He’s Becky’s really, my daughter’s. They ran off together, the two of them. They had good reason, believe me. She had an accident, but she’s all right now, thank God. Much better.”

“That’s good,” Joe said. “So you’ll be taking him home then, I suppose?”

“I don’t think so,” she replied. “We’ve got nowhere to keep him, not any more. As soon as she’s out of hospital – probably tomorrow, the doctor says – we’ll be moving on. Things didn’t work out back home, so Becky and me, we’ll be staying in my mum’s flat for a while, just till we find somewhere on our own. We’re better off on our own. Becky was right about that. She was right about a lot of things. But that’s another story. Anyway, the trouble is, Mum’s got cats, three of them. She loves them to bits, and she hates all dogs. So do the cats.

“I’ve talked to Becky about it. She’s upset, of course she is. She’d love to keep him if she could, but she knows we can’t. She’ll be happy enough if she knows he’s gone to a good home. It looks to me like maybe he’s found one already.”

For a few moments Joe didn’t seem to know quite what to say. “To tell you the honest truth, I really hadn’t thought about keeping him,” he said. “It hadn’t even occurred to me. I mean, I’m planning on being on the move a lot, I’ve got things to do, and I hadn’t bargained on... But then maybe... maybe it’d be good to have a companion along, someone to talk to. He’s a good listener, I know that.” He smoothed my face and fondled my ears gently. “He’s got kind eyes, just like Paddywack. My wife had a dog a bit like this. Paddywack, he was called, because she liked the song – y’know the one, ‘Knick Knack Paddywack, give a dog a bone’, that one. He was a lurcher, fast like a greyhound, faithful too. A good friend. Marion loved him, more than she loved me sometimes, I reckon. Yes, maybe it’s a good idea at that.”

“Well, old son,” he went on, patting my neck gently, and looking me in the

eye. "Haven't got much to offer you, except friendship. I've got lots of that." He smiled and I knew right away I was in safe hands, that here was someone I could trust. He looked up at Becky's mother, "All right, why not? If he'll have me, I'll have him. You tell that daughter of yours in the hospital not to worry, that he'll be well looked after, I promise."

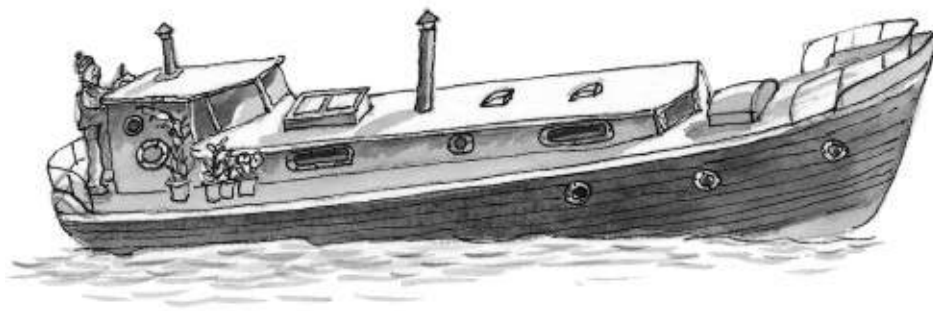
"I'll tell her," said Becky's mother. She was crouching down over me now, her eyes full of tears. "I still don't understand it. How could he? They're so beautiful, so trusting. How could he have done it?"

"Done what?" Joe asked.

"Nothing," she said, standing up abruptly and moving away. "It's nothing. Anyway, he won't be doing it again – I made sure of that." She looked at me. "You'll give him a good life, won't you? He deserves it." And then she was gone, hurrying away from us back into the hospital.

"Botheration," said Joe after a while. "I never asked her what you were called, did I? Never mind. New life. New name. As it should be. I think I'm going to call you Paddywack. Marion would like that."

I had a place to sleep, on a blanket right by the baking oven in Joe's Tattyvan. I loved the warmth of the place and the smell of it and the cheese fillings too. I missed Becky, of course I did, just like I missed Patrick before her. I didn't forget them, they were a part of my life, a part of me. I knew how much they had loved me, how much I loved them and owed them. But now I was with Joe, and I knew we'd get on fine, that like Patrick and Becky, he was someone who would look after me, someone I could trust completely.



“Knick Knack, Paddywack”

Joe Mahoney didn't live in a house, not any more. He lived in a barge, on the canal. He'd been living there for nearly two years, and in all that time he'd lived there alone. This was the first time he'd ever invited anyone else on board. In fact, one way or another, Joe had been living alone for very much longer than that. He'd got accustomed to being on his own, and was wondering, as he drove home in the Tattyvan with Paddywack sitting beside him looking out of the window, whether he'd really done the right thing in taking him on.

It had been on the spur of the moment. He was still trying to work out why he'd agreed to it quite so easily, quite so quickly. Maybe it had been meant, he thought, fated in some way. After all, this was his last day on the road with the Tattyvan, the end of an era for him, and the beginning of another. There was something else though. The dog had a familiar look about him, almost as if old Paddywack had come back from the grave – not a lurcher maybe, but a greyhound was close enough. He had the same gentle look in his eye. And perhaps in the back of his mind was the thought that for what he was going to have to do, it would be good not to be alone. He hadn't been looking forward to the days that lay ahead, not one bit. It was just something that had to be done. Now at least he'd have someone to talk to, someone to be with.

Joe looked at him sideways and the dog looked back at him, as if waiting for him to say something. So he did say something. “Normally,” Joe began, “normally I talk to myself, and not because I'm mad, not much anyway. It's because I like the sound of a voice, any voice. It's silences I don't like. Marion and me, we used to chat away all the time, and I miss that. I like the radio, like the sound of the water lapping around the barge, the ducks and the Canada geese – bit too noisy sometimes, they are, especially first thing in the morning. I expect you'd like to talk if you could, wouldn't you? But since you can't, I'll have to do the talking for the both of us, won't I?” The dog was licking his lips and panting. He seemed to be smiling, and he seemed to be listening too.

“I know what you're thinking, Paddywack. You're thinking: ‘Who is this funny old bloke driving around in a van that looks like a giant potato.’ You don't know the first thing about me, do you? So here it comes: potted history of Joe Mahoney, otherwise known as the Tattyman. Age sixty-nine. Car mechanic, learned it in the army, fixing Land Rovers, lorries, that sort of thing. Mr Fixit,

Marion used to call me – she called me a lot of other stuff too, come to think of it.” He chuckled then.

“I had this shed out at the back of the house, my workshop, and she’d ring the bell when it was time for tea. Sometimes I wouldn’t hear it because I was always sawing or planing or drilling. Then I’d come in a bit late, and we’d have a right old row. But we fixed that too. ‘Never let the sun go down on a quarrel,’ she’d say, and we never did. She’d get mad at me because the tea was cold. Could she get mad at me!”

His laughter turned suddenly to tears. “Don’t take any notice. I’ve done quite a bit of crying over the past few years, I can’t seem to stop myself. Silly old fool I am. Well, she went and got ill, didn’t she? Parkinson’s disease it was. Not much at first – her head shook a little that’s all. But then later when it got bad, she needed a lot of looking after. That’s when I had to give up the regular job in the garage, and bought the Tattyvan – so I could be my own boss. I’d only go out in the Tattyvan when she was well enough to leave. Things worked out fine too, for a while. But then she got worse and she could see I wasn’t coping any more. I said it was fine, but she wouldn’t listen. She insisted. She said she’d go into Fairlawns, the nursing home down the road, and we had a bit of a row about that too. But she talked me round, like she always did.

“Anyway, Fairlawns turned out to be the best place in the world for her. Mrs Bellamy runs it like a ship, but she’s a good and kind captain. Lovely caring people up there. Nothing was ever too much trouble. The trouble was, the Tattyvan wasn’t bringing in enough money – I just wasn’t out on the road often enough. That was part of the problem anyway. Couldn’t pay the bills. Clever with engines, hopeless with money, that’s me.

“So with money running short, I had to sell the house – I didn’t like being there without Marion anyway. And that’s when I bought the barge, bought it for a song. Never told her. There was no point. Her memory had gone – sometimes she didn’t even know who I was. It was a funny thing; she talked a lot about Paddywack, asked about him a lot, asked why I never brought him in to see her – and he’d been dead for years, five or six years at least by this time. But he stayed alive in her head right to the end. Maybe she was right after all, maybe old Paddywack didn’t die. He was just resting and now he’s come back as you, if you see what I’m saying. She’d like that. She’d like you.”



Joe parked the van in its usual place under the trees down by the canal, and let Paddywack out. He locked the van, and then patted it affectionately. “Been good to me, this old thing. ‘My brilliant idea’, I called it. Marion said I was mad, ‘off my trolley’, she said, I remember. But she had to laugh when she saw it.”

The van was an old Bedford camper van, about forty years old. Joe had bought it for £150, restored it and done it up as his Tattyvan. He’d found an old Victorian oven in the same scrap yard where he’d discovered the van, and installed it in the back, built a serving counter with an opening hatch at one side and a little kitchen along the other, with a new sink and worktop too, and room for the gas cylinder underneath. But the best thing about it wasn’t the ingenious potato baking technology, but the van itself. Joe had transformed it into one huge baked potato on wheels, with its own headlights and wipers, with its own chimney. He’d made and painted his own sign: “Mr Tattyman, Best baked potatoes in the whole world. Choice of fillings, £3 each.” He’d hook it up on the side of the van whenever he found a pitch, on industrial estates, outside shopping centres and schools, at fêtes and carnivals, but most often outside the hospital

because it wasn't too far from Fairlawns Nursing Home.

It was Marion who had first named it the Tattyvan, and named him Mr Tattyman too. After Marion first went into Fairlawns the business had gone quite well, for a while. Joe could be out in his Tattyvan for most of the day. It had novelty appeal, fun appeal. But the truth was there were never enough customers to make it pay, and Joe didn't like to put up the price of the potatoes because he thought the children wouldn't be able to afford them if he did – it was children outside school gates who made up at least half his customers.

But Joe didn't do it just for the money. He loved getting in his van every morning, being out there on the road; loved serving his regular customers who, like Lynn at the hospital, very soon became his friends. One of his favourite pitches had been the Fairlawns Nursing Home itself. His visits proved to be the highlight of the day for the old people. Every time he came to see Marion, several of them would come out and buy one of his potatoes. Then he'd go up and sit with Marion for a while afterwards before going home to his barge.

The barge had been a complete wreck when he'd bought it, rotting and rusting away and quite unable to move from its mooring. Joe had renovated it throughout and rebuilt the engine. And now, at long last, it was finished.

"There it is, Paddywack," he said proudly. "Your new home. What d'you think? I've called her *The Lady Marion* – seemed the right name. I started up the engine for the first time last week, and it works too, works a treat. Soon as I've done what I've got to do, done what I promised her, I'm going to move the potato oven from the van into the barge. We'll sell the Tattyvan, and then off we go, free as the birds. That's how we're going to live. We're going to chunter about all over the country, up and down the canals, tie up whenever we feel like it, wherever we want, and sell our potatoes to keep the pennies coming in. We won't get rich, but we'll do all right. I've worked it all out." He bent down and stroked Paddywack. "Till an hour or two ago I was going to do this alone. Some things just happen along. You just happened along, and I'm very glad you did. Come on board, old son, and I'll show you round."

Paddywack soon curled up on the chair by the wood-burning stove and looked about him. The welcome smell of cooking was filling the barge. He lifted his nose and savoured it. "It's bacon," said Joe, laughing. "I hope you like it, because I eat an awful lot of it. You can have some of my rinds too. I've made them nice and crispy. It's going to be a very long day tomorrow. From now on until it's over, every day's going to be very busy, and very long too, and the nights even longer still, I expect. You'll be wondering what I'm going on about,

won't you. Since you'll be with me, I reckon you've got a perfect right to know. Come and get your bacon first. I've got digestive biscuits too. It's what I live on, bacon butties and brown sauce and digestive biscuits. But no potatoes. Never touch baked potatoes. Now there's a secret never to be told. Mr Tattyman hates his baked potatoes!"



Joe told him then all there was to tell about the promise he'd made to Marion. It had been one of the very last times Marion had recognised him. Joe was reading aloud to her, *Gone with the Wind*, her favourite book, when she interrupted, looking him straight in the eye. "Don't you let them do it, Joe," she whispered. "Promise you won't let them do it. Promise."

"I'll do what I can," Joe had told her, but that wasn't good enough.

She became quite agitated. "No, they mustn't close it. Miss Carter, my friends, what would happen to all my friends? You must promise." So he had, and there was no going back on it now.

Of course everyone at Fairlawns had talked about little else for months, ever since the article first appeared in the local newspaper. Many of the old people had become very anxious and upset. Miss Carter, the oldest of them at ninety-six and wheelchair bound, was usually full of the joys of life. But she had hardly spoken a word since the threatened closure was announced. She simply sat,

staring into space, lost in deep sadness.

The Council was closing the nursing home down because it was too small – only a dozen beds – and the building was too old and dilapidated. It just wasn't "cost effective". That it was a much loved home to twelve old people, a place where they belonged, where they were wonderfully cared for, and where all their friends were, appeared to be of little concern to the Council. Fairlawns would close and everyone would be dispersed to other nursing homes, if others could be found, or if not, then to hospital. There had been thousands of letters of protest sent to the Council, and even to the Prime Minister. Deidre Besant, their member of Parliament, had pleaded to have Fairlawns kept open, in the House of Commons, on television and radio. She had done her best. Relatives, Joe among them, had picketed local councillors. Doctors and nurses were unanimous in their support: to close a nursing home, that was so well run, and when the need for such places was growing all the time, would be a disaster, they said. Newspaper reporters and photographers had been in and out of Fairlawns for months, interviewing staff and patients. The whole community was against closing it down. Yet nothing and no one seemed to be able to prevent it from happening.

Joe handed Paddywack the last of the digestive biscuits. "I had my promise to keep," he went on. "So if there was a protest, I was there. I organised the support group, collected signatures. Almost everyone who bought a potato off the Tattyvan signed the petition. I got over 15,000 signatures. Towards the end, when Marion was drifting in and out of consciousness, I'd tell her how well it was all going, how many more signatures we'd got, how the Council would have to listen now. I really hope she heard me, but if I'm honest with myself, I'm not sure she did. Sometimes I think it was a good thing she died when she did, because nothing came of any of it. A week after she died the Council announced the date they were closing Fairlawns down. And that's when I really got angry, when I decided to do it, to pack up the Tattyvan for good and to make one last effort, to protest full-time, until they changed their minds. And by now it wasn't just because of the promise. Like I said, I was angry. That place, those people, they kept Marion happy. The old people were like brothers and sisters to her, like a family, Miss Carter in particular. And the staff did all they could for her, I reckon I owed them. So I've got my tent, my sleeping bag, my little stove, and tomorrow is the big day, the day it all begins."

He emptied the biscuit crumbs into his cupped hand, and let Paddywack lick them off. "Don't you worry, old son, we'll have plenty of biscuits in the tent,

and plenty of bacon butties too. I want to be out there at Fairlawns by first light tomorrow morning. We'll pitch our tent, put up our banner and stay there for as long as it takes."

The next morning, drivers on their way to work in town saw a bright orange tent pitched on the wide grass verge by the road in front of the Fairlawns Nursing Home. Beside it sat an old man in a tatty-looking duffle coat and a blue and white striped bobble hat, and right next to him stood a greyhound almost the same golden colour as the leaves on the tree above them. Behind them and above them, strung out between the branches hung a huge banner. Painted across it in multi-coloured letters was: SITTING HERE TILL FAIRLAWNS IS SAVED! HOOT TO SAVE FAIRLAWNS!

Hardly a driver passed by without hooting that morning. It was a great and hopeful start, and it got better. By lunchtime every single one of the old people from Fairlawns had made their way down the drive at one time or another, to the grass verge to see them, even Miss Carter in her motorised wheelchair. Suddenly she seemed to be her old self again. It was a sunny autumn day, a bit blustery with leaves flying, but still warm enough for each of them to stay there with Joe and Paddywack for a few minutes. They'd wave in delight as the cars and lorries drove by, hooting and honking their support. The matron, Mrs Bellamy, was there most of the time, making sure that none of the old people stayed out there too long or got too cold. It was Mrs Bellamy's idea to invite Paddywack back into the house.



"Look at him, Joe, he's shivering from head to tail," she said. "We'll have him inside for a while and get him out of this wind."

Paddywack found himself being led up to the house and into the warmth of

the sitting room where he at once became the centre of attention. He lay down in front of the fire and toasted himself, until all his shivers were gone. Whenever the old people called him over he would go and stand there beside them, and be stroked and adored for a while. For food he simply followed his nose to the kitchen and waited there until someone noticed him and fed him, which sooner or later they always did. And sometimes, when he heard the front door open, he'd nip out and trot down the drive to be with Joe again. He'd sit down right against Joe's leg, resting his head on his knee. He could doze easily that way, and as Joe already knew, Paddywack loved dozing even more than eating.

So for the next few days Paddywack was in and out of Fairlawns all day long, a pure delight for the old people to whom he was a new and welcome distraction, and a great source of joy. And what they loved best of all was to see him running, on the great wide lawn under the tree of heaven. Mrs Bellamy would throw sticks for Paddywack to chase after and retrieve, and sometimes Paddywack's sheer zest for running would take over and he'd forget the stick and go off on several laps of honour, racing round and round the tree of heaven, faster and faster, scattering fallen leaves. All the old people watching from the sitting room window would burst into applause. He made them feel young again, feel hopeful again. And for Joe, even as cold and tiredness set in, Paddywack was becoming the best of companions, a true and trusted friend. They'd spend the nights huddled together in the tent, keeping each other warm as best they could.

To begin with, the weather was kind to them, but then the rain came, and with it the first real cold of the winter. The tent gave them some protection from the wind and the rain, but Joe couldn't hide away in it for too long. To make the protest effective he knew he had to be out there where he could be seen. He had to be waving back at his supporters as they passed by. There were days when the weather was really foul, when Joe knew the cold and the wet were just too much for Paddywack. Then he would ask Mrs Bellamy if Paddywack could spend most of the day inside Fairlawns. But despite the warmth of the fire, and all the adoring attention of the old people, Paddywack would escape whenever he could and run down to the grass verge to be with Joe again. Joe loved him for that. The two would snuggle together under Joe's waterproof cape, with just their faces showing.



To pass the time Joe counted the number of cars and lorries, and bicycles too, that hooted and honked and tinkled as they passed. Counting lifted his spirits, because more and more of them were doing just that. Support was growing. Every day, whatever the weather, more passers-by stopped to talk and pet Paddywack, and every day more journalists or radio interviewers or television crews would come by. And through it all Mrs Bellamy saw to it that Joe and Paddywack were well supplied with food from the kitchen in Fairlawns, so that Joe only had to use his stove for brewing up hot, sweet tea, which he did on the hour, every hour. That routine helped, because it was something to look forward to, something to warm him through, and he needed that badly. However hard he tried, Joe found it difficult to keep warm. The more the cold crept into his bones, the more he began to feel it was hopeless, despite all the support and attention the protest was getting. At times he would have given way completely to despair, had not Paddywack been there beside him, had not the old people kept coming down to be with them.

Despite all Mrs Bellamy's best efforts to keep them inside, there would always be one of the old people from Fairlawns to keep Joe company through his vigil, to wave back at the cars and to talk to the press. There was a rota now, which they kept to diligently. Each one would stay for about half an hour, and then be replaced by another, no matter how hard the icy wind blew. It became a point of honour now for them never to let Joe and Paddywack be alone out there.

This was all Miss Carter's idea, which is why Mrs Bellamy had to go along with it, despite all her concerns for the health of the old people. No one argued with Miss Carter – Miss Carter had been a headmistress for forty years. But the truth was of course that Mrs Bellamy didn't want to argue with any of them. She felt too much solidarity with them, too much admiration for them. She was simply worried for their health. She made absolutely sure there was always one of the staff with them, and that they were always swathed in blankets and clutching hot water bottles.

A week went by and it was clear by now that two or three of the old people were suffering. Bob Larkin in particular was so weak one morning after a night of coughing that he could scarcely get out of bed. When Doctor Morrison was called to see him, he said that he had a chest infection, and must on no account go outside. He also insisted that Mrs Bellamy had to put a stop to all this before someone caught pneumonia. When Mrs Bellamy said she was powerless to do anything about it, Doctor Morrison called all the old people together in the sitting room. He gave them a severe lecture. "I respect what you are trying to do," he said as he finished. "I admire your courage and your determination. But this has gone far enough. We've already got Mr Larkin sick upstairs. You go out there in this weather and you're risking your lives. I can't be held responsible if you go on like this."

Miss Carter lifted her head slowly. "Maybe," she said in a steely voice. "Maybe. But they're our lives to risk, Doctor, aren't they?"

Mrs Bellamy tried again to persuade them once the doctor had gone, but it was no use. She went outside after that and sat with Joe and Paddywack by the tent. "It's you they're rallying around, Joe," she said. "You and Paddywack. I know you're doing it for Marion. But she wouldn't want this, I know she wouldn't. She'd say what I'm saying, that you should call it a day. You've done all you could, Joe. No one could have done more."

"Believe you me, Mrs Bellamy," Joe replied, "there's nothing I'd like better than to get back to my snug little barge and be warm again. It's a long time since I've felt my feet. And I'll be honest with you – there's been plenty of times when I've felt like giving up. But it's like Marion used to say: 'You're an obstinate old goat, Joe.' I am too. I started this thing, Mrs Bellamy, and I'm going to finish it. Sitting out here with Paddywack, I've had a lot of time to think things over, and the more I think, the angrier I get. They've got no right to close you down, to ruin the lives of everyone up at Fairlawns, and I won't let them. It's a matter of principle, as I see it. We've got to look after our old people.

They've earned it. They deserve it. So, unless the old people themselves tell me to stop, me and Paddywack we'll sit this out. We'll stay here till we make the Council change their minds. That's all there is to it."

Mrs Bellamy knew there was no point in arguing any more, that Joe had quite made up his mind. "All right," she said, "but from now on, you will spend your nights inside, in the warm. I can't sleep thinking of you out here all night. The cold air out here can't be good for you, nor for Paddywack. No arguments now."

So that's how it was arranged. Each night, Joe and Paddywack would pack up the tent, take down the banner and walk up the drive to Fairlawns. They had a spare room there, often used for visiting relatives – Joe had slept in it once or twice before, when Marion had been very poorly. A warm bath and a warm bed each night revived Joe's strength, and his spirits too. He would fall asleep almost at once, Paddywack stretched out beside him. Every night Joe felt so tired that he wanted to sleep for ever. When he woke each morning he would lie there for a while dreading the thought of another long day of cold ahead of him. But Paddywack would be standing by the door, waiting for him, tail wagging. Joe knew well enough what Paddywack was telling him. "Up you get, lazybones. We've got to be out there." So he'd drag himself out of bed and do what he was told. He'd pull on his clothes, get out there, pitch the tent, put up the banner, and settle down for another day of waving at supporters, of brewing tea, of counting cars.

But every day seemed an eternity now to Joe, colder and more uncomfortable than the one before. It was becoming clearer with every passing hour that not so many cars were hooting now, that the novelty of the protest was wearing thin. He began to lose heart. He was looking grey and drawn. Mrs Bellamy was worried about him. She brought Doctor Morrison down to see him. The doctor did his very best to persuade Joe to call a halt to the whole thing. No one was paying attention any more, he told him. There was just no point in going on.

It was while the doctor was down there with him that Paddywack suddenly stood up and trotted away up the drive, his tail wagging. Then Joe saw what Paddywack had seen. Miss Carter was coming down the drive in her motorised wheelchair. She was not alone. Mrs Bellamy counted them, they were all there, every one of them – even Bob Larkin who had got up from his sickbed. Out of Fairlawns they came, some walking arms linked, some on Zimmer frames, others in wheelchairs pushed by staff, a slow procession making its way down towards them. Paddywack was gambolling among them, barking with excitement.

“What’s going on, Miss Carter?” Mrs Bellamy demanded.

“We’ve been talking,” Miss Carter replied, “and we have all of us decided that from now on our place is down here alongside Joe and Paddywack. After all, Joe and Paddywack are doing this for us, for all of us at Fairlawns, and we can’t just pop out for a few minutes to be with them. We have to be here like he is, all the time. We can’t play at this any longer. And do you know who gave us this idea? It was Paddywack. He used to come inside with us, in the warm where he liked it, where we like it too. But then he stopped coming, didn’t he? He decided that he had to be out here with Joe, whatever the weather. Well, so have we. What we’d like to ask you to do, Mrs Bellamy, if you wouldn’t mind, is to bring out those wicker chairs from the conservatory for us, and maybe a cushion or two, and lots of blankets. We’ll be fine.” Mrs Bellamy was bursting to protest. “It’s no use,” Miss Carter went on. “We took a vote, didn’t we? It was unanimous. We’re going to come out here and sit with Joe and Paddywack, all day and every day, for as long as it takes, until the Council change their minds.”

“You can’t!” cried the doctor.

“We most certainly can, Doctor,” Miss Carter told him. “And we will too, you just watch us. Are you with us, Mrs Bellamy?”

Mrs Bellamy was in tears by now. It was several moments before she regained her composure. “Well, Doctor,” she said, wiping her eyes. “I don’t think they’ve left us much choice, have they? So I suppose we’re just going to have to make the best of it. I suggest you warn the hospital and the emergency services what’s happening here. They’ll need to know, just in case.” She turned to Miss Carter then. “And, to answer your question, I am with you, of course I am. I always have been, you know that. We’ll make you all as comfortable as we can, chairs and blankets like you said, but we’ll need heaters and music too. Warm and happy. That’s what we’ve got to be. Warm and happy. We’ll play all the old songs, from the Beatles to Vera Lynn, all the ones you like, and we can sing along, can’t we? That’ll keep us happy.”

Miss Carter drove her chair over to where Joe and Paddywack were sitting, swathed in blankets outside the tent. “You don’t mind if we join you, do you?” she said.

“You’re mad, Miss Carter, all of you are. Mad and wonderful.” He reached out and took her hand. “You’ll catch your death out here, you know that?”

“Outside, inside. What’s the difference?” Miss Carter replied.

Things happened very quickly after that. Mrs Bellamy rang up the local radio and told them what had happened. The word was out. All the old people of

Fairlawns had joined the protest, and they weren't going to give up, not ever. Overhead patio heaters arrived from Mantova, the Italian restaurant in Fore Street. More blankets and duvets and pillows were brought in from the families all around than they knew what to do with. An ambulance came and parked nearby, on permanent stand-by. The television cameras arrived again, but national television this time, and soon a whole posse of reporters. Paddywack became the centre of attention. It was Miss Carter who told them that Paddywack was their mascot. "He's not leaving and we're not leaving," she declared, not till the Council change their minds."

The police were there too, and in numbers, as a huge crowd began to gather. And all the while the old people sat there, wrapped in their blankets alongside Joe, and Paddywack would walk from one to the other, stopping by each of them for a few minutes, to rest his head on their laps – and to be given a biscuit. By now the cars weren't just hooting, and the lorries weren't just honking. Some of them were actually stopping, and the drivers would get out and come up on to the grass verge to shake hands. More police arrived because of the traffic congestion, and because the crowds all along the pavements were spilling out on to the road.



A police inspector came up to speak to the old people and tried to persuade them to end their protest. He said they were causing a public nuisance, that he'd have to take action if they didn't move. "What are you going to do?" Miss Carter asked him. "Are you going to arrest us? Are you going to arrest Paddywack

too?” And when they started up their singing again, he had to retreat. It was a song they all knew, an old favourite.

Miss Carter had suggested they should sing it, because of Paddywack of course, but also because everyone at Fairlawns knew it had been Marion’s favourite song:

This old man, he played one,

He played knick knack on my drum,

With a knick knack paddywack,

Give a dog a bone,

This old man came rolling home!

They sang it and they sang it, over and over. And then the whole crowd was joining in, belting it out up and down the road.

Soon dozens of relatives had turned up, to support the protest. A few of them did try to persuade the old people to go back indoors, but none of them would. They stayed right where they were, and many of their relatives and friends were so inspired that they stayed on with them, in solidarity. As the streetlights came on and the evening darkened, everyone began to feel the first nip of frost in the air. Mrs Bellamy made a statement to all the gathered reporters. “We’re all going inside now,” she said, “because it’s getting too cold. But we’ll be out again in the morning, you can be sure of that.” And as they left, the crowd clapped and cheered them all the way up the drive.

In the warmth of the house, those that could stay awake watched themselves on the television news that evening, and that’s when they discovered just what an impact their protest had had, and also what was still going on under the glare of the floodlights right outside their front door. The world’s press was there now, and hundreds of local people were still gathered on the grass verge. It was Lynn, the paramedic from the hospital, that they happened to be interviewing.

“What you maybe don’t know,” she was saying, “is that Joe Mahoney’s wife, Marion, was looked after in Fairlawns for nearly five years, until she died a couple of months ago. He knows better than anyone how good this place is, and what a crime it would be to close it down. So do I, so does everyone here. And

don't think he'll give up, because he won't, nor will any of them." She was looking straight into the camera. "And if you're watching up there in Fairlawns, good on you! Good on you, Joe! Good on you, Paddywack! We're all with you, the whole town." And another great cheer went up. And then they weren't cheering any more, they were singing. It was *Knick Knack Paddywack*, and they were singing it out so loud that the reporter had to shout to make himself heard.

"We asked the Council if they had anything to say, but they refused to make anyone available this evening for comment."

Heartening as all this was Joe found it difficult that night to keep his spirits up. He knew that the old people couldn't sustain their protest for very long, that there was a limit to their endurance. Many of them were very frail. All night long he lay awake, agonising about it. He decided to give it one last day, and then call it off if the Council hadn't changed their mind by the evening.

The next morning, after breakfast, as Joe and Paddywack led the old people down the drive, Joe saw there were hundreds of supporters waiting for them, gathered on the grass verge and all along the pavement below. Some of them were holding up a new banner that read. "Paddywack for Prime Minister!" There was more clapping and whistling and whooping, and then everyone started singing *Knick Knack Paddywack* all over again – it really had become the anthem of the protest. It was all a bit much for Paddywack, whose ears were twitching constantly with anxiety. He thrust his head in under Joe's hand for reassurance. The reassurance was mutual. As the song rang out, as he felt Paddywack there right beside him, Joe began to be hopeful once again. But an hour later, with all the exultation and excitement over, with the cold gnawing at him, hope gave way to despair. He glanced across at all the old people, heard their wheezing and their coughing, and saw the suffering in their faces. He knew then he had to bring this to an end, and soon, that some of them might not last out the day.



The crowd was still there in vast numbers all that morning, and so was the press. There were vans with satellite dishes all down the road now. Everyone was watching and waiting. Joe was just brewing up again when he looked up and he saw the policeman – it was the same inspector as the day before – come striding across the grass verge towards him. He had a piece of paper in his hand.

“What’s that?” Joe asked. “A warrant for my arrest?”

The police inspector shook his head. “You’d better read it,” he said, handing it to Joe. It was a press release.

“Fairlawns Nursing Home. After due and careful consideration, and in the light of the strength of local feeling on this issue, the Council has decided to cancel plans for the closure of Fairlawns.”

Joe read it twice, just to be sure there was no mistake, that it really was true. Then he read it aloud, loud enough for everyone to hear.

The cheer that went up was mighty. Total strangers hugged one another. Mrs Bellamy, who was not generally a hugging sort of person, went up and hugged the police inspector, because no one else had.



“What was that for?” he asked.

“Because it’s a great moment,” she told him, “and because you brought the good news. Mind you, if you’d brought bad news, I’d have wrung your neck.”

Cynical old reporters shook their heads and wiped their eyes. Joe himself was so relieved and so happy as he went to thank all the old people one by one, but he could tell that Paddywack just wanted to get away and have some peace and quiet. He could feel him hiding behind his legs, nudging him, and pushing his head into his hand.

He bent down to stroke him. “You hate all this noise, don’t you?” he said. “But at least it’s a happy noise. Don’t you worry, all this fuss and bother will soon be over, and then we can go back to the barge. It’ll be just the two of us then, all right?”

But the fuss and bother was not over as soon as Joe might have hoped. Back in Fairlawns there were doctors and nurses everywhere, examining every one of the old people to make sure that none of them was suffering any serious aftereffects from the whole experience. One or two were finding it difficult to get warm again and were taken off to hospital with suspected hypothermia. When everything had settled down a bit, Mrs Bellamy and Miss Carter insisted – and they would listen to no argument about it – that Joe should stay on in Fairlawns for a few days, at least until he was strong enough to leave. “And we will decide when that will be,” said Miss Carter very firmly.

In fact Joe didn't mind one bit, and in the end, neither did Paddywack. There could never have been a more adored dog in all the world. He revelled in all the loving attention, luxuriated in the warmth of the fire and was offered biscuits almost constantly. Joe and Paddywack were the heroes of the hour, and both were spoiled rotten by everyone at Fairlawns. It was nearly a week before Mrs Bellamy and Miss Carter declared that Joe was fit enough to be allowed to go home.

On the last night there was a celebration supper, to mark the occasion. Everyone got dressed-up for it. Miss Carter wore pink, as she always did for special occasions. Joe brushed Paddywack until he shone, and Mrs Bellamy tied a spotted handkerchief around his neck. They had candles and wine and music. Miss Carter made a speech thanking Joe and Paddywack for saving Fairlawns. The whole evening was like a long goodbye, and when it was over Joe wanted no more fond farewells. So they left early the next morning while it was still dark, while everyone was still asleep. He crept out of Fairlawns with Paddywack and drove home to the barge.



Joe talked all the way there. "Just you and me now, old son," he said, "and *The Lady Marion*." He looked across at Paddywack, who seemed a bit down. "You miss those old people back at Fairlawns, don't you? Loved you to bits, didn't they?" It was a few moments before he spoke again. "I want you to know something, Paddywack. I may not *oooh* and *aah* over you like they did, but it doesn't mean I don't love you just as much. And with me it's not because you're beautiful, not because of your big brown eyes. It's because you stuck by me.

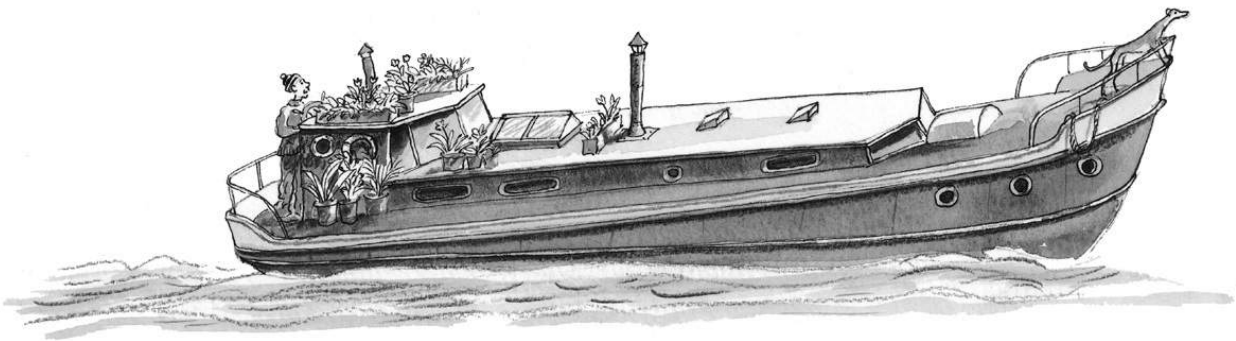
That's what best mates are for, right? My best mate, that's what you were, and that's what you are. That's what we're always going to be, you and me, best mates."

Suddenly Paddywack perked up, ears pricked and happy as if he'd understood every word.

"Time to move on Paddywack. This whole town is full of memories, good memories mostly, but without Marion they'll be sad memories and I reckon they'll only get sadder. I need new places, new faces. Never go back, never go back. I don't know if it's the same for dogs, but I don't think people were made to stay put at all. I mean, look at us, look at all those houses – little boxes every one of them. Most of us live in little boxes like that all our lives. That's what I've done anyway. We don't really want to. It's like we build our own prisons. All right, we may go on holiday from time to time, so we can pretend we're free for a while, but we always come back to our same little box. I don't think that's natural. What about you, Paddywack? Are you the wandering kind? I hope so, I really hope so. Just so long as you don't wander away from me."

It took no more than a few days for Joe to install the potato oven in *The Lady Marion*. He tried to sell the Tattyvan all over town, but being the odd shape it was that didn't prove at all easy. In the end he had to give it away as scrap. "That van was good to me, Paddywack," he said. "Still, it was scrap when I got it, and now it'll be scrap again. That's recycling, nothing to get fussed about I suppose. But all the same it makes me sad."

Paddywack wasn't listening. He was racing off down the towpath towards the barge, scattering ducks and moorhens as he went. He never bothered with the gangplank. He just leaped across on to the deck and made his way at once to the bow, already his favourite place on *The Lady Marion*, where he stood stock still, on the lookout for anything that moved, swans swimming by or dogs on the towpath, or a flurry of ducks flying over.



That same afternoon Joe started the engine and cast off. The barge moved slowly away from the bank and down the canal, Paddywack still on lookout and Joe at the wheel. Day after day, if the weather was fine, that's where Paddywack would be, up on the bow, like a ship's figurehead, searching always for new excitements and new adventures. He loved to watch the world drift by, because the world was always changing around him, there was always something new to see or smell or hope for. Sometimes, if the barge came close enough to the bank and Paddywack felt like a run, he'd leap off on to the towpath and go for a sprint. Any unfortunate rabbit or rat caught out in the open, any cat out hunting, was soon sent scurrying away. And with a bit of luck there could even be another dog to play with or race against. Joe loved watching him as he ran circles round every dog he met.

When they came to locks, Paddywack had a routine – Joe thought it was because he didn't like being left behind on the barge. Paddywack would jump out and go and sit up by the lock gates. From there he would oversee Joe at work, as he opened and shut the gates, manoeuvring *The Lady Marion* in and out. Then, as Joe throttled up again Paddywack would spring back on board, and at once resume his lookout post on the bow.

In the evenings they'd tie up somewhere, mostly in a town or a village if they could, and he would sit there beside Joe as he served his customers their baked potatoes, but he was still on lookout. Any cheesy potato skins dropped on the towpath were very quickly discovered and snaffled up. And when the weather was too miserable to travel, then they'd hunker down in the warmth of the cabin and while away the hours with sleep or bacon butties – and knitting, Joe's new hobby. Paddywack was fascinated with Joe's knitting. He couldn't seem to take his eyes off the clicking needles. "Marion taught me years ago," Joe told him one evening. "She said it was good for mind-eye coordination, keeps your brain alive, she said. But I never really took to it. But then, after she died, I found her needles one day and her wool. So I thought I'd take it up again, and make more bobble hats like mine. We'll sell them, like the tatties. Every little helps."

For a year or more, Joe and Paddywack drifted through the seasons in peace and contentment. Hardly a boat passed them by on the canal without some flattering comment about Paddywack, about how beautiful he looked standing there on the bow, or how graceful and powerful he was as he streaked along the towpath. Joe could have wished for a few compliments about his beloved barge, that he had so painstakingly and meticulously restored. But barge owners, as he was discovering, were rather too proud of their own boats to have much

enthusiasm for anyone else's.

For Joe there were still moments, usually late in the evening, when memories of Marion would come flooding back and his grief took hold of him again. But Paddywack would always be there beside him through these difficult times. He seemed to sense Joe's need for comfort and company and would settle close to his chair, or rest his head on Joe's knee. "I bless the day I found you," Joe told him one night as Paddywack climbed up on to his bunk beside him. "Or did you find me? I don't suppose we'll ever know, will we, old son?"

It happened on an afternoon much like any other. *The Lady Marion* was cruising along the canal into a town, with Paddywack at the bow as usual. Joe called out to him from the wheel. "We'll go under that bridge and the next one, and that'll bring us just about into the centre of town, I reckon. Not far Paddywack. We could do good tatty business here. Might even sell a bobble hat or two." As they passed under the first bridge Paddywack started barking, the echo of it loud all around them. Joe knew there was nothing unusual about this. Paddywack loved barking as they went under bridges, but this time he didn't stop when they came out into the sunlight again, and Joe thought that was odd. There was the sound of children playing nearby. Joe looked back over his shoulder and saw a school playground by the bridge, full of raucous children running around. By now Paddywack wasn't just barking, he was yelping and tearing up and down the deck, frantic to get off.

There was a strange smell in the air, Joe noticed, sweet and sour like the brown sauce he loved on his bacon butties, and Joe wondered where it was coming from. Ahead of them, about 400 metres away was the next bridge. There was a pair of swans swimming side by side towards it, with half a dozen cygnets bobbing along behind them. Joe thought then it might be the swans Paddywack was getting so worked up about. Or maybe it was the sound of the children in the playground that was exciting him. He noticed Paddywack stopping from time to time to lift his nose and scent the air. But then he'd be racing up and down the deck again, barking wildly, his tail whirling. Joe had never seen him so agitated. He called out to him, trying to calm him down, but Paddywack wasn't listening.

Joe could see what Paddywack was going to do. There was nothing whatever he could do about it. There was no time. All he could do was watch as Paddywack took a running jump and landed in the canal.



By the time Joe had managed to slow the barge down, Paddywack was already clambering out of the water and haring off down the towpath. Joe shouted after him, but he knew it was pointless, that Paddywack was too far away by now to hear him. He could only look on in horror as Paddywack bounded up the steps by the bridge, and then ran straight out into the road. A huge lorry was coming over the bridge. Joe heard the blast of a horn and the screeching of tyres.

“Paddywack!” he cried. “Oh my God, Paddywack!”



It was cold in the water, but I hardly noticed it. I was scrambling out and running, running where my legs took me, knowing Patrick would be waiting for me. I was up the steps then and dashing across the road. I didn’t care about the cars all around me, or the lorry bearing down on me. I knew the way home and nothing would stop me getting there. I was going home. I was going back to Patrick. I raced along the pavement, dodging and weaving as I went. Everything around me was so familiar, the trees, the lamp posts, the houses, then I was in the street where I once lived, where Patrick lived.

The gate was open when I got there, but I hurdled the garden wall anyway as I always used to do. I was leaping up and down outside the front door, scrabbling and scratching at it, and barking, barking, barking. But Patrick didn’t come. No

one came. I decided I'd wait. He'd be bound to come back soon. So I sat down by the door and listened for Patrick's voice, listened for his footsteps. But all the voices I heard were strangers' voices and all the footsteps, strangers' footsteps. There were one or two who stopped to stare at me for a while. One of them was a boy with a little terrier on a lead who was trying to pull away from him, straining to come through the front gate and meet me. I knew that terrier at once – we'd chased each other around up in the park in the old days, I was sure of it. So I went after him.

When they crossed the road I crossed with them. The boy tried to shoo me away, but I ignored him. And all the while the terrier was looking back at me, often having to be dragged along. Only when they started up the hill did I recognise exactly where I was. Only then did I know for sure where they were going, and where I was going too. I didn't need them as pathfinders any more. I knew my own way. I raced past them, through the wide gates at the top of the road, and out into the park, the place Patrick always took me to play. The place I loved best in the whole world. I knew every path, every waste bin, every bench. There were children everywhere, dogs everywhere, and there at the top of the hill ahead of me was the bench I remembered, our bench, Patrick's bench, my bench. There was someone up there, but I was still too far away to see who it was. I galloped up that hill, faster, faster with every stride.

Only now I wasn't alone. I had another dog with me, running along beside me, silver-grey and shining. And he was fast, as fast as I was. Neck and neck we raced one another up towards the bench. And there was Patrick waiting for me, just as he always had been.

"You've found a friend then?" he said. Patrick was bigger than I remembered him, broader, taller, and his voice had changed. But it was Patrick all right. I leaned myself up against him, and felt his hand on my head, smoothing my ears gently. "A friendly friend too," he went on. "I had a greyhound a bit like you once. You're fawn though. He was gold, gold as the sun. He wasn't as big as you are, and you're a bit white round the muzzle too. And he was fast, really fast, a lot faster than you." He turned his attention to the silver-grey dog who'd jumped up and was on two legs now, his paws on Patrick's chest. "He was faster than you too, you big softie," he said, shrugging him off. "Go on, now you've found someone your own size, go and play with him. Off you go. Go on boy! Go, go, go!"

They were the words I was waiting for. Off I went, off we went together, the silver-grey dog and me, racing round and round the top of the hill. I was loving it

and hating it all at the same time. Patrick didn't recognise me as I recognised him. But I was not forgotten, he had remembered me. I ran up to him and bounded about him, barking at him, trying to make him know me. But it was the other dog he knew, the other dog he loved, not me.

He threw sticks for us, and time and again I dropped them at his feet and sat down to wait for him to throw them again, just as I'd always done. Still he did not know me.

I was racing after yet another stick when I saw Joe come puffing up the path towards us. He was so tired out he could hardly speak. All he could say was, "Paddywack, Paddywack!"

"Is he yours?" Patrick asked him. "Run off, did he?" Joe nodded, still quite unable to speak. "He's been here for half an hour or so," Patrick went on. "I once had a greyhound like him, must be over five years ago now. He ran off too."

By now Joe had recovered a little. "He's never run off before, I don't understand it. It's not like him at all. I've been looking all over. Someone down by the pond said I should come and have a look in the park. There's always dogs up there, dozens of dogs, and dogs like other dogs. He was right, wasn't he? Thank goodness."

For a moment Joe and Patrick said nothing more. They looked at us lying there at their feet, panting our hearts out. "Where did you get yours?" Patrick asked.

"I guess we just found each other," Joe replied. "Strange meeting really, when I think back on it. Just the luckiest thing. Right time, right dog, right place. What about you?"

"Same with me, I suppose," said Patrick. "When my first dog ran off – Best Mate he was called – I looked everywhere for him. It happened here too, right here in the park. I came back every day for months. I was sure he'd come back. But he never did. He just disappeared. So in the end my dad and me, we went down to the rescue centre. I wanted another greyhound. I like greyhounds. They're the best. I love to watch them run. They run like cheetah-dogs. In fact they're the third fastest animal on earth, after a cheetah and a prong-horned antelope – did you know that? I could watch them and watch them. And they're kind too. I like that." Patrick glanced at his watch. "Homework. I'd better be going, I suppose. See you," he said, and he ran off, the silver-grey dog trotting at his heels.

I watched until they disappeared over the hill, under the trees. I found I wasn't

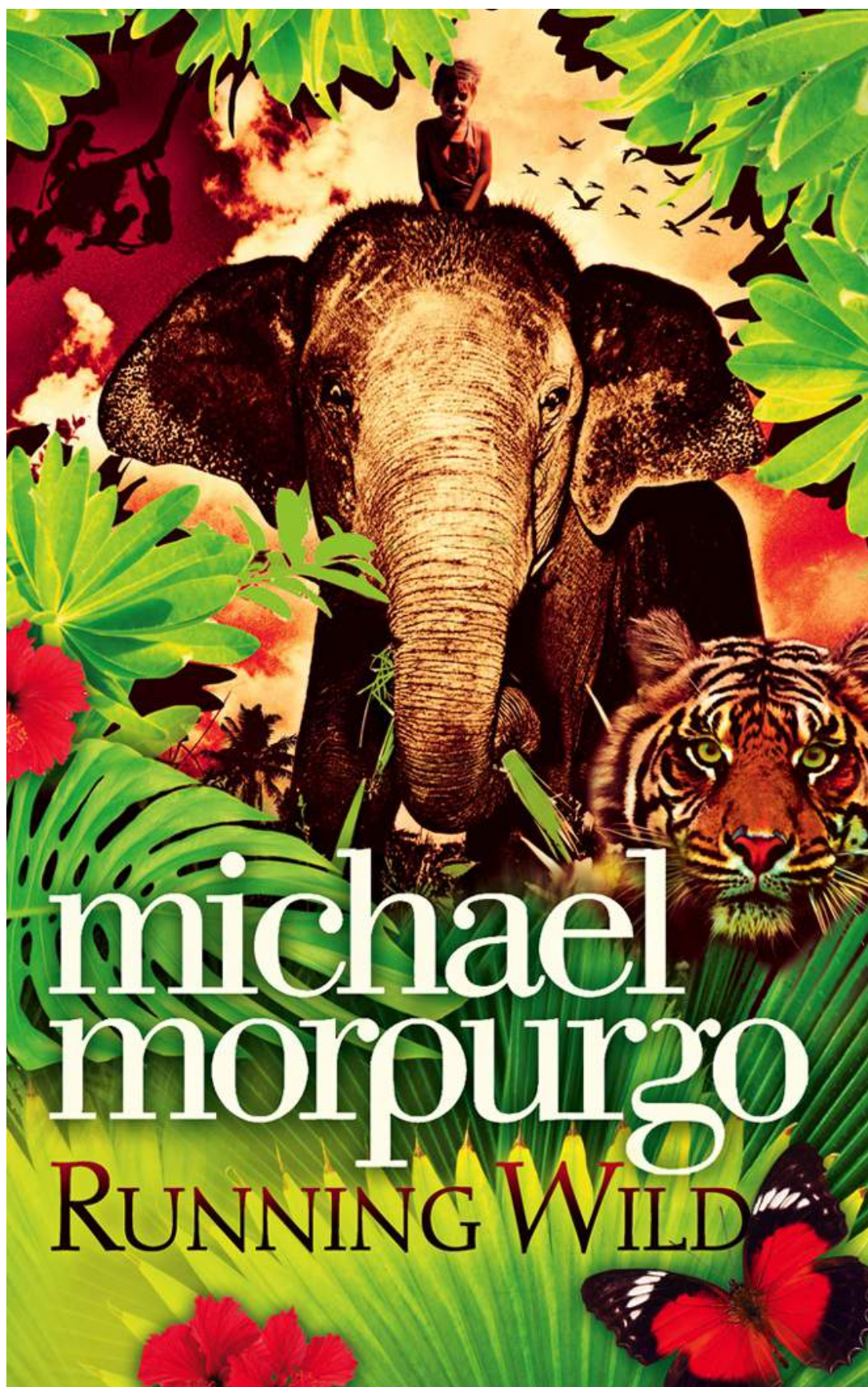
so sad any more. I was just glad I'd seen him.

"Let's go home, Paddywack," said Joe. "Bacon butties for tea, and biscuits for afters. All right?"

As we walked away I looked back over my shoulder, hoping to catch a last glimpse of Patrick, but he was gone.

I miss him, like I miss Alfie, like I miss Becky. But I've got Joe now, and Joe's got me, and we're fine.





michael
morpurgo
RUNNING WILD

ILLUSTRATED BY SARAH YOUNG



HarperCollins *Children's Books*

For Ella, Lottie and Charlie, and in memory of their grandfather, Eddie.

Contents

Dedication

A sudden change of heart

“Look at me, I need a smile”

“No leaves, Oona, I can’t eat leaves”

Tiger, Tiger...

A feast of figs

“He is like God here”

Other One

Burning bright

Sanctuary

Elephant’s child

Postscript

Author’s Note

Post postscript

Deforestation

Orang-utans

Tsunami

Tyger Tyger

Acknowledgements

A sudden change of heart



The sea murmured onto the beach. Beneath me, the elephant walked on over soft and silent sand. The further we went along the beach away from the hotel, away from the distant cries of the swimmers in the sea, the quieter everything became. I was loving the gentle rock and roll of the ride. I closed my eyes and breathed in the peace around me. This was a million miles from everything that had happened, from everything that had brought me here.

It was as I was riding up there on the elephant, swaying in the sun, that Dad's elephant joke came into my mind. Usually I can't remember jokes, but I always remembered this one, maybe because Dad told it so often. I knew it word for word, just as he'd tell it.

"You know the one about the elephant and the bananas, Will?" he'd begin, and without waiting for an answer, off he'd go. "A man and a boy were sitting opposite one another in this railway carriage – they were travelling between Salisbury and London. On his lap, the man had a huge paper bag full of bananas. But soon enough, the boy noticed that something very strange was going on here. The man wasn't eating the bananas. Instead, every few minutes, he'd just stand up, open the window, and throw one of them out. Of course, the boy couldn't understand what he was doing this for. He kept trying to puzzle it out. So in the end, he just had to ask.

"Scuse me," he says, "but could you tell me why you're throwing all those bananas out of the window?"

"To keep the elephants away," replies the man. "Cos elephants is very dangerous, y'know."

"But there aren't any elephants around here anyway," says the boy.

"Course there aren't," the man tells him, throwing yet another banana out of the window. "But that's only cos of my bananas. If I didn't keep doing this,

there'd be millions of them out there, squillions. And elephants is very dangerous, y'know."

I loved that joke, mostly because when Dad was telling it, he'd always be heaving with laughter before he could ever finish it, and I loved to hear Dad's laugh. Whenever he was home it was his laugh that filled the house, brought it alive again.

I didn't want to think about that, because I knew where it would lead, and I didn't want to go there. So I tried to make myself think of a train journey instead, a train journey when Dad hadn't been there. I wanted to keep Dad out of the picture. I didn't want to have to remember, not now, not again. But memories of the train journey with Mum came tumbling out, out of my control and out of sequence, as memories often are, because memories will always become other memories, I suppose – they cannot help themselves.

I always wanted train journeys to go on for ever, and especially this one. I liked trains, the rattle and the rhythm of them. I loved to press my forehead against the cold of the glass, and trace a single raindrop with my finger as it found its way down across the window. I'd be gazing out at the countryside rushing by, at cows and horses scattering away over the fields, at clouds of starlings whirling in the wind, at a formation of geese flying high into the evening sun.



And I'd be on the lookout for wild animals, for foxes or rabbits, or even a deer. A glimpse of just one of these was a marvel to me, the highlight of any train journey, because they hardly ever ran away. They'd just gaze back at me from out there in their wild world, interested perhaps, but quite unconcerned. It was as if they were trying to tell me: we don't mind you being here, just so long as you're passing through, just so long as you leave us alone. I had always longed to be part of their world. For me that momentary glimpse was never enough, always too quickly over.

On this train journey though I had seen no foxes, no deer, not even a rabbit, and that was because I hadn't been looking for them. My mind was elsewhere. I didn't want it to be, but it was. Everything out there was nothing but a blur of grey skies and green fields, interrupted with monotonous regularity by endless passing telegraph poles. None of it was of any interest to me. I wanted this train journey to go on forever, not because I was enjoying it one bit, but simply because I did not want to go where I was going. I did not want to arrive.

I glanced up at Mum sitting beside me, but she did not look back at me. I could see she was lost deep in her thoughts, and I knew well enough what they had to be, that they were much the same as mine, and that it was better not to interrupt them. I regretted again that I'd yelled at her at breakfast that morning. I shouldn't have done it, but it had been the shock of it, the suddenness. She'd just said it, right out of the blue, without any warning at all. "We're going back home, Will, as soon as I've packed the cases. Grandma says she'll drive us to the station."

I tried arguing, but she wouldn't listen. So that was when I yelled at her, and did a runner to the hay-barn, climbing up the stack to the very top. I sat sulking there, till Grandpa came and found me, and fetched me down. Mum was very upset, he told me, and we shouldn't be upsetting her, not after everything that had happened. He was right of course. I hadn't meant to do it, but I'd been so looking forward to staying for Christmas down on the farm with Grandpa and Grandma. It was the house where Dad had grown up, the place we'd always been for every single Christmas of my life, whether Dad was home on leave or not.

But if I'm honest, that wasn't the only reason I'd shouted at her. The truth was that I was dreading everything about going home, and what's more I knew Mum felt the same, which was why it was a complete mystery to me that she was suddenly so anxious to leave. And there was something else I couldn't understand. Before she'd come out with it at breakfast that morning she'd never

even discussed it. She'd just told me. It wasn't like her. Mum always talked things over with me, always.

After all, hadn't she been the one, who only a few weeks before had insisted that it was a good idea to go to stay with Grandpa and Grandma, to get away from home, and the memories, and the ghosts? Hadn't Mum explained to me that she thought we should be with Grandpa and Grandma at this time anyway, because after all, weren't we all going through the same thing, and wouldn't it be good for us to do it together? So why this sudden change of heart?

I gazed blankly out of the train window, trying to work it all out. I thought then it might have been because she had just had enough of Grandma. And it was true that Grandma was never the easiest person in the world to get on with. She did like to organise, to try and tell everyone what to do, what not to do, and what to think even. With Grandma everything had to be just so, and that could be a bit irksome at times, and annoying. But as Mum was forever telling me, that was just how Grandma was and we had to put up with it, like Grandpa did.

No, we couldn't be leaving because of Grandma. It didn't make any sense. But if it wasn't Grandma, what was it then? It certainly wasn't Grandpa, and it certainly wasn't the farm. For Mum and for me, for all of us, it had always been just about the best place in the whole world, and my idea of heaven. I loved being there, whatever the weather. I was up before breakfast with Grandpa, milking the cows, and feeding the calves, and then opening up the hens and geese on the way back to the house for breakfast. Afterwards, it was out on the tractor, with Grandpa again – and driving it sometimes too, when we were far enough away from the farmhouse for Grandma not to be able to spot us. We'd be checking the sheep together, counting the lambs, or mending fences when we had to. We'd be doing whatever it was that needed doing, and doing it together.

And Grandpa was like a walking encyclopedia of nature. He knew all the bird songs, all the plants. He even had a weekly nature column in the local newspaper, so he knew what he was talking about, and I loved to hear him talking about it too. Grandma said one afternoon when Grandpa and I came in for our tea: "Happy as Larry out on the farm, aren't you, Will? Give you half a chance, and I reckon you'd be sleeping in your wellies. You're just like your Grandpa."

She was right about that. For a start Grandpa never said a lot, and nor did I. We knew each other so well that maybe we just didn't need to. Grandpa never mentioned anything about what had happened, except once, when we were down in the milking parlour together, washing down after milking. "Got something to

say to you, Will,” he began. “What I think is this, and I’ve thought a lot about it. In fact these last weeks, I’ve thought about precious little else. When you’ve cut yourself, what you do is you make sure the wound is clean, and you put a plaster on it, don’t you? Then you give it time to heal – if you understand what I’m saying. You don’t keep taking the plaster off and looking at it, because if you do, you’ll just be reminded of how much it hurts. And you don’t keep asking yourself why it had to happen to you in the first place either, because that won’t make it better. Sometimes – and I know it’s not what some people think these days – but sometimes when you’re hurting, I think the less said the better. So you and me, Will, we’ll say no more about it, unless you want to, that is.”

But I didn’t want to, and so between us, nothing was ever said about it again. And in fact, Grandma hardly spoke of it either, not in front of me anyway. It became like an unspoken pact between all of us, to say nothing, and I was glad of it. I knew well enough that they were doing it for me, to spare me the pain. They were trying their very best to take my mind off it.

But the trouble was that it was always there, in the back of our minds, despite all that Grandma and Grandpa were doing to keep everyone busy and happy. And we *were* happy, as happy as it was possible to be, under the circumstances anyway. But as each evening came to an end, and the time came for me to go upstairs to bed, I always began to dread the night ahead of me. One look at Mum’s face told me we were sharing the same dread.

Whether I kept my bedside light on or off made no difference. Lying there in my bed everything would come flooding back, the ache inside me, the pity of it, and worst of all, the awful finality of it. I longed every night for sleep to come, so that I wouldn’t have to remember it all again, so that my mind wouldn’t go over it and churn it all up. But the more I longed for sleep it seemed, the more it was denied me. I’d lie there listening to the murmur of their talk downstairs in the kitchen.

If I tried, I could hear most of what they were saying. I didn’t want to eavesdrop, but sometimes I couldn’t stop myself. I’d hear Mum sobbing again, and Grandma sometimes as well. Soon enough I would find myself crying too, and once I’d started I knew I wouldn’t be able to stop, not until I fell asleep, because everything Mum was saying down there in the kitchen seemed to echo so closely everything I was feeling.

It was her words I was hearing again in my head now, as I rode along the beach on the elephant. Ahead of us a large lizard or iguana skittered away over the sand and disappeared into the shadows of the palm trees. A sea eagle soared

out over the sea. There was so much to see, but my memory would not leave me in peace. I was doing all I could to force myself to live for now, to bask in the joy of the moment, in the beauty of this strange paradise, and for a while I could and I did, but not for long. So I determined that if I was going to have to relive anything in my mind, I would will it to be only the good times: driving the tractor with Grandpa, pulling off a newborn lamb and rubbing the warmth of life into her, seeing the fox padding across High Meadow early one morning.

But instead, all that came to my mind was everything I had overheard Mum saying down in the kitchen only a few nights before. Her words still fell just as heavily on my heart, as when I'd first heard them.

"Why did he have to go and leave us? What am I supposed to tell Will, Grandma? I mean, how can you tell a nine-year-old? How can you explain the stupidity of it? And all the while I have to put a brave face on it, when what I really want to do is scream. I know he was your son, Grandma. I know I shouldn't say it, and I know I shouldn't feel it. But I do feel it. I love your son. Since the first day I set eyes on him I loved him. But I'm so angry with him that sometimes I find myself almost hating him. Isn't that terrible? Isn't it? Back home, I have to pretend to everyone all the time, that it was all in a good cause, that I'm proud of him, and I'm brave, that I'm coping. Well I am proud of him, but I'm not coping, and I'm not brave, and it wasn't a good cause. Tell me why. Will someone tell me why? Why did he have to go? Why did it have to be him?"

When they came up to bed later, and Mum came in to kiss me goodnight as usual, I pretended to be asleep. I was crying silent tears, and when she'd gone out again, they kept on coming. All night long they kept coming. That night, I felt I would drown in sadness.

I knew that if I went on remembering like this I would only be making myself live through the same pain all over again. I wrenched my mind away from where it was taking me. From now on I would recall only the marvellous times, the magical moments that I knew would lift my spirits, that would banish all grieving, that would make me smile. I thought it was working too. I could almost feel Mum's arm come round me and hold me, and the coolness of her hand as she smoothed my hair above my ear. But then I remembered her doing it just like that back at home, on the last day the three of us had been together.

I could see it all in my head now, just as it had happened: Dad going off down the path in his uniform, Mum there beside me, watching him go, her arm round my shoulder, her hand smoothing my hair. After we'd waved him off, we stood

there on the doorstep in our dressing gowns, watching the milk float come humming down the road.

“Don’t worry, Will,” she’d told me. “Dad’s been out there twice before. He’ll be fine. He’ll be back home before you can say Jack Robinson, you’ll see.”

“Jack Robinson,” I’d said. When I looked up at her moments later, I saw I’d made her smile through her tears, and I knew I’d said just the right thing.

Every moment of the afternoon a month or so later was so deeply etched in my memory. Despite all my best efforts not to, I lived it again now riding up on the elephant thousands of miles away from home, from where it had all happened. A rainy Sunday it had been. We were flopped on the sofa in front of the television, watching *Shrek 2*, for about the tenth time. It was my favourite film – Dad had given me the DVD for my birthday a couple of months before. We were enjoying it just as much as ever, anticipating every wacky moment, every hilarious gag. The doorbell rang.

“Oh, for goodness’ sake, who’s that?” Mum said. She pressed the pause button, got up wearily from the sofa, and went to see who it was. I wasn’t a bit interested in who it was, I just wanted to go on watching *Shrek*. There were hushed voices in the hallway. I heard footsteps going along the passage into the kitchen. The door closed. Whoever the visitors were, Mum obviously wasn’t coming back into the sitting-room for a while. So I pressed the play button and settled down again to watch. Only when the film finished, an hour or so later, did it occur to me that it was a little strange that Mum still hadn’t come back – I knew she loved *Shrek* almost as much as I did. That’s why I went to find her.

She was sitting alone at the kitchen table, her head lowered, her hands cupped round a mug of tea. She didn’t look up when I came in, and she didn’t speak for a while either. I could see then that something must be wrong. “Who was it?” I asked her. “At the door. Who was it?”

“Come and sit down, Will,” she said, her voice so soft and far away that I could hardly hear her. When she looked up I could see that her eyes were red with crying. “It’s your Daddy, Will. I told you where he went, didn’t I? We found Iraq on the map, found where he was, didn’t we? Well, there was a bomb by the side of the road, and he was in a Land Rover ...” She reached out across the table and took my hands in hers. “He’s dead, Will.”

We sat there in silence for a few moments. I went to sit on her lap, because I knew that was what she needed, what I needed too. We didn’t cry. We just held on to each other tight, as tight as we could. It felt to me as if we were both trying somehow to squeeze the pain out of one another. Later that night we lay side by

side on my bed, holding hands. Neither of us had spoken, not a word, for a long time. Then I asked her the one question that had kept coming into my mind again and again all night long.

“Why, Mum? Why did he have to go to the war?”

It was a while before she replied. “Because he’s a soldier, Will,” she told me. “When countries fight wars, it’s the soldiers who do the fighting. It’s always been like that. It’s what soldiers have to do.”

“I know that, Mum. Dad told me,” I said. “But what was the war for?”

She didn’t answer me.

“Look at me, I need a smile”



The young *mahout* who was leading the elephant, sometimes by the ear, sometimes by the trunk, was wearing a long white shirt that flapped loosely about him. The elephant kept trying to curl his trunk round it, tugging at it. The *mahout* ignored him and walked on, speaking all the while to the elephant in confidential whispers. I longed to know what he was saying, but didn't dare ask. He looked friendly enough, smiling at me whenever he glanced back up at me to see if I was all right. But he didn't seem to want to talk, and anyway I wasn't sure he spoke any English. But I knew that if we didn't get talking, then I'd be left alone again with my thoughts, and I didn't want that. And besides, I really wanted to find out more about this elephant I was riding. I decided to risk it and talk.

“What's he called?” I asked him.

“This elephant is not he. He is she,” he told me, in near perfect English. “Oona. She is called Oona if you want to know. She is twelve years old, and she is like a sister to me. I know her from the first day she is born.” Once the young man had started talking, he didn't seem to want to stop. He spoke very fast, too fast, and never once turned round, so he wasn't at all easy to understand. I had to listen hard.



He went on, trying all the while to extricate his shirt-tail from the grip of the elephant's trunk. "This elephant, she likes this shirt very much, and she also likes people. Oona is very friendly, very intelligent too, and naughty. She is very naughty sometimes, you would not believe it. Sometimes she wants to run when I do not want her to run, and once she is running she is very hard to stop. Then once she is stopped, she is very difficult to start again. You know what Oona likes best? I tell you. She likes the sea. But it is a strange thing. Not today. Today she does not like the sea. I think maybe she is not feeling so good today. I take her down to the sea early this morning for her swim like I always do, and she does not want to go in. She does not want to go near. She only stands there looking out to sea as if she never saw it before. I tell her that the sea is the same as it was yesterday, but still she will not go in. One thing I know for sure: you can't make Oona do what Oona does not want to do."

He tugged his shirt free at last. "Thank you, Oona, very nice of you," he said, stroking her ear. "You see, she is happier now, and I think maybe this is because

she likes you. I can tell this when I look in her eyes. It is how elephants speak, with their eyes. This is a true thing.”

I did not ask any more questions after this, because I was far too busy just enjoying myself. I was savouring every moment of this ride. The elephant, I noticed then, was strangely mottled, with a sort of pink pigmentation under her grey skin. A pink elephant! I laughed out loud, and the elephant tossed her trunk as if she understood the joke and didn’t much like it.

Everything I was seeing was new and exciting to me, the deep blue of the waveless ocean on one side, the shadowy green of the jungle on the other, where the trees came down to the sand. And beyond the trees I could see the hills climbing higher and higher into the far distance until they disappeared into clouds. Ahead of me the narrow strand of white beach seemed to go on for ever. I was hoping my ride would go on for ever too. I was thinking that maybe Mum had been right, that this was the perfect place to forget. But I didn’t forget. I couldn’t.

Mum and I had drifted through the days like sleepwalkers, enduring it all together, the phone calls, the cards, the dozens of bunches of flowers left outside our door. The television news kept showing the same photograph of Dad, always in his uniform, never as he was at home.

Then there was the silent drive to the airport with Grandpa and Grandma in the front. Beside me in the back seat, Mum looked steadfastly out of the window all the way. But she did squeeze my hand from time to time, to reassure me, and I would do the same in return. It became a secret sign between us, a kind of confidential code. One squeeze meant, ‘I’m here. We’ll get through this together’. Two meant, ‘Look at me. I need a smile.’

Out on the tarmac of the windswept airfield, we stood and watched the plane land, and taxi to a standstill. A piper was playing, as the flag-covered coffin was borne out from inside the plane, slowly, slowly, by soldiers from Dad’s regiment. After, there were more long days of silent sadness, with Grandma and Grandpa still staying on in the house and doing everything for us: Grandma cooking meals we didn’t want to eat, Grandpa out in the garden trimming the hedges, mowing the lawn, weeding the flower bed, Grandma busying herself endlessly around the house, cleaning, tidying, polishing, ironing. There were telephone calls to answer, and the doorbell too. A lot of callers had to be kept at bay. Grandpa did that. There was the shopping to do as well. He did that too. Sometimes we did it together, and I liked that. It got me out of the house.

For the funeral, people lined the streets and the church was packed. A piper

played a lament over the graveside in the rain, and soldiers fired a volley into the air. The echoes of it seemed to go on for ever. Afterwards as they walked away, I saw that everyone was holding on to their hats in the wind, except for the soldiers, whose berets seemed to stay on somehow, and I wondered how they did that. Whenever I looked up I found people staring at me. Were they looking to see if I was crying? Well, I wouldn't, not so long as Mum was there beside me squeezing my hand, once, twice.

At the gathering of family and friends in the house afterwards, everyone seemed to be speaking in hushed voices over their teacups. I was longing for it to be over. I wanted them all to go. I wanted only to be left alone in the house with Mum. Grandpa and Grandma were the last to go. They'd been wonderful, I knew they had, but I could see Mum was as relieved as I was, when at last we said our goodbyes to them later that evening. We stood by our front gate and watched them drive away.

Two hand squeezes and a smile. It was over.

But it wasn't. Dad's fishing coat hung in the hallway, his Chelsea scarf round its shoulders. His boots were by the back door, still muddy from the last walk we'd all had together along the river to the pub. He'd bought me a packet of cheese and onion crisps that day, and there'd been a bit of an argument about that, because Mum had found the empty crisp packet in my anorak pocket afterwards – she always hated me eating that kind of food.

Whenever we went up to town to Stamford Bridge to see Chelsea play, Dad and I always had a pie and some crisps at the same pub, out in the street if it was fine weather, and everyone would be wearing blue. We'd walk to the ground afterwards. The whole street was a river of blue, and we were part of the river. I liked the ritual of getting to the match as much as the game itself. Sooner or later, after we got back home, Mum would always ask what we'd had for lunch, and we would always tell her, confess it sheepishly, and she would tell us both off. I loved it when we were both told off together – it was all part of it, of going to the football with Dad.

Dad's fishing rod was standing there in the corner by the deep freeze where it always was, and his ukulele lay where he'd left it on top of the piano. Beside it, there was the photo of Dad, smiling out at me, proudly holding up the ten-pound pike he'd caught. Often, when Dad was away, on exercise somewhere or overseas – and recently he had been away a lot – I would reach out, and touch the photo. Sometimes when I was quite sure no one else was around, I'd even talk to him, and tell him my troubles. The photo had always been like a treasured

icon to me, a talisman. But now I tried all I could to avoid looking at it because I knew it would only make me feel sad again if I did. I felt bad about that, but I preferred to feel bad than sad. I was so filled up with sadness that there was no room for any more.

Some days I would wake up in the morning thinking and believing it had all been a nightmare, that Dad would be having his breakfast in the kitchen as usual when I got downstairs, that he'd be walking me to school as usual. Then I'd remember, and I'd know it was no nightmare, no dream, that the worst really had happened.

I was back at school a week or so after the funeral. Everyone was kind, too kind. I could tell that no one really wanted to talk to me. Even Charlie and Tonk and Bart, my best friends – they had been all my life – even they were keeping their distance. They didn't seem to know what to say to me. Nothing was how it had been. Everything and everyone was suddenly awkward. The teachers were all being sugary kind, Mr Mackenzie too, the head teacher – 'Big Mac', we all called him. He was sweetness itself, and that wasn't natural. No one was natural any more. Everyone was pretending. It made me feel alone, as if I didn't belong there any more.

One morning I decided I just couldn't stand it any more. I put my hand up in class, and asked if I could go to the toilet. But I didn't go to the toilet. I just walked out of the school, and went home. Mum wasn't there and the house was locked. I sat on the doorstep and waited for her. That's where Big Mac found me when he came looking for me. Even then he wasn't cross. Mum was called away from her work at the hospital. She was upset, I could see that, and told me how worried everyone had been, but she wasn't angry with me either. I was almost hoping she would be. It wasn't the only time I ran away.

One afternoon Mum met me at the school gates in her nurse's uniform. I usually walked home on my own after school, so I knew something was up. She had news, she said, good news. Grandma had come to stay with us again, and without Grandpa this time. I wasn't at all happy about that. I was even less happy when Grandma kept telling me at teatime that I should eat up my toast 'like a good boy'. That was when Mum told me.

"We've been thinking, Grandma and me, we've been talking it over, Will," she began. "And we've decided that you need more time to settle down, that maybe I sent you back to school too soon, that maybe we've rushed back into things too quickly – both of us, I mean. People have been really kind, and really considerate. Mr Mackenzie at school agreed at once, so did the hospital. They all

think we should go away for a while. They've said that we can take as long as we like, and to come back only when we're really ready to."

This all sounded more than fine to me, but when Grandma interrupted, it got even better, because that was when Grandma told me that she'd worked it all out, that we would be coming down to stay on the farm for a month or so. "I've told your mum, Will," she went on. "I said I won't take no for an answer. You'll be staying for Christmas, and for as long as you like afterwards, for as long as it takes." Mum and I exchanged a look and a smile at that, because Grandma never took no for an answer anyway.

"Grandma thinks it'll be a really good break for both of us, just what we need," Mum told me. "What do you think, Will?"

"All right," I said, with a shrug. But I was over the moon.

Every day of our stay had been brilliant, except that is for a surprise visit to the doctor for some sort of injection that Mum said was important. "All kids have it at your age," she explained. I protested, but I could see I was getting nowhere. In the doctor's surgery, I looked the other way as the needle went in, but it still hurt like hell. But that apart, and despite Grandma being her usual bossy self, I'd had the best of times.

So it had come as a complete surprise to me when Mum suddenly announced we wouldn't be staying on with Grandma and Grandpa for Christmas after all, but that the suitcases were already packed and we'd be going home by train that morning. Grandma was going to drive us to the station.

When the train got in, we took a taxi home, which I thought was a bit odd, because Mum had always made out that taxis were a waste of money, and far too expensive. As the taxi stopped outside home, she turned to me and told me to stay where I was, that she wouldn't be long. She asked the driver if he'd mind waiting a minute or two. She seemed suddenly excited, almost as if she were trying to suppress a giggle.

"Where are you going, Mum?" I asked her, but she was out of the taxi by now and running up the path into the house. She didn't answer me. I couldn't make head or tail of what was going on.

It wasn't long before she was out again carrying a heavy suitcase. "Can you take us back to the station, please?" she asked the driver.

"Take you to the moon, if you're paying, darling," he said.

"Not going to the moon, not quite that far," Mum told him breathlessly, as she climbed back into the taxi.

Then she told me to close my eyes. When I opened them again, she was

flourishing two passports at me, a huge smile on her face. “Grandma’s idea,” she said, “and I promise you, Will, it’s the best idea she ever had – actually I think it was Grandpa’s. Anyway, she said that they thought it would be good for us to have Christmas away on our own, just the two of us, somewhere very special, somewhere we can forget ... y’know, somewhere thousands of miles away.”

She took a brochure out of her bag, and waved that at me too. “Look, Will! There’s the hotel. There’s the beach. There’s the sea and the sand. And do you know where that is? Indonesia, where my family come from. I’ve never ever been there, and now I’m going, and you’re coming with me. Full of surprises, your grandma. She never asked. Well, she wouldn’t, would she? She just went ahead and booked it. ‘A Christmas present from Grandpa and me,’ she says. ‘You just go and enjoy yourselves.’”

Mum’s whole face was bright with laughter now. “All we needed were those injections – remember, Will? – then just our passports, our summer things, and we’re on our way.”

“What, now? We’re going now?”

“Right now.”

“What about school?”

“No more school, not for the time being. Don’t worry, I’ve asked Mr Mackenzie. He’s fine about it. We’re going to chill, Will.”

It was one of Dad’s old jokes. This was the first time we’d really laughed in a very long time. It turned to tears soon enough. Crying together, I discovered then, was so much better than crying alone. We clung to one another in the back of the taxi, and at last began to let go of our grief.

At the station, the taxi driver helped us out with the suitcases. He wouldn’t accept any payment. “It’s on me,” he said, taking Mum by the hand, and helping her out. “It took me a while to work out who you were. I was in the crowd outside the church at the funeral. I saw you and the lad. I was a soldier once myself. In the Falklands. A while ago, but you don’t forget. Lost my best friend out there. You have a good holiday now, I reckon you deserve it.”

I’d been on a plane a few times before, to Switzerland. But this plane was massive. It took an age lumbering down the runway before it lifted off. There was a moment when I thought it never would. I had my own screen, so that I could choose whatever film I wanted. I watched *Shrek 2*, again. When it finished, I happened to pick up Mum’s holiday brochure. I opened it. The first picture I saw was of an orang-utan gazing out at me, wide-eyed and thoughtful. There flashed through my mind then a most dreadful image. I must have seen it

on television, or maybe from a nature magazine, most likely the *National Geographic* – we had a pile of them in the bathroom at home. It was a photograph of a terrified young orang-utan clinging pathetically to the top of a charred tree, the forest all around burnt to the ground.

I turned the page quickly, not wanting to be reminded of it any more. That was when I came across the picture of an elephant walking along a beach, and being ridden by a boy no older than I was. I could not contain my excitement. “Mum,” I said, “look at this! They’ve got elephants, and you can ride them!” But Mum was fast asleep, and showing no signs whatever of wanting to wake up.

Some of the people in the brochure looked a lot like Mum, I noticed. She’d never talked to me about Indonesia that much, but I’d always known that was where her family had come from originally. She was Swiss as well, which was why we’d been over there a few times, to see my other grandparents. ‘Liquorice Allsort’, that was what Dad used to call me: “Bit Indonesian, bit Swiss, and a bit Scottish, like me. Best of all worlds, that’s what you are, Will,” he’d say.

I’d always been very proud of having a mother who didn’t look much like my friends’ mothers. Her skin was honey brown, smooth and soft, and she had shining black hair. I would have preferred to look like her, but I’m much more like my father, sort of pinkish, with a thatch of thick fair hair, ‘like ripe corn’, Grandpa called it.

I couldn’t help myself. It was something I’d been doing a lot. I kept trying to picture Dad as he was when I last saw him, but all that came into my head was the photo of him I remembered best, the one on top of the piano with him holding the pike. I knew that a memory of a photo isn’t a real memory at all. I promised myself again that I would think about Dad more often, however much it hurt me. How else could I keep in touch with him? I wanted to see his smile again, to hear how his voice sounded. Remembering him was the only way. It worried me that if I didn’t remember him often, then maybe one day I’d forget him altogether. I needed to remember, but then it troubled me when I did. It was troubling me now, which was why I turned my attention again to the holiday brochure. On every page there seemed to be more elephants. Elephants, I decided, were quite definitely supreme.

And now here I was actually riding one along a beach. I couldn’t believe it. I wished then I had Mum’s mobile phone on me. I longed to ring Grandpa and tell him what I was doing. I said out loud the first words that came into my head: “You’re not going to believe this, Grandpa!” I held my arms high, lifted my face towards the sun, and whooped with joy. The *mahout* turned round and laughed

aloud with me.

I think I've loved elephants ever since I was little, probably ever since my first Babar book. Best of all I loved the story of 'The Elephant's Child', whose nose had been tugged and tugged, until it was stretched into a proper trunk by a crocodile, down by 'the great grey-green greasy Limpopo River, all set about with fever-trees'. Grandpa had read it to me so often at bedtimes that I knew some of it by heart. Ever since then I've always loved any natural history programme, just so long as there were elephants in it.

And now I was in one, on one, and it was my own programme! I whooped again, punching the air. High above me, probably at about 35,000 feet, I thought, flew a silver dart of a plane, its vapour trail long and straight. "I was up there," I told the *mahout*. But he didn't seem to be listening. He was looking out to sea. He seemed distracted by something. So I told Oona instead. "I was up there with Mum," I told her, "in a plane just like that one. And there was an elephant just like you, in the brochure. Maybe it *was* you."

I remembered how, up in the areoplane, when Mum woke she leaned over me, brushing my hair away from my eyes. "I should have cut your hair at Grandma's," she said. "I'll do it when we get to the hotel. It's too long. You look like a right ragamuffin."

"Mum," I told her, fixing her with my most determined look. "When we get there, I'm not going to waste time having a stupid haircut, am I? You know what I'm going to do? I'm going to go for a ride on an elephant." I showed her the brochure. "Look at that!"

"Are they safe?"

"Course they are, Mum. Can I?"

"We'll see," she said. "I expect it'll be a bit expensive. We'll have to watch our pennies, you know."

The hotel was right on the beach, and just as beautiful as it had looked in the brochure. And there *was* an elephant too, we were told, that sometimes gave hour-long rides all the way down the beach and back. Every day I looked out for this elephant, but much to my disappointment it was never there. There were compensations enough though. We spent an entire week messing around on the beach, swimming and snorkelling. It was a week filled with endless sun and fun, all in all the very best kind of forgetting. Then on Christmas Day, Mum told me I wasn't getting a Christmas present this year, I was going to have an elephant ride instead. She'd arranged the whole thing for the next day, for Boxing Day.

So that's how come, on Boxing Day, I found myself sitting there high up on

an elephant, on a kind of cushioned throne – Mum said she thought it was called a *howdah*, or something that sounded like it anyway. There was a wooden rail all round to hold on to. But when the elephant set off, the ride was so smooth that I found I didn't need to hold on at all. I rode along the beach on my throne, looking down on the world around me. I felt like a king up there, or an emperor maybe, or a sultan, except that Mum did rather spoil the illusion, by trotting alongside taking photos of me on her phone to send home to Grandma and Grandpa. I acted up for the camera, waving at it regally. "Hi, Grandpa, hi, Grandma. King Will here. What d'you think of my new tractor then, Grandpa?" I shouted all sorts of nonsense. This was better than I had ever imagined. I felt on top of the world. "Happy up there, Your Majesty?" Mum said, beaming up at me.

"S'all right, I suppose," I told her.

"Mind you keep your hat on, Will, and your shirt. Don't want you getting sunstroke or sunburn, do we?" She went on, and on and on. "And you've got the sun cream, and that bottle of water I gave you, haven't you? It's hot, and it'll get hotter."

"Yes, Mum. I'll be all right, Mum." I was trying to make light of my irritation.

"I'll be fine. Honest, Mum. See you when I get back."

"Don't fall off," she called after me. "Hang on tight. It's a long way down. You will be all right up there, won't you?"

I didn't like her fussing over me, and especially not in front of the *mahout*. I waved her goodbye, waving her away at the same time. "Don't worry, Mum," I told her. "You go and have a swim. It's brill, Mum, just brill." And it was true. I'd never had a ride as brilliant as this, nor as easy as this, nor as high as this. I remembered the donkey on the beach at Weston-super-Mare, with its jerky little steps; and Minky, the Haflinger horse I'd ridden once in Guarda in Switzerland, who used to break into a sudden trot whenever she felt like it, who bumped me up and down in the saddle so hard I couldn't sit down afterwards. This elephant was slow, gentle, dignified. Whatever this elephant had for shock absorbers were fantastic. All I had to do was move with her, sway with her rhythm, and that was as easy as pie. It felt almost as if I was afloat. Riding an elephant seemed as natural to me as breathing.

I'd been so wrapped up in my own thoughts, so enthralled by the elephant, and by everything around me, that only now did I think of Mum. I swivelled around in my *howdah* to look for her. I could see there were dozens of swimmers in the sea just below the hotel. I tried to spot her red bikini, or the light blue sarong that

Dad had given her, but we'd gone a long way away from them by now, and I couldn't pick her out from among the others. The sea was so still now, it seemed almost unreal. It seemed to me as if it was breathing in, then holding its breath, waiting for something to happen, something fearful. It made me feel suddenly anxious too, which was why I kept turning round now, looking for Mum. I still couldn't see her. I began to feel myself being gripped by a rising panic. I didn't know why, but all I wanted to do was to go back. I wanted to be with her. I had to be sure she was safe.

That was the moment Oona stopped, without any warning at all. She was looking out to sea, her whole body tensed. She was breathing hard, short sharp breaths. Then she lifted her trunk and began trumpeting at the sea, tossing her head as if there was something out there, something that terrified her. The *mahout* was trying to calm her, but she wasn't paying him any attention.

I looked out to sea then, and noticed that the horizon had changed. It looked as if a white line had been drawn across it, separating sea from sky. As I watched I could see that this line was moving ever closer towards us, that the sea was being sucked away, leaving hundreds of fish floundering on the sand. Oona swung round, and before the *mahout* could stop her, she was running towards the trees. In those first few hurried strides I very nearly fell off. I managed to stay on, only by clinging on tight with both hands to the rail in front of me. I held on for dear life, as Oona stampeded up the beach, and into the shadows of the jungle.

“No leaves, Oona, I can’t eat leaves”



was being rocked so violently from side to side up in my *howdah* that it was all I could do to avoid being thrown out. I learned fast that I had to keep my head down, that whenever I looked up, there'd be some overhanging branch just ahead of me, waiting to slash and whip and claw at me, or even to knock me off altogether. So I flattened myself face down into the cushion, closed my eyes, and with all my strength, just hung on, riding the pitch and toss as the elephant blundered through the trees, trumpeting in her terror.

It was the trumpeting I could not stand. It was so loud, so excruciatingly shrill, that it filled my whole head, and the whole forest around me too. I longed to put my hands over my ears, but I could not let go of the rail. The elephant's terror became my terror, and I found myself screaming into the cushion, then biting deep into it, because it was the only way to silence my screams. I'd been to the funfair with Dad, done the Big Dipper and the Waltzer, but that had all been make-believe terror, terror I could laugh at, terror I had to laugh at because Dad was, because everyone was, even though I was frightened out of my wits. But this, this was the real thing, this was life or death – I knew it because Oona was trumpeting it. I had no idea then what she was running from, only that whatever it was must be close behind us and coming after us, and would kill us if it caught up with us.

It wasn't until I felt the sun hot on the back of my neck that I realised we must be out of the dark of the forest. I dared now to lift my head at last and look about me. Oona was charging on through a clearing with high grass and scrubby trees all around, and then into a swamp. It occurred to me at once that if I threw myself off here, then at least I would have a soft landing. But then, the more I thought about it, the more I knew I could never bring myself to do it. It was so far to fall, too far, and Oona was running on now even faster than before. I was

still being tossed about in the *howdah*. I was having to hang on with all my strength so as not to be thrown out. But at least I had discovered a technique for staying in there by this time. Splaying my legs wide behind me, I found I could brace my feet against the rails, and steady myself better. I was beginning to feel a little more secure. I even dared to raise myself up a little, and twist round just for a moment to look behind me to see if the *mahout* had been following us. I'd been hoping against hope all along that he wouldn't be too far behind, that Oona would slow down, and he would catch up, that somehow, some way, he would be able to bring the runaway elephant to a halt. But Oona was showing no sign of slowing down, and the young man was nowhere to be seen.

All this time I was trying to take it all in, to make some sense of it. Everything had happened so fast, and was still happening. All I could be sure of now was that I had no one to turn to, that I was quite on my own. I was being carried off into the forest by a rampaging elephant, who had been spooked by something or someone unknown. Whatever it was had transformed her from a ponderous creature of supreme gentleness and serenity, into a wild raging beast, maddened by terror, who seemingly had only one idea in her head, to get as far from the sea as possible, as fast as possible.

Ahead of us, beyond a clearing, I saw there was a wide rock-strewn stream. I was sure that Oona must have to slow down to cross it – I hoped she might even stop altogether. She did neither. She ran straight down into it, launching herself into the river, so that the water exploded all around us, soaking me to the skin. Once through it and out the other side I saw that there was a long open hill ahead of us before we could reach the tree line again. Only once she was climbing the hill, did Oona at long last slow to a hurried scuttling walk, her head nodding vigorously with the effort of it, her great ears flapping. I found the ride was suddenly easier, so I got up on my knees now, still holding on, to see better where we were going, where we had come from. I swivelled round so that I could look behind us, back over the canopy of the forest, back the way we had come, down towards the blue of the ocean beyond.

Only now did I understand what it was that had spooked the elephant, and why she had kept running all this time. Everything I was seeing filled me with horror. A warm shiver of fear crept up my spine and into the back of my neck. The sea was rearing itself up into a towering wall of green water that was rushing in towards the beach, towards the hotel, towards where I knew Mum was swimming. I could hear it now too, a distant thunderous roaring. People were running for their lives up the beach. I couldn't hear their screams, they were all

too far away. But in my head I heard their terror. I saw boats being picked up like toys, only to disappear moments later, simply swallowed by the sea.

The great wave didn't curl over and crash along the beach as I was expecting, but just kept coming, on and on, so fast and so high that it was unreal. It seemed to me like a virtual wave, an impossible wave. There was no beach to be seen any more now, and as I watched I saw that the hotel itself was surrounded entirely by seawater, the first floor already overwhelmed. Everywhere, the water was full of swirling debris: cars, trees, telegraph poles. Entire roofs of houses were being swept along in the torrent like paper hats. I could see there were people caught up in it too, clinging on wherever they could. Any moment now I expected to see the wave crashing through the forest below us, and come rushing up the hill after us. All I knew was that I had to get away, I had to go higher. It was my only chance.

I leaned forward and slapped Oona on the neck, again and again, screaming at her to get going, to go faster. Whether or not she understood I did not know, but to my great relief, I felt her gathering her strength underneath me and then breaking into a lumbering shuffle up the hill and into the forest. All the while I was trying to come to terms with what I'd seen. I was sure by now that it had to be a tidal wave, a *tsunami*. I'd seen one in a natural history programme I'd watched back home, a virtual one that had been set off after the volcanic eruption on Krakatoa. But this one was for real, and this was now. I had witnessed the terrible power of it with my own eyes.

Knowing it and understanding it for what it was had a strange effect on me. I found myself suddenly calmer, more able to think things through. I now realised that Oona must have sensed the danger, must have felt it coming long before she saw it, and long before anyone else saw it too. I recalled then something the *mahout* had told me, how she'd been so nervous of swimming in the sea earlier that morning. Somehow, even then, hours before, she had felt that something was out there, was on its way. That must have been why she'd turned and run when she had, and that was the only reason we had got this far, the only reason I was still alive, that we were both still alive.

I could tell Oona was tiring now after all her efforts. Her breathing was laboured, her steps faltering. I should have been ready for it, but I wasn't. When Oona stumbled and nearly fell, I was hurled to one side of the *howdah*, losing my grip almost entirely. I just managed to cling on to the rail with one hand as I was flung over the side. I found myself dangling there, barely able to hang on, as Oona barged and blundered her way through the undergrowth. All I knew was

that if I let go, even if I survived the fall with no broken arms or legs, I would not stand a chance on my own without the elephant. I had to hang on. Somehow I swung myself round so that I could cling on with both hands, trying all I could to scramble up the elephant's side, and haul myself up. But I hadn't the strength to do it. I knew that sooner rather than later, my grip must weaken and I would fall, or that maybe a branch would knock me off as Oona charged on.

I cried out to Oona then, begging her to slow down. Incredibly, she did. Even more miraculously, she came to a stop. Then I saw her trunk come curling round, felt it grasping me by the waist, lifting me up and depositing me in an ungainly heap back in the safety of the *howdah*, where I lay for some moments limp and breathless. Already Oona was on the move again, walking on slowly at first, as if allowing me time to recover. I rolled over on to my front, and reached out for the handrail, bracing myself again with my feet, as Oona gathered speed. I closed my eyes, gritted my teeth, and determined there and then that nothing would ever make me let go again.

Only now, as I lay there exhausted in the *howdah* did I really begin to take in the dreadful meaning of everything I had just witnessed. If Mum had been in the sea, or on the beach, or anywhere nearby when the tidal wave swept in, then she must have drowned, along with anyone else in its path. No one caught on the beach or in the sea could possibly have survived the onslaught of such a gigantic wave. No one would have stood a chance. She had told me she was going for a swim. It was almost the last thing she'd said to me. I tried not to believe what this meant, but I had to. Choking back my tears, I kept telling myself that there was at least a possibility that Mum might already have left the beach by the time the *tsunami* struck, that maybe she'd been back in the hotel, and had reached the safety of our room, which was after all on the top floor. If so, she could still be alive. She could be. I so wanted to believe that.

But I only had to think again, and I would know in my heart of hearts, that in all probability she had to have been in the water when the wave struck. I knew how much she loved her swimming, and her snorkelling, how for a whole week now she'd hardly ever been out of the water, how each morning we'd raced each other down the beach and into the water, and how she always swam like a seal, effortless and powerful.

That last thought gave me a sudden lift of hope, that maybe even if she had been caught by the wave she might, just possibly, because she was such a strong swimmer, have been able to swim her way to safety. But I realised that Mum's best chance of survival had to have been the hotel. I tried all I could to persuade

myself that she might have gone back to the hotel, to email Grandpa and Grandma again maybe, that she had been up there in our room when the wave came in, that she was alive, that she was not dead and drowned, that she was right now thinking about me, that she'd be looking for me, coming to find me, as soon as she could.

I tried all I could to convince myself that this must be true, and that the worst had not happened. But the more I thought about it, the more I was afraid that it had. As a last resort, I began to pray for God to look after her, to save her, until I remembered that the last time I'd prayed like this, it had been for Dad the night before he went away to the war. God hadn't been listening then, so why should he be listening now? In my despair, I lifted my head and cried out loud, not to God, but to Mum. "Don't die, Mum. Please, Mum. Swim, you've got to keep swimming, you've got to. Don't give up, please don't ..."

I was interrupted by the sound of a strange throbbing, distant at first, but suddenly quite close and then right overhead. I could see what it was now – a helicopter, glinting in the sunlight up above the canopy of the trees. I was up on my feet at once, balancing as best I could in the *howdah*, waving my arms wildly and shouting at the top of my voice. But the helicopter was gone within seconds. Just that glimpse though was enough to give me hope again. I knew for sure that they must be looking for survivors, rescuing people, and that one of them could be my mother.

It was at that moment that I made up my mind. Whatever had happened I had to go back to try to find Mum. I yelled at Oona to stop. She didn't pay any attention. I pleaded with her, I shouted at her, I screamed at her, I slapped her neck. Then, when I could see that none of that was doing any good, I tried explaining. "She could be alive!" I told her. "I have to go back. I have to. Turn round, Oona. You must turn round. We have to go back!" But Oona would not be stopped. If anything, she was going faster, blowing and puffing as she went, striding out more purposefully than ever, her trunk swinging, her great ears in full sail. She was going where she was going, and that was that.

I realised then that there was nothing whatsoever I could do to change her mind, and that I had to go where the elephant was going. I had no choice. Understanding this first, then simply accepting it, seemed to enable me to calm down enough to think straight. Hadn't this elephant already saved my life? Hadn't she known exactly what she was doing right from the start? If so, then she was refusing to stop because she knew that the only safety for us both lay ahead of us high in the hills, deeper into the jungle, and that the quicker we got

there the better.

I was also beginning to think that maybe this elephant understood things a lot better than I could ever have imagined, that she would not listen, would not turn round and go back, because there was just no point. She knew, as I did, if I was really being honest with myself, that no one could possibly be alive back down there on the coast, and that there was no use any more in pretending otherwise.

As Oona made her way ever onwards and upwards into the forest, I lay there in the *howdah*, on my back now, staring blankly up at the trees above me, consumed utterly by despair, numb with grief and longing. I had no tears left to cry. I could feel the elephant was exhausted, that her stamina was fading fast. She was stumbling more often, breathing harder. She plodded on, tugging at the leaves around her from time to time, feeding as she went. By now though, I no longer cared what she was doing, or where she was going, or even what might happen to me. I did not care about the oppressive humidity of the jungle, nor the flies that settled on me and bit me. I was not frightened in any way by the wild wide eyes of monkeys blinking down at me as I passed by underneath.

After a while I think I became altogether unaware of the passing of time. Night and day were the same for me. I was neither hungry nor thirsty. I drifted often into sleep, but even when I was awake, I was barely more conscious of what was going on around me than when I was in my dreams. I was aware of the moon floating through the treetops, of the buzz and drone of the forest in the heavy heat of the day, of the raucous cacophony of screeching and howling that filled the jungle every night, of the sudden torrential downpours that somehow found their way through the canopy of trees and drenched me to the skin.

None of it bothered me, none of it meant anything to me. I suppose I wasn't even aware enough of my surroundings to feel alarmed or threatened. It did cross my mind sometimes that I was in a place where there must be all manner of poisonous snakes and scorpions, and maybe even tigers too – I remembered, in that holiday brochure, seeing a photograph of a tiger prowling through the jungle. I could not have cared less. I was too lost in misery and grief to be fearful of anything.



I lay like this in my *howdah* for days and nights on end. I must have drunk from time to time from the bottle of water Mum had given me. I don't really remember doing it, but I must have done, because I woke up once to discover that the bottle was empty. I kept slipping in and out of my dreams, not wanting to wake at all, because I knew that when I did, I'd remember all over again everything that had happened to me and all that it meant: that I had no father, and now no mother, and that I myself would very probably die out here in this jungle. I was so tired and weak and dispirited by this time, that I didn't much mind if I did.

My only comfort was the regular rocking motion of the elephant beneath me. I became so attuned to it, that I always woke whenever it stopped. Often I would hear Oona tugging at the branches then, grunting contentedly as she grazed the forest. And from time to time, whenever she flapped her ears, I'd feel a cooling breeze wafting over me. I came to love those moments. And when I heard the sound of her dung falling, I became accustomed to waiting for the smell of it to

reach me. It wasn't unpleasant, no worse anyway than the smells human beings make. In fact, I didn't find it unpleasant at all, it was strangely reassuring. And it made me smile.

I woke up one morning to feel the soft tip of Oona's trunk touching me. She was breathing me in, exploring every part of me, from my feet to my face. When she tickled my neck, I couldn't help laughing a little. And then, without thinking about it, I reached out and touched her trunk. As I did so, Oona left it where it was, deliberately it seemed to me, and let me run my fingers along it as she breathed gently on my face. It was like the breath of new life. I knew then that I wasn't alone in the world, that I had a friend, and that I wanted to survive, that I somehow *had* to survive, so I could go back to the coast, and find Mum.

But with this new-found will to live came a sudden unbearable hunger, and with it an overwhelming thirst, a craving for water so strong and all-consuming that I could think of nothing else. I did sometimes manage to grab an overhanging leaf and lick the rainwater from it. Whenever it rained, I'd cup my hands and catch all I could. But there was never enough for me even to begin to quench my thirst, let alone fill my bottle, which was what I knew I had to do if I wanted to survive.

I tried to make Oona understand this every time we came to a stream – and there were enough of those in the jungle – but every time Oona just waded on through and would not stop. I tried whispering gently to her, as I'd seen the *mahout* doing back down on the beach, but it proved to be no use at all. Shouting at her and slapping her neck did not work. Neither did begging or pleading. Stream after stream we crossed, and all I could do each time was gaze longingly down at the rushing water below me that I so longed to be drinking, but was already leaving behind me.

Again and again I seriously considered standing up in the *howdah*, and then throwing myself off into the water when we came to the next stream. I would pick my moment, decide where the water was at its deepest, and leap. I could do it. I could swim well enough – the best in my class at school, better than Charlie or Bart or Tonk. That wasn't my worry. I had other anxieties. If I got it wrong, I could land badly on hidden rocks beneath the surface. I could break a leg, or even my neck. And I knew that rocks weren't the only danger lurking beneath the surface. I was sure there were crocodiles in these rivers. I was sure because I'd caught a glimpse of one, half submerged. It had looked like a log, but if so, it was a log with a tail, and a tail that moved too.

And anyway, even if there were no crocodiles down there waiting for me,

even if I had the best of landings, and had the long cold drink I was yearning for, and managed to fill up my water bottle, would Oona stand there and wait for me while I drank? Even if she did, how was I going to climb back up on to her again afterwards into the safety of the *howdah*? Getting on and off this elephant was something I just didn't know how to do on my own. The last time I'd had to do it, days before now, the *mahout* had been there to help me up, but I could not remember for the life of me how he'd got me up there. All that seemed to have happened so long ago now, before the wave came. Mum had been there. Had she helped me up? I couldn't remember. I didn't want to remember.

My longing for food was becoming every bit as frustrating and urgent as my longing for water. It wasn't as if there wasn't fruit in abundance all around me in the jungle, but none of it was fruit I recognised, and anyway I couldn't get at it. I was looking for bananas – I thought there must be bananas in a jungle – but so far as I could see there were none. There was a small pinky-red fruit, that was shaped something like a banana. But these were always tantalisingly out of reach as I passed by underneath. There were sometimes coconuts, orange, not brown, but anyway they were always growing far too high up. And those that had fallen on the forest floor were of course just as inaccessible to me.

There were plenty of other strange fruits I certainly would have tried, had I been able to get near enough, or quick enough to grab them. But Oona swayed on blithely by, quite oblivious, it seemed, to all my needs. And all this time she was adding insult to injury, because of course Oona could reach out her trunk whenever she felt like it, and with a tug at an overhanging branch, was able to pull it down and eat her fill on the move. Worse still she looked and sounded as if she was enjoying every moment of her feasting. I could only sit there and listen to her great jaws grinding away, to her almost constantly rumbling stomach. Elephant digestion, I was discovering, was noisy, and infuriating, punctuated as it was by rumbling groans of the deepest satisfaction.

In the end it all became too much for me to take. I bent down and bellowed into her ear. I knew it was pointless, but I did it all the same. "Food, Oona! I want food! I want water!" She flapped her ears at me then, as if she was batting away my words like irritant flies. But I kept on at her, whacking her as hard as I could on her neck, on her back, anywhere I could hit her, trying everything and anything to make her listen. "I want to eat, Oona!" I cried. "Fruit. I need fruit. And water, I've got to have water. Please, Oona, please. Can't you understand, Oona? I'll die if I don't have a drink. I'll die!"

In time I discovered that all the bellowing and the whacking and the slapping

was hurting me a great deal more than it was hurting her. My hands ached with it. My throat was raw with it. Whatever I said or did, the elephant was not paying me any attention, that was for sure. She simply continued on her wandering way through the jungle, munching nonchalantly as she went, seemingly without a care in the world. I tried everything I knew over and over again. But even as I was doing it, I could see it was useless, that neither sweet-talking, cajoling, begging, whacking, or threatening was ever going to work. This elephant would do what she would do, and that was that. In the end I simply gave up trying.

Exhausted and angry, I lay down in the *howdah*, which I now thought of more as a cage than a throne, and sobbed. Into my head from nowhere came Dad's old joke: "You've got to chill, Will." I said it out loud then, as Dad would have said it. "You've got to chill, Will." Repeating his words time and again was a comfort to me somehow. It was the rhythm of them maybe, or the familiarity. I longed for sleep, because I longed to put out of my mind everything that had happened, all the discomforts I was enduring. It was the only way to forget the gnawing hunger in my stomach, that my tongue was leathery dry, that my throat was parched and sore.

Once, when sleep came at last, I heard Dad's words again in my dreams, and I saw him too. "You've got to chill, Will," he was saying. "You've got to keep it going. You can do it, Will." I was back in the sea at Weston when I was little. I was swimming towards Dad, who was holding his arms out towards me. I was kicking my legs frantically, trying all I could to keep my chin above water, trying to reach those outstretched hands before I sank, but the seawater kept coming into my mouth and was choking me. I woke then, suddenly, and sat up spluttering. For a few moments the sunlight blinded me.

The elephant had stopped. There was the sound of rushing water all around me. I sat up. Oona was standing in a river, the water washing over her back and up to her neck and her ears, so that the *howdah* was simply an island now, the river swirling all around. And somehow the *howdah* had worked itself loose. I could feel it shifting sideways off Oona's back, so that some of the cushions were already waterlogged. The river was running fast, but I did not hesitate. This was the chance I'd been waiting for. The shore wasn't that far away. I could make it. If there were crocodiles I did not care. I needed to have water. I had to drink.

I put a foot on the rail and leaped off. Before I knew it I was in the river, and swimming hard for the shore. Just a few strong strokes and I was there. I

crouched at the river's edge and drank till I could drink no more, filling myself to bursting. Breathless with drinking now, triumphant with it, I found myself laughing and whooping and slapping the water, filling the forest with my noise, sending thousands of screeching birds flying up out of the trees. "Look at them, Oona!" I cried. "Look!"

All I could see of Oona was her head and her trunk. She seemed to have drifted further down the river, and was right out in the middle now, where the flow was faster. I was quite confident I could swim that far. So without another thought I plunged in. But I found that the current was a great deal stronger out there than I had imagined, and I soon realised that I wasn't going to make it. I just didn't have the strength to sustain the effort. So I had to turn back again, and swim hard for the shore to get myself out of trouble. It was a long swim and I felt myself tiring fast, so it was a huge relief when I felt my feet touch the bottom, and I could clamber out of the river at last.

I looked round then to see where Oona was. She had vanished. Panic-stricken at finding myself suddenly alone, I began calling out for her, tentatively at first, then louder and louder as my fears multiplied. My first thought was that Oona must have gone off into the forest and abandoned me. I was sure of it. There could be no other explanation. With panic came hurt. I let her know just what I thought of her. "Go off and leave me then, you great lump, see if I care! I don't need you, you hear me? I don't need you!"

It was then that I caught sight of the *howdah* being swept away downriver towards the rocks, but there was still no sign of Oona. The *howdah* sank as I watched. All I could see of it now were its straps, and then my water bottle and a cushion from the *howdah* bobbing away into the distance. As I stood there I was thinking that the bottle was the last thing Mum had given to me, that and my hat and the sun cream, all of which must have been at the bottom of the river by now with the *howdah*. All I had left was what I stood up in: my shirt and my shorts.

That was when Oona erupted from under the water only a few metres from me, rising up to her full height with the water cascading from her, trunk flailing and splashing. When I got over my surprise, I found myself overwhelmed with sudden joy and relief, all my earlier fury at her instantly forgotten. Oona sank down again into the river, leaving only the great dome of her head and her eyes visible. It seemed to me that she had been playing hide-and-seek with me, that this must be an invitation to come and play with her. It was an invitation I could not resist. As I ran down into the water I wondered how I could ever have doubted her.

Oona was better than any wave machine I had ever known. Whenever she rolled over to loll on her side, she created huge waves that I would dive into. Time and again she'd submerge herself completely, then rear up out of the water, so that it came rushing down her sides like a waterfall, and I would stand there beside her, shrieking under the shower she was giving me. She swished her trunk at me, sprayed water at me. It was a performance, a game. I was in fits of laughter the whole time, and loving every moment of it.

I remembered then the last time I had loved messing around in the water like this. It had been with Dad at Weston. I remembered diving down and swimming between his legs, and when I came up again there'd been a long galloping piggyback ride, out of the sea and up the beach towards where Mum was waiting for us. She'd screamed at us not to drip on her, and we had, as she knew we would, shaking ourselves like dogs all over her. It had all been so good. The whole day by the seaside at Weston came back to me, every detail of it, then all the treasured memories of home, of Dad and Mum, of all of us together, of how everything had been before Dad had gone off to the war, before the tidal wave.

I felt suddenly racked by sadness and guilt. I left Oona in the river and went to sit on the rocks. All I could think of was that nothing would ever be the same. Those days were gone for ever. Mum and Dad were gone for ever. I would never see them, or hear their voices ever again. And what had I just been doing? A moment or two before I'd been having the time of my life, shrieking with laughter as if none of this had ever happened, as if everything was just 'fine and dandy', as Grandpa used to say. Dad was dead, and down on the coast hundreds of people had been drowned by the tidal wave, thousands maybe, Mum among them. How could I have allowed myself to forget them both so quickly? How could I have been laughing when I should have been crying?

But even as I was thinking this, even as I watched Oona wafting her trunk at me from way out in the river, I found I was smiling inside myself, and I knew there was nothing wrong in it, that Mum and Dad wouldn't mind. There was a hummingbird hovering nearby over a flower. She was so tiny, miraculously tiny, and beautiful. And butterflies of all colours were chasing each other over the water. That was the moment I felt all the gloom and guilt lifting from me. I was not thinking of the past any more, nor of Mum and Dad. I was thinking that if I had any family at all now, it was Oona. It was a strange idea, I knew that. But the more I began to think about it, the more I believed it was true.

As I sat there watching Oona in the river, I began to take stock of my whole situation. I knew for certain that without Oona I would not have survived at all, I

would have no hope at all, I'd be utterly lost. I had only seen that one helicopter, and that was a few days ago at least by now. The only evidence I'd seen of any human existence was the occasional glimpse of a vapour trail high in the sky, thousands of metres above the canopy. No one knew I was here. No one even knew I was alive, so certainly no one would be out looking for me. I had ridden into this jungle on the elephant. If anyone knew the way out, I reckoned, it was her. All I had to do then was to stay with her, and learn to live with her, and I'd be all right. One day sooner or later she'd carry me out of the jungle, just as she'd carried me in.

Meanwhile I had to find some way of communicating with her, of getting her to understand I was starving hungry. I'd heard the *mahout* talking to her down on the beach that morning, but it had been in his language, a language I hadn't understood at all. Oona must have understood, though, otherwise why would he have talked to her as much as he had? So if she had understood his language then she could learn English – it stood to reason. All I had to do was teach her. I remembered how her *mahout* always whispered to her, never raised his voice. I would do the same. Somehow I had to teach her to understand me.

I wasted no time. As soon as Oona came out of the water, I went right up to her. I held her trunk and stroked it as I talked to her, just as the *mahout* had done. As I spoke I was looking her right in the eye, her wise, weepy eye. "Oona," I began, "I know your name, but you don't know mine, do you? You don't know anything about me. So I'd better tell you, hadn't I? Here goes then. I'm Will. I'm nine years old, ten soon, and I live near Salisbury in England, which is a long way away, and that's where I go to school. My Grandpa and Grandma have a farm in Devon, where it's muddy, and he's got a lot of cows, and a tractor, and I go there for holidays. Dad was a soldier and he was killed by a bomb in Iraq because there's a war there, and now I think Mum's dead too, drowned by that big wave, the one you saved me from. If you hadn't done that I'd be dead by now, like she is. But the thing you've got to understand is that I'll be dead anyway pretty soon, if I don't get some food to eat. I'm hungry, Oona, really hungry. I need to eat. Understand? Eat."

I opened my mouth wide, said "aah" several times, sticking my fingers down my throat. Oona looked down at me knowingly from a great height, so knowing that I felt she must be understanding at least the gist of what I was saying. Much encouraged by this I went on. I rubbed my stomach. "Yum, yum. Food. Food." Unblinking, she looked back at me. She was listening, I could tell that much, but now I wasn't so sure she'd understood a single word I'd been saying.

Maybe her eye wasn't knowing after all, simply kind. I just didn't seem to be getting through to her. I had an idea. I decided I'd have to try another tack altogether. I ran off to the edge of the forest, and came back after a while with a long leafy branch I'd torn from a tree. I offered it to her, hoping these might be the kind of leaves she liked. She sniffed at it for a few moments, then curled her trunk around it, ripped off what she wanted and shoved it into her mouth. "Yes, yes, Oona," I cried. "You see? Food. Yum, yum. Me. Me too, I need food. But not leaves, Oona. I can't eat leaves. Fruit. Fruit."

As she chomped and chewed her eyes never left me once, and from somewhere inside her there came a deep groan of contentment. I was hopeful that these were all signs that she understood now, that she was grateful to me for fetching her food, that she would do the same for me. But when she'd finished stuffing in the last of her leaves, all she seemed interested in was exploring my hair and then my ears with her trunk. Exasperated now, I lost my patience. I pushed her away, and shouted up at her. "Can't you understand anything, you stupid elephant? I'm hungry! I just want food! I have to have food!"

I looked around in desperation, and saw there was some kind of red fruit, they looked like huge ripe plums, and they were growing high up in a tree on the far side of the river. "There! Look, Oona! That's what I want. It's too high for me to climb. You could reach them easy as anything, I know you could. Please, Oona, please." But Oona just turned from me and began walking away from the river and up into the trees, her trunk searching out more leaves. Once she was busy eating again, I discovered that no amount of yelling at her, or leaping up and down, or slapping her leg would distract her. Oona was feeding, and nothing and no one was going to stop her.

I felt my eyes filling with tears. I tried to blink them back. But it was no good – they kept coming anyway. I sat down beside the river, clasped my knees to my chest and let the tears flow. I was sobbing not out of self-pity or grief. There were no thoughts any more of Mum or Dad. I was crying out of fury and frustration, and hunger too. I buried my face in my hands and rocked back and forth, moaning in my misery.

When at last I did look up again, I saw that the *howdah* had now become firmly wedged between rocks. It was obvious that there was no possible way I could retrieve it from the river. Without it, I knew I could never ride Oona again. And without Oona how was I ever going to be able to find my way out of this forest, and back to safety? Strangely, it was only now, as I came to understand all this, that I finally stopped crying, and began to calm down and collect my

thoughts. If I couldn't ride the elephant, and if she wouldn't find me food, then she couldn't save me. In which case I'd have to search for food myself, fend for myself. I'd have to find another way altogether of saving myself. There had to be a way out of the jungle. There was a way into this place, so there was a way out. I'd just have to find it, that's all.

Only moments later I knew what I had to do. It came to me as I watched the river running by. It was obvious. Why hadn't I thought of it before? I'd follow the river downstream. Didn't rivers always end up sooner or later in the sea? If I followed the river, at least I'd always have water to drink, and I'd be bound to find something to eat on the way – berries, nuts, roots, fish even. I could catch fish. Yes, I'd leave the elephant. That's what I'd do. There and then I made up my mind. I'd go it alone.

Tiger, Tiger...



But the very next moment something happened that changed my mind altogether. I was still sitting there by the river when I felt Oona's trunk touching me softly on the back of my neck. It moved along on my shoulder, snuffling at me, exploring me. I watched it encircling my chest, pulling at me gently, yet insistently. She was turning me round to face her. She stood over me for a moment, looking down at me, groaning at me reproachfully, as if she knew I'd been doubting her, as if she realised I'd been thinking of leaving her.

She began to lower herself down on to her front knees. At first I thought she was probably tired after all her exertions in the river, and was just going to lie down beside me and rest. And indeed that's what she did, but it soon became apparent to me that this wasn't because she was tired at all. She was reaching out her trunk again towards me, curling it round my waist and then drawing me in towards her. It took a while for me to understand why she was doing this.

Then I knew what she was trying to tell me. There could be no doubt about it. This had to be an invitation to climb up. She was helping me all the way, nudging me, lifting me, supporting me until I found myself astride her neck, sitting there behind the twin domes of her head. Until now I had only really thought she had one dome on the top of her head, but now it was clear to me there were two.

Oona heaved herself up then, her trunk steadying me all the while, until she was standing upright again on all fours. But without the *howdah* there was no rail for me to hold. I panicked, and threw myself forward on her neck, clutching it. Then I found Oona's trunk right there in front of me. She was offering it to me. She knew I had to have something to cling on to. And cling on I did. I dared not let go of it. Terrified she'd take it away, all I could do to make myself feel more secure was to grip hard with my knees and my heels.

But I found my legs were too short and splayed too wide apart, so that any real grip was impossible. If Oona's trunk wasn't there to hold on to, if she took it away – and sooner or later I knew she'd have to – I could see I was going to have to rely almost entirely on balance to prevent myself from falling off. I really did not know if I could stay on her once she began to move. And if she started to run, then I knew I'd be in real trouble.

But to my great relief, when Oona did begin to walk on up into the jungle she moved only slowly. She took me on a gentle wander, meandering through the trees, and all the time her trunk was there for me to hang on to. I hung on tight with two hands, because at first, even though she was going so slowly, every step she took was nerve-racking for me.

But after a while, when I found I was still up there, that I hadn't fallen off, I began to feel my confidence growing. I was already learning how to attune my balance to the rhythm and sway of Oona's walk. And what I was beginning to sense as well, was that she was adjusting her walk to me all the time, that she was teaching me, helping me, that she would not let me fall. In no time at all I found I was more relaxed, that I was enjoying riding her again. I was beginning to look around me, at the parrots flying through the forest, cawing at me, squawking, cackling, then at the dizzying height of the trees, and the sunlight filtering through.

It wasn't long before I trusted myself enough to take one hand off her trunk, and for a few moments even two. She left her trunk there for me all the same, which was just as well, because my new-found bravado was more fragile than I thought. More than once, when I became too overconfident, my balance failed me, and I did come very close to falling off. But each time this happened and I didn't fall, it gave me new self-belief, that I could do this, that I could stay up there, that Oona would always do what she could to look after me.

As soon as the fear of falling left me though, my hunger pains came back, sharper and more insistent than ever now, gnawing at my stomach. And as the hours passed, I began to feel an irresistible weakness coming over me. I could feel that the little strength I had left was fast draining away. I forced myself to concentrate harder, told myself that I mustn't loosen my grip on Oona's trunk. But my head was swimming now. I felt I might lose consciousness and slip off at any moment. Sometimes I couldn't work out whether I was daydreaming or sleeping. I kept imagining I was in the aeroplane with Mum, that I was asleep beside her and dreaming I was riding on an elephant along a sandy beach, with Mum running alongside taking photographs of me, and telling me to smile and

wave.

Time and again I came out of my daydream to discover that it was only partly true. I was riding on an elephant, but Mum was not with me. I was in a jungle not on a beach, and I kept wondering where Mum was. I called for her, but she never answered. I was so weak by now that I could barely sit upright at all. I have no idea how long I rode up there in and out of my dreams, only that the sun was above me sometimes and then the moon, that there was rain, and heat, and flies. But always Oona's trunk would be round me, holding me up there.

Then once when I woke, there was suddenly no trunk to hold me steady, no trunk to cling to. Oona wasn't walking any more. She was standing still, her ears wafting slowly. With no trunk to hold on to, I took fright at once. I gripped tight with my knees and legs, threw myself forward on to her neck and clung there. It was some moments before I had the nerve to sit up again, and look to see what Oona was doing. All I could see at first was the blinding glare of the sun shafting through the canopy above.

Then I saw them. Figs. Dozens of them, hundreds of them, hanging there above us, and Oona's trunk was reaching out to wrap itself around a branch and pull it down towards me. Food, food at last! Oona had understood.

For an elephant this may have been an average meal. For me it was a fabulous feast. I gorged myself. Nothing had ever tasted this good, not fish and chips, not the best beef burger in the world. Oona was eating the figs a great deal faster than I was of course, but I was doing my best to keep up, peeling the next one at the same time as I was trying to finish eating the one before, and while still trying to swallow the one before that. I was stuffing them in. Oona seemed quite happy to reach up and pull down yet another fig-laden branch for me whenever I reminded her, and this I did often, again and again until the time came when I knew I could not eat any more.

But Oona's appetite for figs was insatiable. I looked on in awe and admiration as she stripped the tree of the last reachable fruit. Clearly this had been just a starter course for her, because when she'd done with the figs, she set about stripping a nearby tree of its leaves and twigs as well – they all went into the munching machine together. There was a rhythm about her eating that I found almost musical: from tree to trunk to mouth, from tree to trunk to mouth, accompanied all the while by the sound of those great grinding jaws, and a constant groaning drone of contentment from somewhere hollow deep inside her.

All of this did go on for rather a long time, long after I had ceased to find it at

all fascinating. Soon I had more urgent concerns. I really did need to get down. I couldn't put it off for much longer. I kept telling her I needed to go 'to the bathroom', as Grandma had always insisted I called it. But Oona wasn't at all interested in what I wanted because Oona was eating, and I knew by now that nothing was going to interrupt that, that I was in for a very long wait, and there wasn't a thing I could do about it, except to try to think of something else. But that didn't work either. Only when she had eaten her fill did she at last pay me some attention, and it was only just in time.

This was one of the reasons why, from then on, as the days passed, and the weeks, as the rains came and went, I chose more and more not to ride up on Oona, but instead to walk alongside her, particularly when the jungle was not too dense around us. Sometimes it looked quite impenetrable, and then I always rode, because nowhere was impenetrable, I discovered, to Oona. Riding up on Oona, or with her behind me, beside me, or ahead of me, I felt no fear whatsoever. She was queen of the jungle, I could see that. The gibbons that swung and sang through the trees seemed to be doing it just for her. Toucans flew overhead from tree to tree above us, an escort in scarlet uniforms and yellow bills. Bright blue peacocks strutted close by, sounding out their raucous fanfare.

In fact the whole jungle, it seemed to me, was welcoming her, celebrating her arrival. Sometimes she would trumpet back her response, in appreciation perhaps, or simply to announce her arrival as she went. Then one day, high, high above us, swinging through the branches of the forest canopy, I saw the dark and distant shape of my first orang-utan, watching us, following us, I thought, keeping his distance.

Like this orang-utan, so many of the forest creatures looked down from a respectful distance, obviously intrigued by this awesome giant that was meandering majestically through their world. But they seemed to understand that her presence among them was entirely benign, that she posed no threat whatever. None of them ran away at our approach. Only the insects – and these came in all sizes and colours and shapes, but all of them, it seemed to me, with an insatiable appetite for blood, whether elephant or human – showed Oona no respect whatsoever. And that was another reason why I so often decided to go on foot, because in the end I found that the further I was from Oona, the less the flies bothered me. But there was a downside to this.

Leeches.

I soon discovered that the more I walked, the more exposed to leeches I

became. They would attach themselves to me without my knowing it, mostly to my legs, where they would feed on me surreptitiously, until I discovered them. I learned to loathe these hideous, blood-sucking slugs more than anything in the forest, more even than the flies. They were drinking me alive. I could see my blood pulsating inside them. It disgusted me to have to look at them, and it was worse still to have to deal with them, but I had to, every time I prised them off – I found a sharp-edged stone was the best leech remover. I had to force myself to do it, sometimes several times a day.

Compared to leeches, not even the snakes bothered me, however menacing they looked. Large or small, all of them made way for Oona. One look at her, and they slithered away into the shadows. They were no real trouble. So to walk alongside her was all the snake protection I needed. Even the crocodiles kept their distance. But I did notice that Oona took no liberties with crocodiles. There was mutual respect here. She would always pause, and wait for me to get up and ride on her, whenever we came to a river or a swamp. I needed little persuasion. I recognised by now that Oona knew well enough what was safe for me, and what was not. I had come to trust her judgement implicitly.

As we wandered on ever further, ever deeper into the jungle, the rains came down more and more often, not rain as I had known back on the farm in England, but sudden and, thunderous on the canopy of leaves above me, so loud that the noise of it drowned out all the whooping and whirring of the forest. When it came, both Oona and I were instantly soaked to the skin. We might have been shielded to some extent, by the dense canopy above us, from the full force of each downpour. But if we ever emerged into the smallest of clearings, the rain fell on us with such violence that it hurt. Sometimes it felt more like warm hailstones than rain. In time, I found out that the only effective protection from the ferocity of storms like these was to tear off a great leaf from a tree and hold it above my head like an umbrella. I felt quite clever doing it too. I once told Oona, “I’d do the same for you, Oona, only there isn’t a leaf big enough, is there?”

I talked to her more and more often now. My chatter became a kind of running commentary, a mishmash of all my observations and feelings, jokes even, whatever came into my head at the time. I found that talking to Oona came to me quite naturally. I felt that she liked me to talk, liked the sound of my voice, that she was listening because she liked me to be there, because we had become friends, proper friends who trusted one another.

There was a lot I had come to love and respect about this elephant, especially how nothing seemed to perturb her, or irritate her. Flies she simply dealt with by

wafting her ears or shivering her skin. Rain or sun, it didn't seem to matter to her. Only that once when she had run from the tidal wave had she ever shown any fear whatsoever. Nothing since then had seemed to upset her at all. She ambled on through the forest, aware of every creature around her, and utterly unafraid. I did think sometimes that this might be because her mind was always on her stomach.

Oona was on a perpetual quest for food, browsing constantly as she went, whether in the midst of a downpour or not, her trunk reaching out to explore the branches ahead of her, searching out the most succulent leaves, the ripest fruit. If the fruit on a likely looking tree was too high and inaccessible she'd simply push the tree over, or pull a branch down and break it off. If a fruit was too hard, she'd seem to know how to crack it open, or break it apart, with her trunk or her teeth. No fruit was ever too awkward for her. I loved to watch her trunk at work, almost, it seemed to me, with a mind of its own. I wondered at how skilful and delicate an instrument it could be, how powerful, how sensitive, how infinitely manoeuvrable.

Downpours in the jungle could go on for days at a time, I discovered, and they could stop as suddenly as they had begun. For me this moment always came as a great and welcome relief, leaving the jungle steaming and dripping around us, and slowly finding its musical voice again, all the whooping and howling and croaking, joining together in unison to celebrate the end of the storm. This jungle chorus was so familiar to me by now that I missed it when it was not there filling my head. I felt that the forest was soaking up its own music, as well as all the rain that had fallen, as if it were a living, breathing sponge. There were times now when I thought that in some strange way I was being soaked up too, that I was fast becoming a part of this gigantic, all-consuming sponge.

It was easier to talk to Oona when I was not competing with the thunder of rain. I had long since abandoned any idea of teaching Oona some understanding of English, because I had come to realise as time passed that Oona did not need to know exactly what words meant, but that she understood everything quite instinctively, without the need for language at all. After all, no one had told her the *tsunami* was on its way. She had just known it, and long before she could ever have seen it too. Without being asked, hadn't she knelt down for me and taught me how to climb on to her neck, how to ride her, and feel safe about it too?

The more I thought about it, the more I believed that she knew absolutely which fruit was right for me to eat, and therefore which fruit was not, and maybe

what water I could drink too. She had been looking after me all along, not because I'd told her what to do or how to do it, and certainly not because she understood my language. This elephant was knowing. She was intelligent, thoughtful, and deeply sensitive to my needs. It was becoming clearer to me with every day that there was nothing whatsoever I could teach her, that it was in fact she who was the teacher here, not me.

My actual words in themselves might have meant little to her, but I knew for sure that she was listening, and that she understood the feeling behind them, the gist of what I was telling her. That was enough for me. Besides, I needed someone to talk to. And I have to admit that I talked to her also because I liked to hear the sound of my own voice in this place. Everyone else had their voice in the jungle, so why shouldn't I have mine? I knew I must be repeating myself all the time, but Oona didn't seem to mind that. In those early days in the forest I would keep coming back again and again to what it was that still troubled me most, despite every attempt to put it out of my mind. It helped me to speak it out, to have someone to tell.

I'd always begin my monologues in much the same way: "Oona, are you listening?" Even as I was saying this, I knew it was a silly thing to say, because she was always listening. "I've been thinking a lot, trying to sort things out in my mind, you know? There's no point in trying to find my way back – I can see that now. What would I go back for anyway? Mum's not there. I still keep hoping she might be, but I know she's not. And Dad's not there. I keep thinking about them and I mustn't. I keep talking to you about them, and I mustn't. It's like Grandpa said – I've just got to put a plaster over it, and it'll get better. He was right about that, Oona; Grandpa was right about a lot of things. I've got to put Mum and Dad out of my mind. But then if I do, I'll forget them, and I don't want to do that, not ever. They'll always be my mum and dad."

I cried a lot when I told her these things. I think she understood about death, and about grief too. "You know when I'm really sad and down in the dumps, Oona, don't you? I don't talk to you then, do I? That's because I'm crying inside, and you can't talk when you're crying. When I'm like that I don't care whether I live or die. But I have to care, don't I? Because if you don't, you just give up and die. So that's why I have to keep telling myself, and telling you, that I've got you instead. You're my family now, Oona. My home isn't Salisbury any more, or down on the farm with Grandpa and Grandma in Devon. It's here in the jungle with you. Wherever you take me, that'll be my home. Wherever you go, I'll go. And I won't mind where that is, honest, just so long as you feed me lots

of figs, and just so long as you don't ever leave me. You and me, Oona, we've got to stick together, right? Promise? Love you, Oona." That's more or less how I'd ramble on to her.

Above all I always wanted to remind her that I loved her. I'd try to remember to tell her that last thing at night before I went off to sleep. Mum had always told me the same thing at bedtime; Dad too, when he was home. I always loved them saying it. And now it comforted me to be saying it to Oona each night, helped me to put the past behind me, and to come to terms with my new life in the jungle with Oona.

Of course I didn't expect any kind of response from her to anything I'd said. I did think sometimes, that an occasional, 'Love you too,' would have been nice. But it never happened. There was one time though, when she did reply, in a sort of a way, in a most surprising way actually. I'd just said my 'goodnight, love you', when she let out one of the longest, loudest farts I had ever heard in all my life. I'd known her long enough by now to know she was a frequent farter, but this particular one was truly the most magnificent fart of all farts, and musical too, one that seemed to go on and on interminably. I could hear my own giggling echoing through the trees long after I'd finished. I remember I'd always giggled with Bart and Tonk and Charlie when someone let off in school assembly, even when we knew we'd get into trouble with Big Mac. I don't know why, but when it came to farts I was a helpless giggler, I could never stop myself. Now out here in the jungle there was no need to stop myself, no Big Mac to keep me in at playtime.

There wasn't any real need to stop myself either when my laughter turned to tears, as it so often had done since I'd been in the jungle with Oona. I could tell it upset her when I cried, so I did my best not to. I promised her so often that I wouldn't cry again, but it was a promise I was still struggling to keep. I went on promising her all the same, because I knew that one day if I promised it often enough, it would help me to make it happen. "I'm not going to cry, Oona." I'd hold her trunk between my hands, close my eyes, and tell her yet again. "I'm not going to think of them. I mean it this time. I really mean it. I promise. I promise. I promise."

Every night during those early times with Oona, I tried to keep that promise, and there were many nights when I failed. There were no weeks and months for me any more, not in this place, only days, and the long long nights. Whenever I saw a glimpse of the moon through the trees above, I'd think about where I'd seen it before, through the window at home, out camping with Dad. It was these

nights I hated most, for it was then that, however much I tried, the old griefs would come welling up inside me again. All I could do then was give myself up to tears. In some strange way though, I found the discomfort of having to sleep rough in the jungle each night did help to distract me from the sadnesses I was trying so hard to forget. In the first place, I had to concentrate all my mind on making myself comfortable, on collecting and piling up a bed of leaves to lie on, always close enough to Oona, but not so close that I'd have to share her flies.

I had learned from bitter experience by now that the damp of the ant-infested, leech-infested forest floor was no place to spend a night. So I did spend a lot of time and trouble every night making myself a substantial nest of leaves, preferably off the damp of the forest floor, on some nearby rock if possible. But even so, I could never get to sleep easily. I couldn't forget the jungle around me, what dangers might be lurking, even though Oona was right there nearby to protect me.

But on some nights all these fears, and even my grief, were dwarfed by the constant battle I fought with the insects that came alive in the dark, and whirled and hummed and buzzed about me. However much I slapped and swiped at them, they just kept on coming back to have another go at me. Sooner or later, I knew, despite all my best efforts to make my bed inaccessible to ants and leeches, they would find me out, creep up my legs and feed on me whether I was awake or asleep.

And then there was the din.

I should have been used by now to the sounds of the jungle at night, but the howling and screeching and hooting, all the endless racket of crickets and frogs would not let me sleep. Lying there, I often longed for the silence of the nights on the farm in Devon, when I'd been camping out with Dad. There I might have heard the occasional bark of a distant fox, or perhaps the hooting of a pair of owls calling to one another over the fields, but that was all I'd had to cope with. Here the full orchestra of the jungle, along with my fears, and my memories, as well as the insects, did their very best to prevent me from sleeping. Every night was a battle that had to be won before sleep would come, and every night it was Oona who helped me win it.

Time and time again I found that it was only when my thoughts turned to Oona that I could begin to forget everything else. It was so dark at nights that I often could not see her even though she was always near. I could always hear her though, and that was all the reassurance I needed. I'd listen to her rumbling away, groaning and grunting softly. It was like a lullaby to me. Sometimes,

when she came close enough, I could feel her ears wafting away the insects and fanning me gently, reminding me she was there when I was feeling at my very lowest. Somehow she seemed to know when that was, when she was needed most. I'd feel her breath warm my cheek and the soft tip of her trunk checking me out. Then I could relax, then I could sleep. Stuff everything, I thought, stuff all the sadness, stuff the leeches. I had Oona. In the morning everything would be fine again.

And it was.

How long it had been now since the day of the tidal wave I had no idea at all. All sense of time had long since vanished. When I thought about it, I did know it must have been a long while, several months at least – the waxing and waning of the moon told me that much. These were days and months that had changed me utterly, my whole being, my whole reason for living. Back at home, everything I'd done, I'd done for some specific reason and purpose. When I watched a DVD it was to see what would happen at the end. I used to get up at half past seven in the morning in order to go to school, in order to get there on time, because if I didn't I was in trouble. And when I got to school, I would maybe do a test in order to show I had learned what I was supposed to have learned. Back at home I would have to wash my hands before a meal, because I was told to, because they had to be clean, so that I wouldn't catch germs and get ill. When I went on a journey, it was always in order to arrive somewhere, at the library perhaps, at the doctor's, at the seaside, at the farm. Every hour of every day, everything I ever did seemed to have a different purpose. Life was full of endless purposes.

Here in the jungle there was only one simple purpose, and it was the same every day: to stay alive. Oona and I were travelling, not to get from one place to another, not to arrive, but only to find food and water, only to survive. It was a different way of being altogether, a new and uncomplicated kind of existence. And with it came a growing familiarity with the jungle around me, the world I now depended on. I was beginning to feel a kinship with this world, such as I had never known before. I was no longer a stranger in this place.

I was coming to believe more and more that the jungle was where I truly belonged, that I was becoming a part of it, that this new rhythm of life was the same for me as it was for every other creature in the jungle, from the leeches on the forest floor that I so loathed, to that distant, shadowy orang-utan I loved to watch swinging majestically above us high in the trees, so unlike the sad little creature I'd seen in that magazine back home, lost and bewildered in the burned-out wasteland of his home. I was sure this one was following us now. I'd see him

up there so often. He looked to me like the same one. He was keeping an eye on us, I was sure of it. But orang-utan or leech, snake or gibbon, I was one of them now.

And even to look at I wasn't the same person any more. From time to time I'd catch sight of myself when I went down to fish in a river or to have a drink. The boy I saw staring back at me hardly resembled the same boy who had been carried off on Oona's back all that time ago. My shirt had long since been abandoned, ripped apart and shredded by the jungle, so all I had left were my tattered shorts. The buttons had mostly come off by now. So that they wouldn't fall off, I tied them up as best I could through the belt loops with jungle twine. I still had to keep hitching them up all the time, but it worked well enough, mostly. I was a mess. My hair hung down almost to my shoulders, and was no longer the colour of ripe corn, but was bleached almost white now – my eyebrows too. And my skin was nut brown, with sun or dirt or both. I looked as I felt, like someone else altogether.

It was this transformation, I think, that softened the pain of my grieving and stopped my tears altogether. I was able to believe now that everything before the tidal wave had happened to another boy, a different boy, the pink one, the one who went off to school every day with Tonk and Bart and Charlie, who went for holidays down to the farm in Devon, who drove Grandpa's tractor, and supported Chelsea and ate pies and crisps before the match, whose Mum and Dad were dead now. That was another boy, in another time, in another world. I was a wild boy now, with calloused hands, with the bottom of my feet as hard as leather, a boy of the jungle, and Oona was all the friends and family I had, all I needed. She was my teacher too, and she taught only by example. From her I was slowly learning to live with the heat and humidity of the jungle, and even with the insects too. Like her, I simply devised a better way of dealing with them. I didn't curse them or dread them so much, but instead tried to accept them as Oona did. It wasn't always easy, but I tried.

I learned from her that in the jungle everything and everyone has its place, that to survive you need to find ways of coexisting. You need knowledge of what is dangerous and what is not, what fruit is edible and what water drinkable. But above all you have to live in rhythm with the jungle, as Oona did.

Patience is everything. If you see a snake – be still, let it pass. If a crocodile is basking on a river bank, mouth open, watching you, it means: this is my place, take care, keep out of my way. So much in the jungle depends on respecting the space of others. Some creatures eat one another – leeches ate me for a start – but

most are fruit eaters, or insect eaters, or frog eaters, and just want to avoid trouble.

And one of the best ways of avoiding trouble, I was discovering, was being ready for it, being aware. See it coming, hear it coming, and most importantly of all, feel it coming. As Oona had shown me so often, she could do this supremely well. I really did have the very best of teachers.

But it wasn't Oona who taught me to fish. I had Dad to thank for that. It was seeing a plastic bag caught up on a branch and dangling in a river that reminded me of something he'd taught me once. He never told me much about the things he did in the army – he didn't seem to want to talk about it. But he did teach me how to catch fish if you were living off the land, with no rod and no line. He used trousers. He showed me. He tied both the legs of some old jeans with twine from a tree, ran more twine through the belt loops, and then strung them up to a branch overhanging the river, so that the jeans were submerged in the water. Ballooned by the current, they acted like a net, so that any passing fish swam in. I remember thinking how brilliant that was – even though Dad never actually caught a fish, just lots of creepy crawlies. I tried it again and again now, using my shorts. It didn't work the first time, nor the second. But the third time, I caught a fish. It was tiny, but it was a fish. I killed it, scraped off the scales with my teeth and ate it raw. Nothing had ever tasted so good to me as that fish. From then on I caught fish whenever I could.

It made a change from fruit.

Fruit had kept me alive. I could shin up a tree for bananas, but it was the orange coconuts that were the real life savers for me. Sometimes Oona would knock them down, sometimes I would climb for them myself – I was getting pretty good at that. A sharp stabbing stick was all I needed to make a hole. It took a while, but the milk inside was always delicious and sweet. That coconut milk and the flesh inside kept me alive more than any other food.

I was becoming more resourceful with every day, working out for myself better ways of living, safer ways, more comfortable ways. From time to time, when I couldn't find a convenient rock, I had taken to spending my nights now in a tree. I'd climb up a hanging vine – I'd become quite good at this – make myself a nest of twigs and leaves up in among the branches, bending them in, weaving them into a bed, and then lie down to sleep, with Oona below me nearby. It took a while to build, but it was worth it. There were fewer insects up there to bite me, fewer leeches to eat me. It provided shelter from the rain, and anyway it was a whole lot more comfortable than bedding down on the forest

floor, and safer too.

I woke one morning up in a tree to discover the tip of Oona's trunk touching my shoulder. She was just below me, grunting and swaying impatiently from side to side, a sure sign, I knew, that she wanted to be on her way. Perhaps the food had run out where she was, or maybe she was thirsty. Whatever it was, when Oona wanted to go, I didn't argue. There was an urgency about her swaying that morning. She clearly wanted me to hurry. There was a wary look in her eye too that made me think at once there might be something worrying her, that she felt there might be some danger nearby. I let myself down from my nest of leaves and on to her neck.

"What is it, Oona?" I said. "What's the matter?"

She set off at once, and much faster than usual. She was looking about her all the while, and tossing her head. She wasn't on the lookout for food, I was sure of that. She began to trumpet then, and that was when I knew for sure that something was wrong, that there really was something out there in the jungle that was alarming her. We were being watched. I could feel it. Whatever it was, was nearby, and whatever it was, was dangerous. I was scanning the forest now, looking for any sign of movement. A toucan flew off, a sudden flash of colour through the trees. There were panic calls echoing through the jungle, peacocks screeching, and monkeys hooting, cackling.

And from high above us in the canopy, the orang-utan was crashing about in among the foliage. I could hear him, but I couldn't see him. The jungle was agitated, unsettled, on edge, watching. I had known it like this once or twice before, a sudden and inexplicable eruption of jungle panic. But Oona had never been worried then. Nothing had ever happened – it had always been a false alarm. This time, something did happen, and when it did, it happened quite suddenly.

I saw a shadow moving through the trees ahead of us. The shadow came into the light, flickered into a flame of orange fire, and became a tiger. He came padding out of the forest on to the trail, stopped and turned to look up at us, hissing at us repeatedly, showing his teeth. Oona trumpeted again, and wheeled round to face him, trunk raised, ears displayed. Then in a moment, all was still. Elephant and tiger stood there eying one another for several minutes, but without ever actually looking straight at each another. There was no more hissing, no more trumpeting. It was a stand-off, neither was going to give way, but then neither was threatening the other either.



When the tiger began to circle us, Oona stood her ground and never moved a muscle. The tiger was right below me now, gazing up at me out of unblinking amber eyes, magnificent, awesome, terrifying. I went cold all over. I could hear my heart pounding in my ears. I could feel the hairs standing up on the back of my neck. I dared not breathe, but sat rigid on Oona's neck, clenching myself all over from my jaws to my fists, holding myself tight together, doing all I could not to betray my fear. I could smell the tiger's breath as he panted. I could see the pink of his lolling tongue. He was that close. One spring and I knew that would be the end of me. The tiger's twitching tail told me that it was very likely he was thinking just the same thing.

I did not look directly back into the tiger's eye – I knew better than to do that

with any animal by now. In fact I tried all I could, as the tiger circled us, not to look at him at all, in case my courage failed me completely. I didn't trust myself to stay brave, which was why in the end I began to play out a fantasy game between myself and the tiger. I made myself believe that this tiger, that was only a couple of metres below me now, was not real at all, but only virtual, virtual like the lion in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, virtual like the polar bear in *The Golden Compass*, an imagined lion, an imagined polar bear. The tiger looking up at me was still frightening, still terrifying, but this was now an imagined terror that I was living through, the kind I could almost enjoy because I knew the fear was imagined too, only virtual, virtual like the tiger. It was pure self-deception, I knew it was. It may have been a ridiculous ruse, but it worked.

When the tiger came too close for comfort, Oona let him know, not by trumpeting at him, not by charging him. All she did to warn him off was to toss her head at him, swinging her trunk a little, and swishing her tail. It was enough. The tiger licked his whiskers, hissed up at us again a few times to show his displeasure, twitched his tail and padded off back into the jungle, his dignity and Oona's dignity intact. Oona rumbled inside herself, in triumph, I thought, waved her ears, and then walked nonchalantly on as if nothing at all had happened, reaching up her trunk to pull at the leaves above her, eating as she went.

"You know what you are, Oona?" I whispered to her, when I'd found my voice. "You're the coolest elephant on the whole planet, that's what you are. You just faced down the best killing machine in the world, and sent him on his way. And now all you can think of is eating again. You are something else, you know that? You're really something else."

She farted again then, only gently, but it was enough to release all my pent-up fear, and convert it into laughter, laughter that rang out through the trees. The gibbons were laughing back at me now, the toucans too, and soon the whole forest was loud with laughter all around us.

A feast of figs



For days after that first encounter with the tiger, I rarely strayed further than a metre or so from Oona's side, insects or no insects. I no longer wandered on ahead of her as I had taken to doing so often. I played it safe, riding up there on Oona's neck where I knew I was out of danger, and from where I had a much better view and an early warning of everything going on around me. At nights I climbed a lot higher into the trees than ever before to build my nest of leaves and branches, and Oona would stay right below whichever tree I'd chosen all night long, on lookout. I slept lightly, alert to the slightest rustle, half listening for him all the time.

But as time passed, and there was no sign or sighting of the tiger, I grew less anxious. I still slept high in the trees every night, as high as I dared to climb, and I hardly ever went anywhere on foot now, but that wasn't entirely because of the tiger. I had noticed that all the monkeys around me rarely came down on to the forest floor. It seemed sensible to follow their example, to keep out of harm's way. For me, as for them, the tiger was simply one of the many dangers lurking in the darkness of the jungle. Even by day, it was more often than not a dark place, a place of deep shadows, cut off as it was almost altogether from sunlight by the thick canopy of the trees above. *Better to be safe than sorry*, I thought. Sleep high, stay high.

In a strange way I actually found myself missing the tiger. I kept hoping I would see him again. More than that, I was even longing for it. As I lay there one night in my sleeping nest, I kept remembering the tiger poster on the wall of the classroom back at school. I could see it so clearly, lit by the afternoon sun slanting in through the classroom window. That tiger used to gaze down at me with the very same look in his eyes as the tiger Oona and I had encountered on the jungle trail that day. There was a poem underneath the picture. We'd all had

to learn it by heart for homework, but I could only ever manage to recite the first verse before drying up. I couldn't remember even that much now, but the first couple of lines did come back to me, and I spoke them out loud again and again, because I thought it sounded so much how the tiger had looked to me, as if the poet had been there and seen him with me. And anyway, I thought Oona would like to hear it.

“Tyger Tyger burning bright, in the forests of the night.
What immortal hand or eye could frame thy fearful symmetry?”

I got a deep rumble of appreciation from down below, and I knew she'd be smiling away down there in the darkness. I wished now that I had learned it better so that I could have recited the rest of it for her. As I went to sleep that night, I tried to see the words again as they were printed on the poster, but all I could visualise were snatches of lines, bits and pieces. However, the harder I tried, the more I was remembering. I hoped it was all there somewhere, deep in my memory, lost for the moment, but not entirely forgotten.

When we did see the tiger again, it turned out to be in no sense a repetition of the earlier stand-off. There was no hissing this time, no trumpeting. This time he came wandering on to the track in front of us, and looked back at us over his shoulder, as if to say: “Are you going my way? That's fine by me.” I was tingling with apprehension and excitement, and I could feel that Oona remained wary too. She did not show it though. As she walked on she never broke the rhythm of her stride. We followed the tiger through the jungle for most of that morning.

After a while, I began to relax, more and more sure all the time that the tiger was not doing this because he wanted to eat me. It was simply because he liked the company. There could be no other explanation. He had the whole forest to wander in, and yet he had chosen to wander along with us. When Oona paused to eat from time to time, the tiger would lie down in the shadow of the trees nearby and clean himself, then yawn, stretch out and wait until Oona was ready to go on again.

So at ease did I become that day with our new travelling companion that I felt I might even try to talk to him. But then I didn't seem to know what I should say. I mean, what do you say to a tiger? It was so important to say the right thing, but I couldn't find the right words. So I decided in the end to recite the poem for him – the bits I could remember anyway – because I felt the words were full of

wonder and respect, and I hoped he might pick up on that. Somehow – and to be honest, I have no idea how – when I began to recite the poem this time, every line, then every verse, all of it, just flowed from my memory, almost as if the poet was inside my head and speaking it out for me, maybe because he too knew this was the right moment for his poem to be heard, that this listener was the one he'd written it for, the listener who mattered to him more than any other. I remembered his name then, suddenly. Blake, William Blake. It said so on the poster, right at the bottom.

*“Tyger Tyger burning bright, in the forests of the night.
What immortal hand or eye could frame thy fearful symmetry.”*

As I spoke it, I so wanted the tiger to listen to me. I was encouraged by his ears, that were turning constantly, backwards, forwards, this way and that. I recited the poem again, projecting my voice this time, so that the tiger should be in no doubt that the poem had been written just for him, and that I was reciting it just for him too. I was so pleased with myself for remembering it. I recited the poem over and over again, to prove to myself that I really could do it, and to drum it into my brain so that I would never be able to forget it.

Just as I began it for the umpteenth time, the tiger stopped in his tracks, and turned to look up at me. At that moment I had no doubt whatsoever that he had been listening, no doubt that he knew these words were about him, and for him. His eyes burned into mine, just for a moment, and I felt there was no hunger there any more. It wasn't mere curiosity either. It was a meeting of minds. Shortly after this, the tiger lifted one of his front paws, shook it as if he'd just stood on a thorn, then sprang lightly away into the shadows of the trees, and vanished. I could tell at once, that unlike me, Oona was glad to see the back of him. She was much more at ease now that we were on our own again.

That walk through the jungle proved to be the longest the tiger ever stayed with us, the longest he hung around. He did show himself to us several times more after that, just to remind us he was still there, I thought, just so we didn't forget him. But I needed no reminding, and I certainly couldn't forget him. I felt his presence about us all the time. I heard him roaring at night too, heard the hullabaloo of alarm he created in the forest wherever he went.

Then one morning we came across him swimming in a jungle pool. I was sure he knew we were coming, that he'd been waiting for us. Oona watched him for a while from the bank, but when there was water to be drunk and mud to wallow

in, and no crocodiles, Oona never hesitated for long, not even for a tiger. Keeping a safe distance from him, she lumbered into the water, and was soon indulging in all her usual flamboyant water sports, creating as much noise and kerfuffle as she could, slapping her trunk into the water and hosing herself down.

I knew what was going on here. Very deliberately, very ostentatiously, she was claiming the pool. So, in the same spirit, I joined in. I leaped off her back with a great whoop, and cannonballed into the river. The tiger clearly did not appreciate this disruption to his tranquil morning swim. In the end he swam away to the far bank where he climbed out on to a rock, shook himself dry and stretched himself out in the sun, ignoring us both. I showed off for him, diving underwater, disappearing for several moments and then appearing elsewhere.

Then I thought I'd show the tiger my best trick of all. With Oona standing in deep water, I clambered up her trunk, stood on her back, balanced myself, punched the air, yelling "Up the Blues", and then leaped off. When I surfaced I checked to see if the tiger was enjoying my antics. But he looked deeply unimpressed, far too busy washing himself to be interested in anything I was doing.

But I did notice that, as he was licking his paws, he kept giving us occasional surreptitious glances. And that made me think that this tiger was pretending. He may not have been fascinated by all our frolicking, but he did stay. I had the distinct impression that even if he wasn't going to show it, he liked having us there, he was enjoying our company – at a distance. I was busy skimming stones, I remember, telling Oona how Dad had taught me to do it, how the secret of success was to find a flat stone, when I saw the tiger get up, and give us a long look. Then with a twitch of his tail, he padded across the rocks, sprang down on to the beach, and disappeared into the jungle.

But this wasn't the last time I saw him, because after that I saw him in my dreams almost every night. By day I'd look for him everywhere and never see him, but by night he'd be there padding through my dreams, down on the farm in Devon maybe, having tea in the kitchen with us, or in the classroom at school gazing up at the poster of himself and reading the poem, or we'd be back in the jungle together, and I would be there walking alongside Oona and the tiger with my hand resting on his neck, and he'd be like a brother to me. And once, he was even walking with me and Oona and Dad down the Fulham Road on the way to Stamford Bridge to watch Chelsea play. The four of us walked out on to the pitch, and there were 40,000 fans cheering us. That was far and away the most

amazing dream I'd ever had in all my life. I always wanted to dream it again. But I never could.

I told Oona about it one day, the day I found the tennis ball. In order to explain the dream better to her, I had to remind her first about how I used to go to matches at Chelsea with Dad, and all about the pork pies and the crisps, about how Mum hated us eating 'all that rot' as she called it. I knew I must have told Oona everything about myself several times over by now. So it certainly couldn't have been the first time I'd mentioned football. But this was the first time that I'd been able to show her what football actually was, and how it was played. It didn't bother me one bit that she didn't look remotely interested – I told her anyway.

I'd just discovered the tennis ball in the river. Increasingly now, I kept coming across rubbish floating in the river, or caught up in the rocks maybe: plastic bags, Coca-Cola cans, all sorts, and once even a long yellow T-shirt, with horses galloping across it, that came down to my knees; a handy find. It was a bit on the big side. But I discovered I could adapt it into a fishing net too, so that meant I could at last discard what was left of my shorts.

And now I had found a tennis ball.

I gave Oona a demonstration of John Terry heading the ball, then of Lampard scoring a goal from a free kick into the top right-hand corner of the net. I raced along the river bank afterwards, arms raised above my head, celebrating wildly, showing her how it was done at Stamford Bridge. Oona wasn't even looking. She was enjoying herself far too much, lolling in the mud, rolling in it. Rolling in mud was Oona's ecstasy time, but I hated it when she had her mud baths because she would stay smelly and then dusty for days afterwards. I knew she loved mud, and that she needed mud to keep her cool, that it kept the parasites away; but as I pointed out to her, often, it was me who had to sit on her when she was smelly, and the more smelly she was the more she attracted the insects. I ticked her off every time she did it – not that it did any good.

It was at times like that, smelly times, that I preferred to run on ahead of her. With no more sightings of the tiger for a while now, I'd taken to doing this more and more, straying further and further ahead. Just as I had sensed the tiger's presence before, even when I couldn't see him, now I sensed his absence. He was gone, I was sure of it. Anyway, nothing frightened me that much any more about this place, not even the prospect of meeting the tiger face to face again. I had other company – that orangutan still shadowed us from high in the branches. He never came closer, but when he wanted to let us know he was there, he would

blunder about, deliberately I thought, and shake the branches at us. I was beginning to think of him now as quite a friend, and I noticed that Oona seemed to like having him around too.

I found that as my strength and agility grew, so did my daring. I knew my limitations though. I was no gibbon, no orangutan. But even so, every tree, every hanging vine, no matter how high or how difficult, was a challenge I relished. I could climb more swiftly now, gripping instinctively with my toes as well as with my fingers, and not looking down. I'd climbed trees a lot, back on the farm in Devon, but always nervously – to be honest, I'd never much liked heights.

But heights didn't bother me now, not any more. And when I ran, there was a new spring in my legs, an agility and a balance that had never been there. Everything came easier to me. I wouldn't scramble over a fallen tree trunk as I had before, I would leap it like a deer. I bounded and vaulted and hurdled with consummate ease. I was revelling in my new-found speed and stamina. I felt I could run all day now and never get tired. So when Oona was covered in mud from her wallowing, and stinking to high heaven, I was more than happy to run on ahead for ever if I had to.

But where the trees grew dense and impenetrable around us as they often did, then whether Oona was stinking or not, I'd have to sit up there on Oona's neck and put up with it, because I knew that for me this was the only way through the jungle. Oona could barge and trample her way through the jungle when it was like this. I couldn't. Of course she'd always take the easy route along a jungle trail if there was one. But if not, or if she was after particularly succulent fruit or leaves, then she'd just shove her way in and keep going, tearing aside the undergrowth with her trunk, or simply crushing it with her great bulk and treading it underfoot.

When the forest was this dense it was inevitably an uncomfortable ride for me, and a dangerous one too. To avoid the worst of the whipping branches and the tearing thorns that Oona was bludgeoning her way through, I had to lie face down along her neck. It only took one careless glance up ahead at the wrong moment, one lapse of concentration and the damage was done. It had happened all too often in the past – I had scars all over me to prove it. I had learned time and again that an open wound, however insignificant it might seem at first, festered quickly and healed slowly in this humidity, that prevention was always better than cure in the jungle. I knew that sores and cuts and insect bites were a real danger to me, that I had to protect myself.

So that was why I was lying down on Oona's neck and hugging myself into it

so tightly, when one morning we emerged from the jungle and into a clearing. It was safe enough now for me to dare to look up. Oona was standing still, her ears wafting gently, her trunk reaching up into the nearby trees. They were fig trees, and heavy with ripe fruit from the ground up. I sat up then and looked around me. I was amazed at what I saw – a secret horde of figs, an entire forest of fig trees, dozens of them all around the clearing.

“Must be enough here to feed a hundred elephants,” I told her, leaning over and patting her neck. “And you knew it was here, didn’t you? You just follow your trunk, don’t you?” Out of necessity, when orange coconuts and bananas were scarce, I’d had to eat a lot of fruit in the jungle that I didn’t much like, but figs were different. Figs were fantastic. Figs were my favourite. Figs were the best. I knew it was the same for Oona, that they were the delight of her life. It was obvious that we’d be staying put for a very long while, and that by the time we left the clearing, there wouldn’t be a fig left.

I heard the babble of a river nearby, and caught a glimpse of it glistening through the trees, and spotted a kingfisher, bright with sudden colour, knifing through the air. The whole place was alive with hummingbirds. It was a perfect paradise. There was all the water we needed, I thought, and plenty of high trees for safe sleeping nests. “We could stay here for ever, Oona,” I said. “I bet there’re fish in that river too, hundreds of them.” I tapped her neck then with my heel, as I always did when I wanted to be let down. But Oona wasn’t responding, wasn’t lowering herself for me. She wasn’t eating the figs either, and that was strange. I tapped her again and again. She still wouldn’t let me down.

That was when I first began to think we might not be alone, that Oona had sensed something, and wasn’t sure yet what it was. I heard rustling from across the clearing, and saw there were branches shaking, high up in a giant fig tree. I thought maybe that our orangutan must have got here before us, and had been waiting for us to arrive, that perhaps it was him who had found this place, and not Oona at all as I had supposed. There was more rustling then, more shaking of branches. Then I saw them, half hidden in among the branches, dark shapes drifting through the trees, shapes that became orangutans, not one, but dozens of them.

I spotted at once at least three mothers with their babies clinging on to them, and there were several youngsters there too, one of them hanging from a branch by a single arm, and all of them gazing in wonderment at Oona and me, unsure, anxious, but not alarmed. They were more like humans than any creature I’d ever set eyes on. Every face was individual, different, and their eyes were filled

with feeling and with curiosity. The younger they were the wisper their brown hair was, the more bald many of them seemed to be. They scratched like we do, yawned like we do.

I had seen that one orangutan often enough in the jungle, but only distantly, as he swung high up through the canopy. This was my first close encounter. I found myself staring back at them. The wonderment was mutual. For many long minutes it seemed none of us knew quite what to do. All any of us could do was stare. But after a while I could see that the more I stared the more agitated they were becoming. Wide-eyed with consternation, the babies were clinging ever tighter to their mothers, hiding their heads. One of them began to suckle his mother frantically, as if that might help these strange apparitions to go away. Many of them were still holding a fig to their mouths, their jaws frozen in mid-chew, not yet at ease enough to go on eating. Each was looking to the other now for comfort and reassurance.

I could see no real sign of aggression in them. A few of the younger adults were crashing around up in the treetops, but I felt that, as with the orangutan who had shadowed us for so long through the jungle, this might be just to let us know they were there and watching, and that we had better take care not to encroach any further on their territory. I realised that any sudden movement would have been a mistake. Oona clearly sensed this too. She was moving almost in slow motion as she began at last to lower herself and let me down. I followed her example, and stood there stock still looking up at them, only my eyes moving. Even so, I could see we were causing them great alarm. They were all climbing up away from us into the higher branches of the fig trees now, bunching together, mothers and infants hugging one another close.

By this time, Oona had clearly decided it was best to ignore them altogether, and just let them get used to us. She'd begun to feast on the figs from the nearest tree. The orangutans looked on, apparently happier now, and a few of them, mostly the younger ones, were beginning to feed again, but still keeping a wary eye on us at the same time. I thought the best thing I could do was what Oona was doing, what they were doing, and eat the figs. A dozen or so of these huge ripe figs were all I could manage, and I could reach these easily enough from the ground.

When I'd finished, I climbed high into the branches of one of the fig trees where I found myself a comfortable place to sit, and a perfect vantage point from which to observe the orangutans, who were now all much calmer, and intent on their feeding in the trees on the far side of the clearing. The three nursing

mothers had settled to their feasting like the others. They ate tidily, peeling each fig and enjoying it before looking for the next one, their babies clinging on to them easily as they clambered from one branch to another, constantly on the search for better pickings.

I could see that these mothers in particular were still a little wary, still not at all sure what to make of us. Sometimes, when they had gorged themselves enough, when they were at rest in between these fig feeding frenzies, they would sit in among the leaves, and just stare at me, trying to work me out, I thought, wondering what on earth I was. There was one moment, I remember, when it felt as if all of these dozens of orangutans, young and old alike, were gazing at me in awe and wonder. For all I knew I might have been the very first human being these creatures had ever set eyes on. One thing was for sure, I was as curious about them as they were about me. I couldn't help thinking that we didn't just look like one another, these orangutans and me. We were like one another. We were kindred spirits.

The older orangutans, the mothers with their babies, seemed content to look on from afar. It was the young ones who made the first move. They came swinging their way slowly towards me around the clearing, pausing every now and again to feed and to play as they came. When they moved from tree to tree they had a curious way of doing it. They didn't swing through the trees as the gibbons did. They weren't lithe and loose-limbed like them. They didn't look like natural born swingers. Their technique seemed slower and more considered, more cautious. They would hang there and sway themselves from side to side until they could reach out, grab the branch they were after, and then let that branch swing them into the next tree. Every time they seemed to judge the swing just right, holding on by three hands, or two hands and a foot, and then reaching out with the fourth for the branch of the tree they wanted to climb into.

But it soon became worryingly clear to me that at least three of the younger adults weren't going to be content until they got a closer look at me. They were coming to check me out. Encouraged by their example, all the other orangutans began to swing towards me through the branches. I noticed then, that one of the mothers, the darkest and largest of them, had the tiniest of infants clinging to her. She seemed to be leading a whole group of adults, most with babies hanging on to them. Everywhere I looked they were making their way towards me through the fig trees. I found I was being approached by orangutans from all sides now. It was unnerving, but at no time as they came nearer did I feel really frightened. This wasn't an attack, I was sure of it – or nearly sure anyway. This

was an investigation. But there were lots of them, and all their eyes were on me.

I did look around to see where Oona was, just for reassurance, but she had disappeared from sight. I knew roughly where she was though. I heard her browsing in among the fig trees, snorting and blowing and groaning from somewhere deep in the thicket. Once or twice I could make out *exactly* where she was, because I could see the branches shaking. I could hear them splitting and cracking as she dragged them down and broke them off. Like me, she had clearly decided there was no threat, that she could feed here in peace, and not be bothered. But it did mean that I was now left entirely alone with the orangutans.

They might have looked peaceful enough, these orangutans, but all the same, I was beginning to wish that Oona hadn't gone off and left me. I watched them moving in ever closer, until they were settled all around me in among the branches. I found myself completely surrounded. There was only one thing for it. I kept very still, sat back in the crook of the tree, crossed my legs, folded my arms, and tried to look as relaxed as I could. Now that they were this close, I noticed that they seemed to be wanting to avoid any real eye contact. They would dart looks at me, then look away. So, as I understood it, glancing was acceptable to them, but not staring. I thought it was best to do the same.

After a while the youngsters began to show off, each doing his best to out-dare and outshine the other, or so it seemed to me, as they swung through the fig tree below me, above me, and behind me. I hardly knew which way to look. They were all around me and so close now, far too close for comfort. One of them decided it would be fun to hang upside down and dangle there by one leg from a branch right above my head, so that as he swung we were almost nose to nose. Another had climbed on to the branch I was sitting on, and was shaking it vigorously, so that I had to hang on tight with both hands to prevent myself from falling off.

In the end, to my great relief, the three mothers came and sat nearby, and that seemed to calm the youngsters. They stopped their antics and sat there quietly eating figs and pretending to ignore me altogether. I did the same. I peeled a fig and tried to take absolutely no notice of them.



It was all a game, a game of patience. With orangutans this was clearly how everyone got to know everyone. *Just do what they do*, I kept thinking, *and it'll work out fine. Hopefully.*

Oona came back shortly afterwards into the clearing. I watched her as she stood there for a few moments looking around for me. I called down to her, softly, so as not to upset the orangutans. She didn't seem in the least surprised to find me sitting up there in the fig tree surrounded by an entire family of orangutans. I threw her down the fig I'd been peeling. She snuffled it up off the ground, before meandering away through the trees and down towards the stream beyond. I really hadn't been at all thirsty until I saw where she was off to.

Suddenly I was longing for a drink.

I was about to climb down and follow her when I saw that one of the infant orangutans had detached herself from her mother and was swinging herself slowly along the branch towards me. It was the smallest of them and, I presumed, the youngest too. She came and sat down so close to me, that I could have reached out and touched her. But I sensed that maybe this wasn't the right moment for me to move. I didn't want to do anything to scare her. I thought I would sit there, just be still and patient, and give my new friend the opportunity to introduce herself in her own time. Her mother – and this was the darkest of the mothers, the one who seemed to me like the leader, to carry most authority – was watching everything more than a little warily, as the young orangutan reached up, grasped the branch above my head, swung herself up and dangled there beside me, one-handed. I looked into her eyes, and smiled at her. I found myself laughing then. I couldn't stop myself. I was hoping it wouldn't frighten her off.

What happened next took me entirely by surprise. The young orangutan

reached out towards me, swung herself down on to my shoulder, then made her way along my arm, and sat down beside me. She kept looking up at me, then away. I didn't move. She touched my hand, tentatively at first, looking back at her mother, for reassurance, it seemed. Then she grasped one of my fingers firmly and tugged at it. There was a strength and determination in the grip of that tiny creature that I simply could not believe. I knew there was no point in trying to pull my finger away, because I knew I wasn't going to be strong enough to break free. The youngster lifted my hand to her nose, sniffed it, touching it with her lips as she did so, before letting it fall. She looked up into my face then and touched me on the ear. I was hoping she wouldn't decide to have a grab at it, and try to yank it off.

Maybe it was partly to prevent that from happening that I spoke to her then. I didn't mean to. The words just came out. "That's my ear you've got," I said softly. I wanted to see how much I could make her understand. It seemed the natural thing to do. I thought I'd try something. I reached my hand out very slowly, and touched the infant orangutan on her ear. "And that's your ear," I told her. I went on. "And I've got hair like you too, not shaggy and red like yours, but it's hair all the same. And you've got two hands and two feet like me. In fact, you and me, we're pretty much alike. What d'you think?"

The orangutan was looking up at me all the time I was speaking. There was an intelligence in her face that astonished me. This was no mere animal. I couldn't help thinking to myself that this little creature was as human in spirit as I was. It made me think then, that maybe, maybe, I could be every bit as animal as she was human. It was a new thought and a troubling one.

The youngster made her way back to her mother after that, and for some time afterwards I sat there in my fig tree among the orangutans, listening to Oona wallowing noisily in the river nearby. I imagined her whooshing herself down, drinking her fill, revelling in it, and I longed to climb down and join her. I was hot now, and listening to her in the river was only making me more thirsty than ever. I was longing for a drink, and for a swim too. I was sorely tempted to climb down and join her in the river, but I just couldn't bring myself to leave the orangutans. I sensed that these moments I was living through with them were to be treasured, that this close encounter might never happen again. I was so completely at one with these gentle creatures, so at ease. They wanted me to stay, I was sure of it. So I stayed. I decided I would drink later, swim later.

With a clap of thunder so close above us that it actually shook the tree, the rains came down. The downpour was so sudden and violent that within seconds I

could hardly see across to the other side of the clearing. Huddled together, hunched and bedraggled the orangutans were sheltering as best they could under the leaves of the fig tree. But in a gusting storm like this even the huge fig leaves provided little protection. I noticed then that two of the mothers had contrived a makeshift canopy of giant leaves, holding them up over their heads, just as I had learned to do. This way both they and their babies were staying a great deal drier than the rest, and a lot drier than me too. I found I was sitting on a branch that seemed to be exposed to the worst of the storm-blast, and with hardly a leaf for shelter. Like the orangutans, I just had to sit it out until the storm ended at last, as abruptly as it had begun, leaving the forest dripping, strangely silent and filled with mist.

Only moments later I looked down to see Oona come running through the trees into the clearing. I could see at once that she was unsettled, by the thunder perhaps, I thought, and that surprised me because she'd never shown any fear of thunder before. She was coming on a charge now, her ears flapping, her trunk lifted and trumpeting. She was warning me of something. Not since the tidal wave had I seen her this agitated.

Then I saw why. Coming out of the jungle behind her I saw three men – hunters with rifles. They were taking aim, not at her at all, and not at me, but at the orangutans in the fig trees all around. A volley of shots rang out. Every bird and bat in the jungle lifted off in a cacophony of shrieking and screeching. Trumpeting her terror Oona stampeded across the clearing and vanished into the undergrowth. I saw the dark-haired orangutan slump, and slip sideways from her branch. She hung there by one hand for a brief moment, her baby screaming now and still clinging to her, before they came crashing down through the tree to the forest floor. They lay there unmoving.

All the other orangutans were scattering, clambering, climbing, swinging, as high as they could go, as fast as they could go, into the tops of the fig trees. But they weren't fast enough, and nowhere was high enough. More shots rang out, and a second mother tumbled out of the tree, hitting the forest floor with a sickening thud. Stunned until now, I had come to my senses and was screaming at the hunters to stop shooting.

For just a few moments they were taken by surprise. They lowered their rifles and pointed up at me, gesticulating wildly and shouting at one another. But all too soon they began shooting again. One of the youngsters was hit in mid-swing as he tried to escape, and came crashing down through the branches above me. I had no time to get out of the way. I took a glancing blow from his body as it fell,

but it was enough to make me lose my balance. I tried desperately to grab a hold, tried to save myself, but I couldn't. I remember hitting the branches as I fell through them, remember thinking it was taking a long time to hit the ground.

Then I remember nothing.

I knew I was still alive because I could hear the sound of an engine, and some music. It was several moments before I could gather my thoughts enough to realise I must be in the back of some sort of pick-up truck that was being driven at speed over rough ground, rattling violently as it went, throwing me from side to side. A radio was playing, the music loud, and close by, the whole truck vibrating with the beat of it. And there was the sound of men laughing raucously from inside the cab. They had to be the hunters I'd seen in the clearing. I could feel fingers clutching me, clawing at me. Everywhere there were warm wet bodies clinging to me and crying. I was still trying to believe this might be the worst of nightmares, and I wanted to wake up from it. I kept trying to sit up, but I was being rocked around so much that I couldn't stay sitting for long. My head was swimming and heavy with throbbing. I could feel the blood running down my face from a cut somewhere on my forehead. That was when I understood for certain that this was too real, too painful to be the nightmare I was hoping it might be.

My vision might have been blurred, but I could see enough now to begin to make some sense of my surroundings. I was in some kind of a wooden cage, along with three little orangutans, all of them whimpering in terror, their fists gripping me tight, by my hair, my T-shirt, my neck, my ear, wherever they could get a hold. My feet were tied. There was no feeling left in them. I looked up to see where I was, where we were going. I could hardly see the sky above me for smoke. Everywhere there was a stench of burning. The truck was slithering and sliding in and out of every pothole and rut it was being driven through, jolting me violently against the bars of the cage. From the cab, I could hear the hunters whooping and singing. I gathered the three orangutans close to me, my arms around them to protect them all I could.

Now it came to me, and I remembered everything. I knew well enough why they were clinging to me so tight, and why they were squealing too. Every one of them had just seen their mother killed, and I knew only too well how they must be feeling. I hugged them to me, stroking them, talking to them, trying to console them all I could. But they were inconsolable. So many questions filled my head, all of them unanswerable. Who were these hunters? Why had we been

kidnapped? What were these men going to do with us? I closed my eyes, tried to calm myself, tried to think straight.

When I opened them, I found my vision was clearing itself at last, that everything was in focus again. That was when I became aware that there were eyes staring at me from the back of the truck, amber eyes, tiger's eyes. His paws were tied together, and they were lashed to a pole. He was lying there on a blood-soaked sack, his tongue tolling. This was the same face I remembered, the same tiger that had journeyed with us along the trail and in my dreams. This was our tiger.

But he was no longer burning bright.

“He is like God here”



The evening was darkening. The pickup truck was lurching down a muddy track into what looked to me to be a small shanty town of campfires and ramshackle huts scattered all over the valley and up the hillsides. And all around as far as I could see the whole valley was stripped bare of trees, a great scar of brown earth and rock slashed through the jungle, a muddy stream running along the bottom.

Everywhere in the gloom there were swarms of men and women and children working like ants all over the valley, most of them hacking into the hillside with pickaxes, others manning sluices, some – and most of these were children – labouring uphill under heavy loads, many of them covered in mud up to their waists. I thought at once this had to be some kind of mining operation, but I had no idea at all what they could be mining for. A pall of dark pungent smoke hung over the entire valley. There were shrill voices, angry voices, and the sound of children wailing. It seemed to me that we were being taken down into a kind of hell, a place of evil, a place of sorrows.

All through that terrible journey I had tried all I could not to look at the tiger, because I found that if I did my eyes would fill with tears. But it was almost impossible not to look at him, stretched out as he was right in front of me. I knew I mustn't give in to tears, that whatever happened, the little orangutans would be relying on me for everything now. I had to concentrate all my mind on their needs and nothing else. What they really needed of course was to feel their mothers' arms around them, their mothers' love, and most importantly the milk that went with it. They were all of them desperately hungry by now, sucking obsessively on my fingers and elbows at every opportunity. And when sucking proved fruitless, then they would use their teeth and gnaw at me, which was often painful.

But painful or not, I had to endure it and let them suckle on. Of course, there was little enough satisfaction in it for them, but it was clearly of some comfort to them, and I thought that must be better than nothing.

There were dozens of people running alongside the pickup truck now, as it slowed and then ground at last to a halt. Thinking this might be the last moment we would have together, I looked long into the eyes of the tiger. It was my way of saying goodbye, I suppose. But from those eyes, gleaming now at me in the flickering light of the fires, I drew all the courage and strength I knew I would be needing, to face whatever was to come. I promised myself then that whatever was going to happen to us, whatever they did to us, I would cry no tears in front of these kidnappers, these murderers. I had a powerful feeling that the tiger was handing to me at that moment the guardianship not only of the three little orangutans I was cradling in my arms, but of the spirit of the whole jungle.

We were already surrounded by an excitable mob, pushing and shoving to get a better look at us, at the orangutans, at me, at the dead tiger. I was ready for them. There would be no cowering, no fear shown. I gripped the bars and glared back defiantly at every one of them. Whooping in triumph the crowd dragged the tiger out first. My eyes filled with tears despite myself, as I watched them carrying him away swinging from the pole, head hanging, limp in death. They hauled out the cage then, and we were carried away, swaying like the tiger in front of me as we were borne along through the hubbub of the crowd, the orangutans crying in their terror, despite all I could do to comfort them.

The gathering crowd looked on in awe as the tiger passed by, but this soon turned to mocking laughter when they spotted me, and the little orangutans, in the cage. They rattled the bars with sticks, poking and jabbing at us. They made monkey faces at us, and some of the children were laughing at us and sticking their tongues out. Everywhere there was whooping and yelling, and shooting too. They were firing their rifles off over our heads in celebration. With every shot the orangutans clung tighter to me, pushing their faces into my chest, into my armpits, my neck, desperate for somewhere to hide.

All this time I was trying to confront the crowd with a fixed, unflinching stare, and as I did so, I recited to myself again and again, like a mantra, the first lines of my tiger poem: “Tyger, tyger, burning bright, in the forests of the night ...” I found the words sounded like a bugle call to me inside my head. They kept my courage from failing, they rallied my spirits.

This journey through those baying crowds was like torture for the little orangutans, and it only ended when at last they set the cage down outside a

rickety-looking wooden shack with two chimneys belching smoke at either end. The place smelled and looked like some kind of a cookhouse. I could see there were several pans left steaming on the vast stove inside, and there was a long low table covered with chopped vegetables and fruit outside, under the eaves. Everything looked as if it had been hastily abandoned in all the excitement of our arrival.

Nearby, the three hunters stood with their rifles, arms around one another, posing for photographs, the tiger stretched out on the ground in front of them. One of them – he had a red bandana around his forehead – put his foot on the tiger's head and punched the air again and again in triumph, to the evident delight of the crowd, who were cheering him wildly all the time. I remembered the red bandana now. I'd seen that man back in the clearing, and he'd been driving the pickup truck. He had the look of power about him, and seemed to me to be a ringleader. He was certainly the hero of the hour for the crowd. He hushed them easily, with a flourish of his hand, and began to make a speech, his foot still on the tiger's head.

It became clear very soon that he was telling them all the story of the hunt, and doing it dramatically, flamboyantly. I didn't understand a word of what he was saying of course, but I understood the gist of it: how they'd lain in wait by a river where the tiger came to swim and ambushed him; how they'd shot him in the water as he was swimming, and dragged him out. Then, and he was pointing at us in our cage now, he began to make much of how they'd shot the orangutans out of the trees. He counted out in English the number they'd killed: "One, two, three, four, five, six ..." Up to fifteen he counted, firing his rifle into the air to celebrate each one, and every time they roared their approval.

They had shot fifteen.

By this time the whole crowd was cheering and laughing. And then, he went on, they had discovered that one of them was not an orangutan at all, but a 'monkey boy'. He said that in English too, and that got the loudest laugh of all. There were more stories, more jokes, and then the bottles came out and the drinking began. Shortly after this, with the excitement over, they drifted away, carrying the tiger with them, leaving us in peace at last. The little orangutans fell asleep, but only fitfully, clutching me all the while.

But they didn't leave us alone for long. The mineworkers and their families were beginning to line up for their evening meal outside the cookhouse. As they passed by our cage with their bowls of food, most of the children would crouch down and have a look in at us, and it wasn't just out of curiosity either. They

teased us and taunted us, offering us food, and then snatching it away at the last moment. Some would put their faces to the bars of the cage and screech at me: “Monkey boy! Monkey boy!” One or two were trying out some words of English. “What are you? You monkey? You American monkey boy? You English monkey boy?” I sat there, confronting every inquisitive look, enduring every mocking grin, with the same cold gaze, all the while reciting the tiger poem silently to myself, over and over, keeping the spirit of the tiger alive inside me, keeping him strong, keeping me strong.

It was only when the last of them had gone, the cooks had left, and the cookhouse shutters were closed, that I felt I could try to get some sleep. I lay down and tried to stretch out as best I could. But the cramped cage gave me little room to move, and no comfort at all, and the little orangutans were constantly crawling over me, always on the search for food, pestering me for it almost constantly, and there was nothing I could do to help them. They weren’t going to let me sleep, that was for sure. I was as hungry as they were by now, but there was no way I was ever going to beg these people for food. With the smells of the kitchen still in the air all around me, it was impossible to put the thought of food out of my mind. I knew that only sleep could drive that away. So, even knowing it was unlikely in the circumstances that I would be able to make myself go to sleep at all that night, I closed my eyes and tried.

I was almost there, almost asleep, when I heard footsteps coming, then the sound of someone breathing close by. “Boy?” came a voice. I looked up to see a figure crouched by the cage. After a moment or two, I recognised him as one of the cooks I’d seen dishing out the rice earlier. He had a knife in one hand, and was holding some kind of a huge fruit in the other, the size of a small rugby ball.

“Durian,” he whispered. “It is for the orangutans. It is fruit. You give it to them. And you must eat it too. Smell bad this fruit, but taste very good all the same. They like it. All orangutans like it. You like too. You see. The hunters, they always say the same to me, every time they bring little orangutans back from the jungle. Many times they bring them back. They say, ‘You feed them, Kaya.’ But when they very young, very small like these orangutans, they are not so easy to feed. They do not like to take food from stranger, only from mother. But mother is dead, and they know this. They are very afraid. The hunters say to me, ‘Kaya, no one buy dead orangutan. Dead orangutan no use to nobody, not worth a flea. If they die we beat you, Kaya.’ Many times they beat me. I tell them it is not my fault, that I try my best, but sometimes little orangutans do not take fruit from me. They are not stupid – I tell them this. I say, ‘They know I am

not mother. They want food only from mother. They do not want to take it from me.' And then they die. These people, these hunter men, they do not listen. They just beat me. But I think little orangutans die from sadness inside, not because they do not eat. These ones are very sad, like the others. But I watch you. They think you are like mother. They trust you. I can see this. They will eat this food if you give it to them."

He cut the fruit and handed it through the bars to me. "Is it true?" he went on. "Are you wild monkey boy of the forest, like they say?" I took the fruit from him, but said nothing.

"Kaya is your friend, boy," said the man. "You remember this. I must go now. I come again."



When he'd gone I soon discovered that my problem wasn't getting them to eat, far from it. It was sharing it out that was the problem. They were pulling it apart, tearing at it, stealing from each other. I was hoping for some of it for myself, but there was no chance of that.

By the time they had finished, they were still looking for more, gnawing at the

skins again and again. But it must have been enough for the moment, because they all fell asleep soon afterwards, which was more than I was able to do. I had pins and needles in so many places. I was longing to move, but I didn't dare, for fear of waking the orangutans, who were still clinging tight to me, even in their sleep.

Kaya came back a short time later, as he had said he would, scurrying across to the cage, bent double as he ran, looking around nervously all the time. He crouched down, his face close to the bars. "They eat it all, this fruit?" he whispered, reaching in and picking up one of the discarded skins. I nodded, but said nothing more. Kaya looked back over his shoulder again. "You must be very good mother, I think. I have water for you, boy, and I have coconut. You like coconut? My son, he like coconut very much. I have son like you, not so young as you maybe. He is back home in my village. I work here because I must feed him, I must feed all my family, my mother and father too. He is very old man now, and sick. How can they live if I do not send them money?"

I wasn't sure he wanted me to answer, so I said nothing.

"I do not like what they do to this tiger, boy," he went on. "I do not like what they do with orangutans. But if I say what I think, they will beat me and maybe send me away, and then I have no work. Maybe they will kill me. These are not good people. They do bad things. The hunter men they say to me, 'Starve the monkey boy, no water, no food.' But I cannot do this." He handed me a bottle of water through the bars of the cage. I drank it without stopping, and afterwards wolfed down the coconut so fast that I almost choked on it, and then I washed it down with the last of the water.

As I handed back the bottle, I looked at him properly for the first time. He was a withered, diminutive man, his skin stretched thin over his hollow cheeks, as if life was draining out of him with every passing minute. But in his eyes he was strong, and kind too. "Thank you," I whispered.

"I will do what I can to save you, boy," Kaya said, "but I cannot do much. They watch me. Here everyone watches everyone."

"What will they do with us?" I asked him.

"They sell you maybe. Here they sell everything, the gold from under the ground, the trees they cut down, the orangutans they capture, the tigers they shoot."

"And me?"

He shrugged. "I do not know what they will do with you, boy. Maybe they sell you too. Tomorrow Mister Anthony comes from Jakarta. He is God round here.

He will decide. He decides everything round here. It is Mister Anthony who decides who works, who does not work, who lives, who dies. Everything. You sleep now, boy.” He got up to go, but before he left, he crouched back down again. “You say nothing about this water I give you, boy,” he whispered, “and you say nothing about the coconut, eh? If they know I have done this, they will beat me. You understand? You promise?”

“I promise,” I said.

Kaya smiled at me suddenly. I noticed then that he had very few teeth. “Your babies, they are asleep. I must sleep too. I will come again in the morning.” And he was gone into the night.

It was the longest night of my life. Only now did I truly realise just how much I had relied on Oona all this time, and not only for companionship. For so long she had solved all of my problems, kept me out of danger, been my protector and guide, been a mother and father to me. Now she wasn’t there beside me I felt alone and abandoned, and then suddenly angry with her too. I even found myself blaming her for running off as she had, and saving herself. Why hadn’t she driven the hunters away? Why hadn’t she stayed to help us? And where was she now? Maybe she would still come to rescue us. Maybe she was out there now, just waiting for the right moment. She would come charging out of the jungle to save us. Yes, that was it. She would come. She had to come.

It wasn’t the flies, nor the incessant chattering of the forest that would not let me sleep that night, nor the little orangutans who lay all over me, their bodies hot and sticky. Hope and dread kept me awake, hope that Oona might somehow be coming to our rescue, and dread of what would happen to us the next day if she did not. I couldn’t help wondering who this man was that Kaya had spoken of, this Mister Anthony from Jakarta who seemed to have the power of life and death over everyone in this place, including the orangutans, including myself.

I thought of escape too, even though I knew it was quite impossible. The cage was made of wood, but strongly made and well padlocked. The more I thought about everything the more anxious I became, and the more I came to believe that unless I could find some way of escaping that night, unless Oona came for me, then the next day I might very well be sold into some kind of slavery.

In the end, to stop myself thinking about such things, to stop the panic rising inside me, I began to say the tiger poem, out loud this time – but softly, because I didn’t want to wake the orangutans. I recited it again and again. Then I decided to hum to myself all the songs I could remember one after another, all the George Formby songs we used to sing back at home, with Dad strumming away

on his ukulele, ‘Chinese Laundry Blues’, and “I’m leaning on the lamppost at the corner of the street in case a certain little lady comes by! O me, O my ...”

And then, and I’ve no idea why, I found myself humming the Chelsea song, “Blue is the colour, football is the game,” the one Dad and I would stand up and sing, along with 40,000 others, at Stamford Bridge at the end of every match. It was during one of these familiar tunes that I must have drifted off to sleep at last.

I was woken by the sound of an engine, and the splash and crunch of a car coming down the track. I propped myself up on my elbows, but only as far as I could without disturbing the still-slumbering orangutans, and saw a huge black four-by-four with darkened windows, pulling up outside the largest of the shacks. I’d noticed it the evening before. It was the only one that had looked anything like a proper house, with proper glass windows, a veranda, and a low wooden fence all round, and there’d been a rocking chair out on the veranda right by the front door. I remembered thinking that seemed incongruously domestic in this sprawling mess of a place.

One of the workers was hurrying barefoot past the cage now to open the car door, and there were a couple of others frantically rolling out a length of matting, from the car to the steps of the veranda. Not wanting to be noticed, I shrank back in the cage, and lay down again. All I could see now were the doors of the car, its huge tyres covered with dirt, and a lot of mud-splattered legs running past me.

The man who stepped out on to the matting had highly polished brown shoes, and white trousers with immaculate creases. He walked away along the matting for a few steps. But then he stopped, turned round and came straight back towards me. He was carrying a shiny black stick. His fingers were covered in huge gold rings, at least one on every finger. Suddenly his face was there right in front of me, pale, puffed up and sweaty, with small, shining eyes, venomous eyes.

“So there you are,” he began – he spoke in a kind of drawl. “The little monkey boy they told me about. Sit up, Monkey Boy, let’s have a look at you.” He spoke English, but his accent was strange – I couldn’t think where it came from. All I knew was that this had to be the Mister Anthony from Jakarta that Kaya had told me about. This had to be the man who was God here. He mopped his neck with his handkerchief. “Do you know what you are, monkey boy? You’re a flaming nuisance, that’s what you are, a flaming nuisance, a lousy spanner in the works. You know something? I don’t like people who cause me problems. Best thing to do with a problem is to get rid of it, I reckon. So maybe I’ll put a bullet in your head, and throw you in a hole out there somewhere in the jungle. Problem

solved. But then, maybe ... maybe there's a way to make a dollar or two on you first. I can always kill you later, can't I? I'll have breakfast and think about it."

He stood up. "Bring Monkey Boy up to the house. But I want the little beggar washed down good and proper first. He stinks to high heaven."

As Mister Anthony walked away through the crowd – Kaya among them – I noticed they all lowered their eyes and bowed as he passed them by. "Now where's this lousy tiger?" he was saying. "Show me. I want to see the tiger. He'd better be a good one." He was escorted on all sides by a phalanx of bodyguards, all dressed in the same shiny black suits, every one of them carrying a rifle.

I was expecting they'd come back for me any moment, but it seemed like hours later, hours during which I tried all I could to banish the fears inside me. I tried to think of home, of Mum and Dad, of the farm, tried to see everyone and everything clear in my head, tried to imagine I was there with them, with Grandpa on his tractor, with Dad going to the football. If I was going to die, then I wanted these to be my last living thoughts. I had my eyes closed, and was trying to stay deep in my thoughts, when I heard them coming for me.

Strong arms hauled me out, holding me fast by the elbows on either side. The little orangutans clung on tight to me wherever they could, as the men frogmarched me away. Terrified though I was, it felt good to be upright again, and moving, not cooped up. A crowd was following us, wild with excitement, jeering and whooping, more and more of them all the time.

I could see ahead of me now what they had in store for us. One of the hunters, the one with the red bandana again, was standing there beside the cookhouse ready with a hosepipe, beckoning them to bring us closer. The crowd was all around us, encircling us. I wasn't that worried when they first turned on the hosepipe – it looked harmless enough. In a way I was even looking forward to it. It was going to be humiliating, being hosed down like this in public, but at least it would be cooling, refreshing. Then I saw that there was a smile on the hunter's face and I remember wondering why he was smiling.

I realised what was going to happen too late. The jet of water hit me full in the chest with terrific force, sending me reeling back across the circle. I bent myself double, cradling the orangutans close to me, turning my back on the water, protecting them and me as best I could. But there was no escape for them or for me, however much I tried to turn away from it, to dodge or duck or run. There was nowhere to run to. In the end there was only one thing I could do. I dropped to my knees, and cowered there trying to use my body to shield the screeching orangutans from the full blast of the water. This stinging torture seemed to go on

for ever, pummelling every part of me, all to the raucous delight of the crowd, until at last, mercifully, there was an end to it.

I was dragged to my feet. Determined not to cry, not to betray any sign of fear, I faced down my grinning tormentor, pursing my lips, clenching my teeth to hold back the sobs that were rising inside me. Hysterical in their pain and fear, the little orangutans squealed pitifully. I did what I could to comfort them, whispering to them all the while as I was led away. But they were beyond consoling.

Dressed in an immaculate white suit, Mr Anthony sat there in his chair, waiting for me at the top of the veranda steps, his dark glasses glinting in the sun. At his feet lay the skin of the tiger, my tiger, Oona's tiger. There were two large hunting dogs one on either side of him, eyeing me from the top of the steps. Mister Anthony waved his stick, and at once the guards let go of my arms. I looked around. There must have been hundreds of people standing there, hushed now to silence, watching and waiting. I saw Kaya outside his kitchen, wiping his hands on a cloth. Our eyes met for a moment, and I recognised the sympathy there. It reminded me that at least I had one friend in this place of horrors. That was something. It gave me hope. It gave me courage.

"So, my little monkey boy," Mister Anthony began, pointing his stick at me. He was making sure he was talking loud enough for everyone to hear. "You see what I did with this tiger. And I know what I'm going to do with those orangutans. But I'm still trying to work out what I'm going to do with you. Maybe I'll let you go, give you a head start, and then set my dogs on you. How would you like that? All I have to do is say the word, and they'd hunt you down and tear you into little pieces. That would be a whole lot of fun to watch." The crowd laughed at this, and I could see he liked that. He leaned forward. "Where did you come from, eh? How d'you get here? You got a mum and a dad, or are you just a little Pommy bastard?" He chuckled at that. "You even got a name, Monkey Boy?"

I did not answer. Mister Anthony was enjoying himself. This was a performance, a power game for the benefit of the crowd. This man was toying with me, showing me and reminding everyone there who the master was, that as Kaya had told me, Mister Anthony was God here. I screwed myself up inside. I would be fearless, as fearless as a tiger. I would make my voice sound out strong. I glanced at the dead tiger, and suddenly there was no room any more for fear. The anger raging inside me drove all that away. It was my anger that was speaking out, not my courage. "I won't tell you my name. And I don't care what

you do with me,” I said. “You can’t do me any more harm than you’ve done the tiger, can you? And it was you, wasn’t it? Everyone here does what you tell them. The hunters killed the orangutans, I saw them. They killed the tiger. But you’re the real killer. Everyone here is afraid of you, but I’m not.”

The crowd were becoming unsettled. Clearly many of them had understood enough of the tone of what I’d been saying to sense my defiance. Emboldened by this, I went on, in full flow now. “Why do you do this? What for? Just for the fun of it, is it?”

Mister Anthony stood up, took off his dark glasses slowly, menacingly, and then tucked them very deliberately into the top pocket of his jacket. He seemed to me more and more like a snake in human form, from his slicked-down hair, to his shining shoes, everything was smooth and slithery. He even moved like a snake, as he walked slowly up and down the veranda glaring at me. I could feel his fury rising. I knew he was about to strike. I could feel the knot of terror growing in the pit of my stomach. I determined to try to keep it there, not to waver, but to stand tall and look this vile man in the eye and face him down, no matter what he said, no matter what he did. The little orangutans clung to me as tight as ever. I could feel their need, I knew how much they were relying on me now, and that helped to keep me strong.

“Quite the little firecracker, aren’t we?” I’d caught Mister Anthony off guard, and that really bucked me up. I could tell he was trying to laugh it off. But it was a poor attempt. Anyone could see that he was seething with fury. “You’re right, Monkey Boy. Everyone here does exactly what I tell them. And it’s true. I killed the tiger, killed the orangutans, and I kidnapped those cutey looking little orangutans you’ve got wrapped round you. I’ve killed dozens of tigers, kidnapped hundreds of little orangutans. And I’ll tell you why, sunshine, shall I?” With every word he spoke, he was becoming more worked up, more enraged.

“Money, Monkey Boy. Do you know how much they pay me in Dubai or California for a tiger skin like that? Ten thousand US dollars. That’s right, ten thousand. And the Chinese, they pay a fortune for their insides, all their bits and pieces. Tiger medicine. They swear by it. The Chinese have lots of money these days, believe you me. As for those little orangutans of yours, I’ll be selling every one of those blighters back in Jakarta. Five thousand US a piece, just like that. They buy them as pets for their kids. Police officials, government officials, business people, anyone. I sell, they buy. It’s what makes the world go round, sunshine.” He brandished his stick. “You see that forest? You see it?”

“I see it,” I said. “So what?”

“It’s mine,” he went on. “I own everything in it. I own all the trees, every leaf on every one of them. I cut them down whenever I feel like it. Trust me, they make very nice kitchen cabinets, and the finest floors, the finest doors all over the world. I sell them in Japan, in England too, in Pommiland, which is where I reckon you come from by the sound of you. And I sell them back in good old Oz too – that’s home territory for me. But that’s not the half of it. Thing is, I got so many trees out there I don’t know what to do with them, and when I don’t know what to do with them, d’you know what I do? I’ll tell you, Sunshine, shall I? I burn them down, make a ruddy great bonfire of the forest. And then what have I got? Land, lots of it. And what do I do with the land? I plant more trees, thousands of them, millions of them. Not the big fellows, no they take hundreds of years to grow. I want my money fast. So I grow palm trees, to make palm oil. They grow fast, fast as grass. I can’t grow enough of them. The whole world is screaming for palm oil, to put in their toothpaste, their lipstick, their margarine, cooking oil, peanut butter. You like peanut butter, Monkey Boy?”

He didn’t wait for an answer. He was ranting now, his eyes blazing at me. “Palm Oil. You like biscuits, Monkey Boy? Palm oil. You like chips. They cook them in palm oil. And it gets better too, Sunshine. Heard of global warming, have you? Well, I like it. Yeah, I like it a whole lot. You see, on account of all this global warming they want to save the planet, don’t they? So now they’re after palm oil to run their cars, instead of petrol and diesel. All I do, Monkey Boy, is provide what the world wants. I’m just saving the planet. Oh yeah, and I’m saving the people too. I pay them. I feed them. I house them. They come from poor villages where there’s no work. They cut down the trees for me, burn the forests, plant the palm trees. They look for gold for me too, dig it out, and I sell it, like I sell everything else. That’s why I’m just about the richest man in Jakarta. I’ve got four houses, two Ferraris, and a garden bigger than a flaming football pitch. Not bad, eh? And you know what money is, Monkey Boy? I’ll tell you. Money is power.”

Now he was shaking his stick at me, a crazed look on his face, and screaming at me. “I could have you killed right now, and no one would ever know. These people wouldn’t say a dicky-bird, not a word, because they know what would happen to them if they did. You see, I own them body and soul, and they know it. They do what I say. If I told them to jump through hoops of fire, they’d do it. If I—” Suddenly he paused. “Now there’s a thought, Monkey Boy,” he said.

He was coming down the veranda steps now. Then he was right up close to me, calmer now, but still breathless from all his ranting. He was so close that I

could see the spittle on his lips. “Talking of jumping through hoops of fire, I don’t reckon I need to kill you after all, Monkey Boy. Aren’t you the lucky one? No, I’ve suddenly had a much better idea, and the best kind of idea too, a moneymaking idea. I’ll sell you, and I’ve thought of just the right place for you. I know somewhere they’d pay good money for a monkey boy like you, no questions asked. There are circuses all over India where you could be quite the little star – I’ve sold orangutans to them before. I can see it now, up there in lights. ‘Monkey Boy, the only all singing, all dancing monkey boy in the whole wide world!’ Can you do a few tricks, cartwheels, handstands? Can you jump through hoops of fire? No? Well, can you dance? Can you sing? Go on, give us a song, sunshine; do a little dance for us.”

I said nothing. Mister Anthony leaned forward and whispered in my ear. “You will dance, Monkey Boy, you will sing, or I will have those cutey little orangutans killed right now, right in front of your eyes. Don’t think I won’t. There’s plenty more where they come from, I promise you.” He stepped back. “You hear me, Monkey Boy? Dance!”

I knew without a shadow of doubt that this man meant every word he said, that I had to do what he said. I had no choice. So I closed my eyes and began to dance, shuffling awkwardly at first from foot to foot.

“Dance, you little bastard, dance!” he yelled. I tried to let my body go looser, so that I was swaying as well as shuffling, humming all the while now to the little orangutans, humming to help me dance. “That’s better, Monkey Boy, that’s better. Give us a little turn.” Mister Anthony was laughing at me now, and when moments later he began to clap, the whole crowd joined in, cheering and whooping as I danced about, keeping my eyes closed tight, to shut out the humiliation of it all. I just wanted to get it over with. But Mister Anthony wasn’t finished with me yet. He was shouting at me. “Now I want you to sing, Monkey Boy.”

I sang the first song that came into my head, sang it out as loud as I could, like I always did with Dad. I sang it with my eyes open, glaring up at him, looking him full in the face, unflinching. It turned out to be just the right song to have chosen, because it kept me brave, and because I could sing it with real passion. And it was a song that transported me at once to another place, another time, so that I could become another person altogether, so that I could make believe I was not there, that it was not me that this was happening to.

“Blue is the colour, Football is the game,

We're all together, and winning is our aim ..."

Soon the whole crowd had fallen quiet. I could sense every one of them listening. This seemed to unnerve Mister Anthony. He had suddenly had enough. He waved his stick to silence me. "So," he said, his smile thin-lipped and triumphant, "so now you see how it is, Monkey Boy. You're just the same as them. They do what I say. You do what I say. You all jump through my hoops. It wasn't so bad, was it? I think you'll do very well in that circus in India. More to the point, you'll fetch me a mighty good price too." Then he turned on his heel and walked back up the steps, wiping his feet on the tiger skin on the veranda.

If he hadn't done that, and if I hadn't been so angered by it, I don't think I would ever have had the nerve to do it. I didn't think about it. I just began reciting the tiger poem at the top of my voice, very slowly, very deliberately, so that everyone there in the crowd could hear every word, so that those who could understand the words would understand, and those who couldn't would understand their meaning and my meaning from the tone of my voice.

I was aiming every word at Mister Anthony's back, and every word was an arrow of defiance. I had nothing to lose, and I wanted him to know just how much I despised him, and everything he did. By the end of the first verse, Mister Anthony had turned to face me. The whole camp, the forest itself seemed still and silent. I went on, right through the poem, word perfect, my gaze on Mister Anthony never wavering, until the last verse, when I looked away, because I felt the tears coming into my eyes then, and I did not want him to see them. I had eyes now only for the tiger. I spoke the last lines to him, for him, and for him alone.

*"Tyger, Tyger burning bright
In the forests of the night.
What immortal hand or eye
Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?"*

When I had finished, the crowd stayed hushed. I saw that same flicker of uncertainty on Mister Anthony's face. It was a victory of sorts – for me, for the little orangutans, for the tiger. I knew, after all that had happened, and with all that was going to happen to us, that it was only a little victory, but it meant a great deal to me all the same. It meant I had not surrendered, that I could at least hold my head high as I was led away through the crowd, back to our cage behind

the cookhouse.

I sat there all day long in the cage with the orangutans, trying to comfort them as best I could. There were always dozens of curious miners and their families around the cage, pushing and shoving to get a better look at us. And although most of them came only to mock, there were a few families, often those with small children, who just squatted there gazing at us, fascinated, it seemed, as much by me as by the orangutans.

When they dared – and they dared more when I smiled at them, I discovered – some of the smaller children in particular would reach in and touch my hair, and would even let the little orangutans hold on to their fingers. They would giggle then, and I loved to hear that. There was a curiosity and a gentleness in their eyes that gave me new heart, and as the day wore on I needed that more and more. I could feel my spirits sinking fast, as the heat and the hunger and the thirst got to me, and to the orangutans too. Thankfully they slept a lot, but when they woke they would be looking incessantly and urgently for food, begging for it, and I had none to give them. All I could do was hug them, talk to them, stroke them. But it was never enough.

It was some comfort to me that I could see Kaya chopping his vegetables, stirring over his stove all day, and ladling out endless meals for the miners and their families. It was fast becoming clear to me that in this place, everyone was expected to work – men, women, and the older children too. They worked long hours, from dawn to dusk, with little time off for rest or for meal breaks. They had to scoff their food down in a great hurry, and were always overseen by foremen, who strutted about everywhere, blowing their whistles and harrying them back to work, threatening them with their sticks, if they ever thought anyone was malingering.

I sat there trying to ignore the delicious smell of cooking food wafting across from Kaya's kitchen. It kept reminding me just how hungry I was. The orangutans could smell it too, which was a relief to me, because after a while they stopped pestering me for food, and hung on to the bars, looking longingly across to the cookhouse. One or two of the children did try to feed them scraps through the bars of the cage, but the foremen soon shouted at them and shooed them away.

All this time Kaya never once even glanced in our direction, and I began to wonder if he had forgotten about us altogether. As it turned out, he did come again, but it wasn't until darkness fell that evening. The familiar night chorus from the jungle started up, and that was a great comfort to me, to know it was so

close. But it was soon drowned out by the sound of music pulsating from Mister Anthony's house, and there was raucous laughter and wild whooping going on inside. I was sitting there thinking about how it would be for me in the circus in India, whether there'd be elephants. I was hoping there would be, then I got to thinking about Oona again, longing for her to come for us, praying she would. And that's when I saw Kaya coming running through the darkness towards us, from the now deserted cookhouse. He had a basket with him. He crouched down beside the cage, and put his finger to his lips.

He had brought us more fruit, but it was a different sort of fruit this time, with a coarse, prickly skin that he cut and opened up for us. The orangutans fell on it at once, and gorged themselves. I wasn't quick enough, and was quickly reduced to picking up their scraps, so I was over the moon when Kaya took a small bowl from his basket and handed it to me through the bars. It was rice! I put my back to the orangutans and shovelled it into my mouth before they even noticed I had it. Luckily for me they were still intensely occupied eating their fruit. Kaya had brought us bottles of water too, enough for all of us. I helped each one of them drink it down, then I drank the rest myself, until there wasn't a drop left. Kaya waited until I had finished drinking before he said anything.

"I like very much this poem you spoke," he whispered. "I know it also. I learn it in my mission school long time ago, when I was a boy like you. Fine poem. It stay in my head for ever, I think." He looked about him nervously, then leaned forward. "Listen, I have bad news for you. I serve the food in the house for Mister Anthony and the hunters. They have big party in there. They celebrate killing of the tiger. I hear them talking. They are telling him you must be killed, because you have seen their faces. You know who they are. You could tell the police. It is against the law to kill tiger, to take orangutan. If they are caught they go to prison for long long time. They know this. So they tell Mister Anthony, "Do not sell him to the circus. You must kill this monkey boy." I am very much afraid Mister Anthony will do this. You know his face too. You know too much. You must leave this place. You must escape."

"But how?" I asked him. "Look at that padlock. There's no way of getting it open without a key. Have you got the key?"

Kaya shook his head. "No," he said. "But I have been thinking, and maybe we do not need a key after all. What is it you say in English? There is more than one way to skin a rabbit. Listen to them. They are busy with their drinking. If we are lucky, if we are careful, they will see nothing, they will hear nothing. I will bring knives from the kitchen. I have knives like saws, very sharp. It is easy to do I

think. I will saw, you will saw. It will not take long to cut through the wooden bars, and then you will be free, the orangutans too. And the jungle is very near. You go to the top of this track, cross over the other side, and you are there. You are wild boy. I think you know very well how to hide in the jungle. But when you go you must go fast, and you must not stop. Mister Anthony's dogs. When he finds you have escaped, he will send them after you."

"Won't they know it was you that helped me?"

"I do not think so. This Mister Anthony, I have been cook for him in his house since he was a little boy. When he was young he was not so bad, you know; maybe a little greedy, like many of us I think. But the greed in him, it grew, and became the devil inside him. And now he is a bad man, a wicked man. He does not trust me, he does not trust anyone, but he will think I am too frightened to do this thing. And before I hear you speak your poem today, he was right to believe this. All my life, until now, I was frightened, like everyone here. Then I listen to the tiger poem. I remember it. I see the skin of tiger lying on the veranda. I see you and the orangutans shut in this cage. I see men and women and little children working like slaves all around me, and I am not frightened any more."

He got up to go. "I come back very soon. I bring you coconut too. I go now."

Kaya was as good as his word. Within minutes I saw him emerging from the cookhouse. But almost at the same moment the door of Mister Anthony's house opened suddenly, and a shaft of light spilled out into the darkness. Two men came staggering down the steps, one with a rifle over his shoulder, both of them loud with drink. Kaya froze where he was, and for a moment I thought they might not see him. But they did. One of them called him over, and Kaya turned, walking towards them slowly, reluctantly. When they shouted at him he broke into a limping run. I could see that he had the coconut in his hand, that the other hand he held behind his back, and I wasn't sure why, until I saw the blades of the kitchen knives glinting darkly. One of the men snatched the coconut out of Kaya's hand, slashed off the top of it with a machete, drank the milk, burped loudly, and hurled the shell to one side. Then, un-slinging his rifle, the other one came stumbling across towards me. As he came closer I recognised him as a hunter from the forest. He was the hosepipe one, the one with the red bandana, the one I feared most.

"Monkey Boy, Monkey Boy," he called out in a mocking singsong voice. "This time I shoot you proper, Monkey Boy." He was aiming the barrel of his rifle right at my head. I hugged the orangutans close to me, turned my head away, closed my eyes, and waited for it to happen. I filled my whole mind with

thoughts of Dad and Mum and Grandpa and Grandma and Oona, and held them there, so that they would be with me right to the very end. For long long moments nothing happened. Then I heard howls of laughter. I opened my eyes, to see the two of them walking away into the darkness, arms round each other's shoulders, hysterical with drunken giggles. Kaya waited until they were well and truly gone, before he ran over to the cage.

"We must work quickly," Kaya whispered. "No talk. No noise."

He handed me a knife. We chose a bar each, and set to work at once. The bars were thick, the wood hard, and each of them seemed to take for ever to saw through. But it wasn't the time it was taking that worried me so much. It was the noise we were making as we sawed. It sounded loud, loud and rasping, too loud to be a frog, too rasping to be any part of the jungle chorus. I was sure that sooner or later someone must hear it. We couldn't do anything about the noise, but I could do it quicker. I got up on to my knees, so that I could saw harder, work faster. It wasn't at all easy, because any movement inside the cage was so restricted, and because the orangutans would keep clinging to my arms and my shoulders. From time to time I was forced to stop sawing altogether so I could detach them and resettle them elsewhere.

Kaya had told me the knives would be sharp, and they were too, and with serrated blades. After several minutes of frantic sawing there was a wide enough gap in the bars. I handed the orangutans out to Kaya and then wriggled through myself, tearing my T-shirt. Kaya put his hand on my shoulder as I stood up. He handed me the little orangutans one by one, and they clung on. "No time to say nothing," he said softly. "You go now. Quick. Whenever I say the tiger poem I will remember you. When you say it, you remember me. Now go, go fast."

Doubled up, I ran off up the track, slipping and sliding through the mud as I went. I discovered very soon that it was quite impossible to run with the three orangutans attached to me. I would have to walk, but walk as fast and as silently as I could. Nothing else mattered now but to reach the safety of the forest before our escape was discovered. I reached the broad forest track, hurried straight across it, and plunged almost at once into the forest beyond.

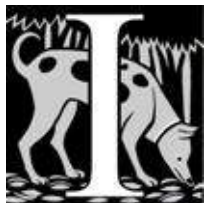
And as I walked on into the night, Dad's words kept coming back to me. "You can do it, Will. Keep going. You can do it!" It was this echo in my head, this and the thought that Mister Anthony's dogs and hunters might already be on my trail that drove me on to greater and greater efforts, when my whole body was screaming at me to stop for a rest. I knew I mustn't stop. The clinging orangutans were as much a part of me now as my own arms and legs, a constant

reminder that if the dogs caught up with us, it wouldn't only be me they would tear to bits.

I walked on from darkness into dawn, and through all the next day, stopping only for a few brief minutes to let the orangutans drink from a river, and to drink myself. But I soon realised that even this short stop had been a mistake. When I tried to go on again afterwards my legs had stiffened, my feet were on fire with pain, and far from being reinvigorated, all my strength seemed to have drained away. I knew I could not go on much longer. I wanted to believe that I must have put enough distance between ourselves and Mister Anthony's mining camp by now, that any pursuing dogs and hunters could never catch us up.

I had to tell myself this again and again, to reassure myself it was true, before at last I was convinced it was safe to stop. I found the right kind of tree, climbed high into its branches, where we made ourselves a sleeping nest of branches and leaves. The rain came down then, hard and straight, but I was too tired to care. I curled up, clutching the little orangutans close to me, and slept like the wild boy I was.

Other One



I was woken by the orang-utans stirring around me in the nest, then climbing all over me. I pushed them off. I was too sleepy to cope with them. They gave up on me after a while and two of them began to wander off, climbing in among the branches nearby. Still half asleep, I let them go where they wanted. I knew they'd come back if they needed me.

One of them was trying to drink some rainwater from a hollow in a tree, another was chewing on a young leaf bud. But the smallest of them stayed closer to me – she always did – never letting go of me, even as she gnawed one-handed on a piece of bark. All of them were alert to everything that was going on around them, always looking, listening, scenting. If there was any danger, they would very soon let me know. I was still too exhausted to care much about anything. I drifted off to sleep again, but slept only fitfully.

I remember I was having one of those strange, deeply disturbing dreams, where you somehow know that you're only dreaming, but all the same it's terrifyingly real. All I wanted to do was to wake up, but I couldn't. I could hear the baying of hunting hounds. Oona was standing there at the edge of the clearing, the fig trees all around. Everywhere the ground was littered with the bodies of dead and dying orang-utans. Then out of the forest came the hunting dogs. Mister Anthony was there with them, with his hunters, and the dogs were baying for blood. Oona was trumpeting, tossing her trunk at them, as the dogs leaped at her. All the trumpeting and baying sounded loud in my head, so loud that it woke me at last.

I sat up, suddenly aware that the little orang-utans were clambering all over me, clinging to me for protection, that the jungle was alive with alarm calls. I realised then that the baying had not only been in my dream, that it was real enough. It was coming from somewhere below me in the forest, not that far

away, and closer all the time. I could hear men's voices now. I saw them then – hunters with dogs yelping and straining on their leashes, some with machetes, some with rifles. They were coming our way. I counted two dogs and half a dozen men with rifles, one with a red bandana. But none of them looked like Mister Anthony.

They were right underneath us now. There was nothing else to do but to lie low in the sleeping nest, hold on tight to the orang-utans, and hope and pray they wouldn't move or whimper, that the hunters wouldn't look up and see us. I buried my face in their hair, willing them to be still, not to make a sound. I could hear the dogs yapping and yowling, as they rummaged through the leaves at the bottom of the tree, searching for the scent we must have left there. I was sure they must find it sooner or later, and that it would lead them directly to us. I closed my eyes.

I didn't breathe.

For several heart-stopping moments I lay there listening to them snuffling about, pinning all my hopes now on the rain that had fallen the night before, that it might have washed away the scent of us. Then I heard them moving away. I could breathe again. I dared to look down, and saw that one of the dogs was still reluctant to go. He was agitated, excited. I was sure he'd found something, that he was on to us. But the hunter in the red bandana yelled at him, jerking him on his lead, dragging him away. They were gone.

For a long time afterwards I could still hear them moving further and further away into the forest, slashing and beating their way through it, shouting at one another as they went. With every moment their voices became more distant. It seemed an age before the chatter and screech of the jungle quietened down around us. Only then could I really be sure they were gone.

Even so, I knew I had to stay where I was with the orang-utans, that the hunters and the dogs might not be gone for good, that they could be back. One thing was for sure: from now on I must at all costs try to avoid moving about on the forest floor. That was how the dogs had found our trail. I couldn't risk it again. We would have to live as orang-utans live, up in the trees, where we would be out of harm's way. How I would do it, or whether I could do it, I had no idea. But I knew there was nothing else for it. I had to try.

Once I started looking, I soon discovered that we didn't need to go down on to the forest floor anyway, that there was enough food up here to live on, all the fruit we would need, if only I could get to it. A few trees away there were orange coconuts and some bananas too. I spotted the same kind of prickly fruit that

Kaya had given us back in the cage. I'd seen that growing high up in a nearby tree. I thought there was a good chance I could reach most of the fruit I could see. It would be difficult and dangerous, but it had to be done. I would have to leap from one tree into another.

I knew I was taking my life in my hands, but I had no choice. There was plenty of fruit there, all we needed for days. I had to try. I left two of the orang-utans in the nest – the little one wouldn't be left – and made my bid for the fruit, climbing and swinging through the branches, never once looking down. I made it, I made it there and back, again and again. We would have all the fruit we needed, for a while at least.

We were all right for drink too. There was milk from the orange coconuts. It took a while to stab through the outer skin with a pointed stick to get at the milk, but it was worth the effort. I had to fight the little orang-utans off to have my share. They loved it as much as I did.

But we had to make do with water mostly. The orang-utans always seemed to find enough, from the giant leaves that were so often filled and refilled with rainwater, and sometimes from the hollows of trees where it always seemed to be plentiful. We might have had to share the water with frogs and beetles and all sorts, and it might not have tasted that wonderful, but it kept us going, kept us alive. Above all we were safe up here. It was all that mattered.

The more I thought about it, the more I felt sure it was best to stay where we were, that there was no point in running anyway. Down on the forest floor we could bump into the hunters and their dogs at any time. I had no idea where they were, and no idea which way to go. So, what would be the point? I was already lost, I knew that. I could be going round and round in circles for ever in this jungle. I could even end up back near Mister Anthony's mining camp, the last place in the world I ever wanted to see again. No, staying put was best, staying put was safest.

So for many days and nights I tried to live as orang-utans and gibbons did, high in the trees, feeding off them, living off them, hiding in them, sleeping in them. I kept reminding myself of a lesson Oona had once taught me, that I had to set aside all hopes, all expectations, and to live only for today, because it was the only way to survive. But that was a great deal easier said than done.

My constant hope was that Oona might somehow find me. I kept the hope alive in my mind every day, every night. Often I'd find myself lying there in our sleeping nest telling the little orang-utans all about Oona, about how she'd saved me from the *tsunami*, about how one day she would come and find us in the

jungle. But it was a hope that was fast fading with every passing day. I went on telling them about her, promising them she would come, because deep down I needed to keep believing it might be possible, that however unlikely it might be, a reunion with Oona could happen. They seemed to love gazing up into my face as I was telling my stories about her, reaching out to touch my face with their fingers, and sometimes with their lips too. Kissing, I discovered, was not just for human beings. And nor was storytelling.

I remember I was lying there once in the sleeping nest, telling them all about the farm in Devon, about Grandpa and the tractor, when I heard a sudden hooting from high above us in the canopy. It sounded like an owl. At once an image came into my head – of Mum sitting on my bed when I was little, and telling me a story about an owl who was afraid of the dark. And here I was, like an owl up in a tree, telling a story, just as she had. I cried for her that night, and for Dad, for the first time in a long while.

Living so closely together up in the trees, I was getting to know the three little orang-utans as individuals now, and as companions too. In a way it was a bit like being back at school again. These were the guys I hung out with now, my new gang, my best mates. We ‘did stuff’ together, not the same ‘stuff’ of course as with Bart and Tonk and Charlie, but it was ‘stuff’ all the same.

I suppose that was why I decided in the end to call the orang-utans Bart, Tonk and Charlie. They were all very distinctive characters, so I twinned them up with whichever friend back home seemed to suit them best. The biggest of them, the strongest, and certainly the most pushy, and probably the eldest, I called Tonk. He had less hair than the others, just like Tonk back home, and like that Tonk too, he could be a bit boisterous and rough. But Tonk could sulk when things didn’t quite turn out the way he wanted. Bart on the other hand, was a gentler soul altogether, always in Tonk’s shadow, but a lot cleverer than him. He was the one who could always seem to work out how to find the leaves with the most water in them, when none of the others could, or how to use sticks best when he was probing for ants. Ants, I was discovering, were a special orang-utan favourite. Tonk’s hair was lighter in colour, and he had the deepest set, darkest, most thoughtful eyes.

So the littlest of the three I had to call Charlie. I wasn’t sure, but I’d always thought Charlie had to be the one that had belonged to the mother orang-utan I remembered from the day of the slaughter in the fig trees, the dark-haired one that the other mothers had all looked to as a leader, the one I’d seen falling out of the fig tree, that I watched hitting the ground, still clutching her baby. Charlie

was definitely more of a loner, quickly becoming more adventurous than the other two, and increasingly independent of them, though still very attached to me, literally. She was also a girl – there's a way of telling these things – unlike the Charlie at school. It made me smile every time I thought how furious Charlie would have been if he knew he'd been turned into a girl. But then of course Charlie shouldn't really have been that upset, because Charlie was a name that could be used both ways, so to speak. So it was fair enough, I reckoned, to call Charlie, Charlie.

Charlie might have been the most adventurous, but she was the most sensitive too, the most easily depressed, and by far the most affectionate. She and I had already become inseparable. She'd often wake me up in the mornings by prising open my eyelids, and then – nose to nose – she'd look deep into my eyes. She liked to do hugging too, lots of it, and kissing too. She liked to kiss my nose in particular, I don't know why.

She had thin wispy hair that stood up on the top of her head, so that she looked in a permanent state of shock. Her eyes looked like upside-down commas facing one other. There was something comical about her, but like a clown, always a sense of sadness too, even when she was fooling around and showing off. She was the best athlete of them all, which was just as well, because Tonk and Bart could gang up on her sometimes. But she always had the speed and the agility to swing away and get herself out of trouble. The boys could get jealous of her, and were inclined to give her a bit of a hard time if I ever gave her too much attention. So I did all I could to share my affection out as evenly as possible.

In the end I found that I couldn't stay up there in the sleeping nest where we'd made our home for as long as I'd hoped. The trouble was that the little orang-utans frequently fouled the nest, and it soon began to smell, and that brought the flies. Besides, we were fast running out of accessible fruit where we were. I was having to climb further and further from the nest to find it, taking greater risks all the time. If I'd had the strength and skill I would have been able to move through the trees like an adult orang-utan. I'd seen, on that terrible day in among the fig trees, how they'd reach out, grab a branch, bend it, then let the spring of the branch swing them across into the next tree where there was more fruit.

But I couldn't do that.

I could climb well enough by now, and fearlessly too. I was balancing and leaping more confidently all the time, but I knew I'd never be able to swing through the jungle like an orang-utan. I didn't have the strength, in my arms and shoulders, nor in my fingers. I didn't have the flexibility.

I realised that sooner rather than later I was going to have to risk it. I would have to climb back down to the forest floor, and go on a search to discover another suitable tree where enough fruit was growing to keep us going, a tree from which I could climb across into others just like it, where the leaves were broad and large enough to collect water, and most importantly of all, where I could find a promising nest site with enough foliage around to hide us from any prying eyes on the ground. But I was still reluctant to make the move, to take the risk.

As it turned out it was something else altogether that finally persuaded me that we had to move on. One afternoon in the heat of the day, as we all lay resting in the sleeping nest, I heard the sound of rustling from somewhere high above us. I thought little of it, but the more it went on, the more the little orang-utans became alarmed. They kept squeaking, and darting frantic looks upwards. To begin with I couldn't see what it was they were getting so agitated about.

Then I saw it, the dark shape of a large orang-utan, moving stealthily through the canopy. He was sitting there studying us now, scratching his neck, yawning, his eyes never leaving us. It was obvious he had no intention of going away. He'd come to stay. I didn't have the impression he was annoyed with us, and certainly not angry. He wasn't displaying or shaking the branches at us, but he wouldn't leave us alone, and the little orang-utans were working themselves up into a frenzy of anxiety. It occurred to me after a while that the orang-utan up there was telling us in his own way that this was his tree, that we should move on, and that if we didn't, then he might turn nasty. I realised by now that the only way I could calm the little orang-utans down was to move, and move now. But even after I'd made up my mind, I spent just a few moments sitting in the nest, listening out for any telltale alarm calls from the jungle, before finally deciding it was safe to climb down.

Once back down on the forest floor, all three of the orang-utans clung to me more tightly than ever, terrified, I think, that the orang-utan might be following us. I didn't see him or hear him again, and in fact I soon forgot about him altogether. But they didn't. I talked to them softly, hummed my songs to them – I'd found they liked the Chelsea song best – and the further we walked the more I could feel them relaxing. I was becoming less worried myself too, about being caught on the ground by the hunters and their hounds. I wasn't looking any more for a new tree to climb into. I was thinking of something else entirely.

It was the first stream we came upon that put the idea into my head, the same idea I'd had a long time ago when I'd been with Oona: that if I followed a

stream, then it must lead me to a river, and I could follow any river to the sea. And maybe, maybe, there was just a chance that Mum might be there, that she might have survived, might still be alive. I thought I had put all that out of my head a long time ago, but I found the hope was still there. It was possible. She could be looking for me right now. I couldn't stay in this jungle and hide for ever, hoping that Oona would come and find us. I had to get out, I had to try to find Mum. I would stick close to the stream and go wherever it led me. I would find a tree where we could lie up each night, feed as we went, just keep going.

It was then, as we were walking along the banks of the stream, that I noticed the little orang-utans seemed rather nervous of the water. To begin with, they wouldn't go anywhere near it. But they didn't much like being left on the bank either. The more they saw me enjoying it though, drinking it, swimming in it, washing in it, the closer they dared to come to the water's edge. Charlie was the first to dip her finger in, then to try to drink from it. Then all three of them were doing it, nervously still, but doing it all the same. But however much I tried to encourage them and tempt them in, they drew the line at following me into the water to swim.

As we travelled on day after day, I never ceased to be surprised at how quick they were to imitate me, how quick to learn, even when it came to walking. Although they would generally go about on all fours when they were walking or running, they would sometimes now get up on two legs, especially if they were close to me. Charlie in particular seemed to prefer it, and would often walk upright alongside me, holding my hand.

I had only to throw a stick, and one of them would pick up another stick and do the same, and then like as not they would all join in. Whatever I did they liked to be doing too, except swimming. When the time came each evening to find a tree for the night, they would help me make a sleeping nest. They'd be folding in the twigs and branches, weaving them into a solid base, then pressing down fresh leaves for bedding. They were clever with it too, working things out for themselves, finding their own way of doing whatever I was doing. Branches I could not hope to bend, they managed with ease, and they seemed to know instinctively what branch was needed and where. There was such power in their arms and shoulders, and in their fingers too.

The longer we were together on our journey down the stream, the more I came to wonder at just how similar we were. The orang-utans seemed to me to be capable of so many of our emotions and feelings: affection, jealousy, fear, pain, anger, sympathy, empathy, joy and sorrow. I saw that they learned just as we

learn, by example, and by trial and error. And like small children they loved the fun of play. It was when we all four played together, hiding games, ambushing, chasing, wrestling with one another, that I became aware of just how much they trusted me now, how much they saw me as one of them. As far as they were concerned I was their mother. As far as I was concerned, they were my children.

But what I truly loved about these creatures was how *unhuman* they were. They seemed quite incapable of any kind of calculated violence or cruelty, such as I had witnessed in Mister Anthony's camp. These were peaceful creatures, generous-hearted. Yes, I had known people like them – Kaya for one, my own family, and my friends back home too. But the more I thought about it, and I thought about it a lot, the more I was coming to believe that deliberate cruelty was to be found only in humankind, men like Mister Anthony who killed for greed and pleasure, men who destroyed the world about them.

Whenever we'd found the right tree and settled in for the night, we would very soon discover we had inquisitive visitors from all around the forest. The first to come were usually the gibbons, swooping and swinging down through the canopy above to check us out. They would stay for a while, howling and hooting at us, showing off their astounding athletic versatility. When they'd finished a performance, they would sit around for a while watching us, but sooner or later they would get bored and leave. I never wanted them to. I could have watched them for ever. Their acrobatics were amazing, flowing, graceful, balletic, so effortless it seemed to me, that at times they were actually flying.



With the gibbons gone, we were often investigated by whole families of long-tailed lemurs. And redbottomed monkeys with flashing eyes would approach us through the trees and watch us, but they never came too close. All of these visitors were nervous enough to keep their distance. They were just curious. The young orang-utans showed little interest in them. They kept their eye on them, but they didn't seem at all fearful.

It was only when that same orang-utan appeared one morning in the canopy above our sleeping nest, rummaging around as if he meant us to notice him, that they became at all alarmed.

The moment I saw him, I had no doubt it was the same orang-utan who had bothered us before, and the uncomfortable truth was that if it was him, then like as not, he was following us. And only then, as this realisation sank in, did it occur to me that this might even be the same orang-utan who had shadowed Oona and me through the jungle all that time ago. He didn't scare me, but as the days passed and he was still up there, still following us, it did unsettle me.

The little orang-utans, on the other hand, seemed to get used to having him around, and ignored him almost completely. He was so often with us – more often than not now – that we all began to think of him as a travelling companion,

though he wasn't very companionable as such. I gave him a name – the others had names, so I thought I should. I thought of calling him Big Mac, after my old head teacher – but that didn't seem fair on the orang-utan. In the end I couldn't think of a proper name, not one that suited him anyway, so I called him 'Other One'. I'd call up to him sometimes, and wave. "Morning Other One," I'd say. I'd only get a long dark look in reply, of course. He was good at long dark looks. Then after several days with us, he just wasn't there any more. I missed him. I think the little orang-utans did too.

I was beginning to find the long days trekking along the stream more than a little disheartening. Other streams did join it, and it joined other streams, but it never became the river I was looking for, the one that would take me to the sea, and back to Mum. And that was another thing I wasn't coping with well at all. In my mind's eye I kept seeing that great green wave coming in, and the devastation it brought with it, and I realised more and more that I was hoping for the impossible. I would follow the stream, I would try to get to the sea, I would keep going, but I knew in my heart of hearts that it was just kidding myself in my desperation to believe that Mum could have survived. I tried, as I'd tried before, to put that hope out of my mind once and for all. I had to try to concentrate all my energies on the little orang-utans, on finding us food, on keeping safe, keeping strong.

Instead, I turned to the only real hope I had left – Oona. During the day I was always too busy looking after the little orang-utans to think of her that much. But every night now as I lay listening to the forest around me, I'd make a point of closing my eyes and thinking of her. I'd wonder where she was and what might have become of her, how long it would be till I saw her again.

I had no idea how she was ever going to be able to find me in the immensity of this jungle. But I told myself she would, that she was out there somewhere, that she was alive. We were living under the same stars, the same moon, listening to the same din of the jungle. Every night I tried to fill my heart with fresh hope, hope that she was still looking for me, that one way or another our paths would cross. Another reason then to follow the stream, I thought. She needed water, she loved water. If I hoped hard enough, I thought, then it might happen, it might. Keep believing – every night, it was the last thing I told myself – just keep believing. It wasn't surprising then that she appeared in my dreams as often as she did.

So when I woke one morning and heard the trumpeting of an elephant sounding out distantly through the jungle, I thought that I must be imagining it,

still in my dreams. Only when I heard it again some time later – more fully awake by now – did I begin to dare to hope that it hadn't been a dream, that my ears might not be deceiving me. Charlie was sitting on my shoulders, grooming me, delving into my hair with her fingers, an established morning ritual by now. She stopped her grooming. She had heard it too. She climbed at once on to my lap, her eyes wide with alarm. Tonk and Bart were already gone from the nest, playing somewhere nearby, but they came scurrying back, and sat there with Charlie, all of them clutching me. Still not allowing myself to quite believe it, I waited until I heard it again. When it came this time, it was louder, closer, more urgent.

It was real!

I wasn't imagining it. The trumpeting echoed through the forest. Gibbons and lemurs scattered screeching high into the treetops. Clouds of birds and bats rose into the air, filling the forest with their thunderous din.

The little orang-utans were becoming frantic by this time, as the trumpeting sounded out again, and again, and again. She was calling me, I was sure of it. It had to be her! It had to be Oona! But now it seemed to me as if the trumpeting was coming from further away. She was moving away from me. I had to go after her. I had to let her know I was there, that I was still alive. I was yelling out now at the top of my voice, terrified that the moment might have passed, that it was too late, that my last chance of rescue was gone for ever.

I did not hesitate any more. I was on my feet in the sleeping nest. With the little orang-utans clinging on where they could, I began the long climb down, talking to them all the way, reassuring them as best I could. "We've got to find her," I told them. "She won't hurt you, I promise. Just hang on." And hang on they did, like limpets, their sharp little nails digging into me, as I shinned down the tree to the forest floor. Leaving the stream behind us, I set off through the jungle as fast as my legs could carry me, in the direction of Oona's last trumpeting call, stopping every now and then to call for her, to listen for her.

But all too soon, with no new trumpeting call to guide me, I lost any sense of the direction I should be going. I found a track and followed it through the forest, hoping and praying she might have found the same track and be following it too. Suddenly it occurred to me that the hunters and their dogs followed tracks, maybe this track, that I could just as easily be walking towards them, as towards Oona – or away from her come to that. But even as I was thinking all this, I dismissed it as unlikely. I hadn't heard or seen anything of the hunters in a long time now. They must surely have given up the chase by now and gone back to

Mister Anthony's mine. There was a risk, though, and I knew it. But I had no choice. If I was to find Oona, I had to take the risk. I had to go on looking for her, go on calling for her. So, time and again I stopped, cupped my hands to my mouth, and shouted out as loud as I could, "Oona! Oona! Oona!"

It was loud enough to upset a few starlings and doves and to send them fluttering skywards, and to flush a pair of squawking peacocks out of the undergrowth. But I could tell that my voice was not carrying, not far enough anyway. The jungle was simply soaking it up, stifling the echoes. Even so, I never gave up trying. Every time I called her, I'd stand there and listen, waiting for a response, listening for it, longing for it. But none came.

The little orang-utans clearly hated it whenever I stopped to shout for her. They kept hiding their heads against me, clinging to me and to one another. I think they must have thought I was angry with them. I stroked them, put my arms round them and hugged them. "It's all right," I told them. "It's all right. Only once more, I promise you. I'll call her just once more."

Ahead of us now I saw there was a great mound of grey rock rearing up through the trees from the jungle floor, a miniature mountain shaped a bit like a giant ant hill. That was the place to do it, I thought. If I could manage to climb to the top of it, then maybe my voice might carry further. I knew it was going to be a difficult climb. And it was too. Handholds and footholds were difficult to find, the rock face wet and treacherous, and all the time Charlie was hanging tight round my neck, half throttling me. Somehow I made it. Standing at the top I took a deep breath, and tried again, for the last time. "Oona! Oona! Oona!" Around and around I turned, sending my call out into the jungle in all directions. I did not stop until my throat was raw, until I could shout no longer. There was no answer except for the rasping of some nearby frogs that I must have disturbed. Once they'd begun, others answered until the whole jungle was loud with frogs.

I sat down on the rock in deep despair. I did not doubt for one moment that it had been Oona out there, that she had been searching for me, calling for me, and that she had now wandered away out of earshot. We had been so near to one another, yet so far. I put my head in my hands and cried. Almost at once little fingers were prising away my fingers. Charlie was looking up at me, reaching out and touching my mouth. Her eyes were telling me that she didn't like to see me sad, that I had her, that I wasn't alone.

"I'll be fine, Charlie," I said, wiping my tears away with the back of my hand, and I knew I had to be too, that I mustn't give in to despair. I had to be fine, I would make myself be fine. "You've got to chill, Will." I said it out loud.

“That’s what Dad used to say, Charlie. You’ve got to chill, Will. Where there’s a Will there’s a way – that was another one of his jokes. He was full of jokes, my dad.” But no words, not even those could lift my spirits. I closed my eyes to stop the tears coming again, and they would have come too, had Charlie not insisted on opening my eyelids too. I was thinking that Charlie, just like Oona, spoke with her eyes. She was telling me to cheer up. So I did. I smiled back at her, and I could see that made her happy again.

She heard it before I did, and looked up. So did Tonk and Bart. They weren’t alarmed, but they were excited, surprised. Then I saw him too, high above us, swinging through the branches. It was Other One. He’d come back. I was so pleased to see him. But there was something strange going on, something I couldn’t understand at all. I thought I could hear him breathing. But that wasn’t possible, because he was far away, thirty, maybe forty feet above us. Yet I was definitely hearing the sound of breathing, heavy breathing.

In fact it wasn’t just breathing, it was heaving, it was puffing and blowing and snorting. Then I knew. Then I understood. No one puffed and blew and snorted like that, except Oona. As I stood up, I saw Oona come wandering out of the trees towards the rock, her trunk reaching slowly up towards me, scenting for me, feeling for me. And walking along on all fours just behind her was another dark-haired orang-utan, a female. Like Oona, she had stopped now, and was gazing up at me.

“What kept you, Oona?” I said. And then the tears did come.

Burning bright



Once down off the rock, I set the three little orang-utans down on the ground. With Oona there towering over them, they were reluctant to leave me at first, but then Charlie seemed to recognise the dark-haired orang-utan as one of her own. She needed no encouragement after that. Giving a wide berth to Oona, she scampered over to what must have seemed to her at long last to be a proper-looking mother. Tonk and Bart followed, and soon the mother orang-utan was being besieged by all three. She looked a little overwhelmed, as they clambered all over her, but perfectly happy. I noticed though that it was with Charlie that she was at her most attentive, most affectionate.

Oona's trunk was the only part of her I could hug – I'd done it often enough before. I waited for the deep rumble of contentment that I remembered so well, and sure enough it came, vibrating all through her, and all through me too. It was so good to feel that wrinkled roughness again, to trace once again the patterns of the pinkish markings in her skin, to look up into her all-seeing eyes, to be wafted again by her great ears. She was still dusty from some recent mud bath, and a bit smelly too, but it was an old familiar smell, that I found as reassuring as the rest of her.

She was turning then, kneeling for me, her trunk curling around and lifting me up on to her neck. I was back where I loved to be, where I belonged. I caught a glimpse of Other One too, sitting high up above us in among the leaves, looking down on us all, satisfaction written all over his face, as if he had engineered this whole thing, had somehow brought us all together. I believed at that moment that he had, and I still believe it.

"Thank you, Other One," I cried. "Thank you, Oona." I was whooping and punching the air then, the sheer joy of the moment surging through me. "You see, Charlie, Bart, Tonk, I told you Oona would come looking for us. I knew

she'd find us. I knew it." But the little orang-utans were far too busy with their new-found mother, to be listening to me at all. They were all over her and all over each other too, squealing with excitement, jockeying for the best place to get the most attention. She was sharing it out as well as she could, but the longer I watched the more it became clear to me that little Charlie might well be her own baby, that she was without any question her favoured one. She was the only one she was allowing to try to suckle, her little fists clenched tight in her mother's straggly brown hair.

Bart and Tonk were not rejected as such, not pushed away. They were allowed to cling on, but not to interfere with Charlie. As I looked on, I felt overwhelmed by a huge sense of relief. Not only was I safely back with Oona, but the three little orang-utans I had looked after all this time had survived their ordeal, and were at last reunited with one of their own kind.

I noticed then for the first time that there was a livid red scar across the mother orang-utan's forehead, and that she often held her left arm up across her chest, supporting it if she could with her other hand, as if she was nursing a damaged shoulder. I was sure of it then. This had to be the mother I'd seen falling out of the fig tree that day, the one that had been lying there, dead as I had thought, with her baby still clutching her. And Charlie was that baby.

A bullet must have grazed the mother's forehead. She'd fallen out of the fig tree, and had lain there unconscious on the ground, while the hunters grabbed Charlie and carried her off. I knew well enough by now just how tight Charlie would have clung to her, how they must have had to tear her off her mother. The whole picture of the brutality of the massacre flashed through my mind then, enraging me all over again. But not even that could take away how privileged I felt at that moment, to be there to witness the tenderness of their reunion.

There was enough fruit and water to be found for us all to be able to stay where we were by the rock for the rest of the day. Other One hung around, literally sometimes, and watched from afar as the little orang-utans gambolled about, swinging in among the trees, ambushing one another. I'd never seen them so relaxed and happy.

Sitting alone up on the rock, with Oona busy at her feeding and the orang-utans at play, I've got to admit that after a while I was beginning to feel ignored, abandoned even. It was as if they had forgotten all about me. So when I saw the mother climbing up the rock towards me, and bringing the little ones with her, I felt very grateful to her. She came to sit nearby, watching me, considering me. I sensed caution in her gaze, but approval too, almost as if the little ones had told

her everything that had happened, about all we had been through together – which I knew was absurd, but I thought it anyway. And when after some time she reached out and touched my hand, I felt sure there was real affection in the gesture, and maybe even gratitude.

That evening the mother orang-utan climbed high into a tree, to make her sleeping nest, carrying all three of them. She went a great deal higher than I had ever managed. Again, I have to say I did feel excluded, which was ridiculous, I know, but it was why I left my rock, and went to lie down on the forest floor with Oona in the crook of her leg, braving the damp and the creepy-crawlies. I didn't want to be alone. I wanted to be close to her that night. I was missing my little family, and the intimacy of the sleeping nest.

But I had forgotten what good company Oona was, and what a good listener too. Never for one moment could I forget she was there. She was right beside me, the whole wonderful wrinkly, smelly, leathery bulk of her. I think I must have told her everything that night, all about Mister Anthony and Kaya and our escape from the cage, about the hunters and their dogs who came after us.

She kept touching me from time to time with the tip of her trunk, to reassure me perhaps; or maybe to reassure both of us, herself as well, that this had really happened, that we were together again, and not dreaming it. As I told her my story, leaning back against her side, hands behind my head, I could hear her stomach churning and gurgling and groaning. As I expected, of course, this familiar elephant melody would be accompanied by a formidable elephant fart whenever she felt like it, which was often. This was one of many reasons why I think I must have gone to sleep that night with a laugh in my heart and a big big smile on my face.

I was nudged awake next morning by Oona's trunk. She wanted me to get up. The first thing I noticed was that the jungle was filled with mist. Everything was lost in it, except Oona and the looming shadow of the rock, and the forest floor. Oona was unsettled, troubled by something, tossing her head. She wanted to be on her way, and she was in a hurry too. It was then that I began to realise that there was something wrong about the mist, something strange and unnatural. It didn't drift in among the high canopy of the jungle as I'd seen it so often before. Instead it hung low everywhere, clinging to the trees. It was swirling all about us, snaking its way through the forest. And it wasn't white, but almost yellow. It smelled different too. Now I knew it for what it was. It wasn't mist at all. It was smoke, drifting smoke. The jungle was on fire. The jungle was burning.

As I listened, I could hear, above me and around me, that all the invisible

creatures of the forest were on the move. Whooping, cackling, cawing and screeching, they were fleeing for their lives. I could only hope that in among them somewhere were the mother orang-utan and the three little ones, and Other One.

I felt Oona's trunk come around me, pulling me in. She was urging me to mount. I needed little encouragement. I climbed up on to her neck. She was on the move at once, striding out, almost on the run already. She lifted her trunk and trumpeted. Then she was charging through the trees in full flight. Because everything had happened so fast, I hadn't been able to collect my thoughts. It was a while before I could, and when I did everything became horribly clear. I remembered then what Mister Anthony had told me, every chilling word: "I burn them down. I make a ruddy great bonfire of the forest."

We were careering through the trees now. It was all I could do not to fall off. It was a while since I'd ridden Oona, and not since the day of the *tsunami* had she ever stampeded quite like this. It took me some time to find my balance again, my riding seat, but I rediscovered my old technique quickly enough. I gripped with my legs, dug my heels into her neck, and managed to ride the pitch and toss, clutching desperately on to any folds of skin my fingers could cling on to. But however fast Oona was running from it, the smoke seemed always to be there, all around us. In patches it was so dense now that I was forced to hold my breath until we were out of it, and that was terrifying, because once in the middle of a suffocating whiteout like this, I would wonder if we'd ever come out of it into clearer air beyond, whether I'd ever be able to take a breath again.

In the end, with less and less good air to breathe, I had to breathe in whatever there was, knowing even as I was doing it, that I had to be taking in as much smoke as air. I forced myself to make believe I was under water, not to breathe at all. But of course, I had to. So then I could only try not to breathe in deeply, not to gasp. But I couldn't help myself. All I could do then was to try to control the coughing that was racking my whole body.

But the harder I tried to stop myself from coughing, the more I began to choke, and the giddier I was becoming. My whole head felt as if it was filling with smoke. I had my mouth closed. But somehow it seemed to be finding its way into me through my eyes, through my ears. I felt myself fainting, and for a few moments I tried to resist giving in to it. But there was nothing I could do about it. I fell heavily on to the forest floor – I remember that – and lay there for a few moments, gasping for breath. But on the ground I found there was at last some proper air to breathe. I looked up, and saw that Oona was coming back for

me. Then she was trying to lift me, to get me to sit up.

With better air to breathe at last I recovered quickly. I had coughed and spluttered the smoke out of my lungs, and was thinking I was feeling just about strong enough now to climb back up on to Oona, when I felt myself being taken very firmly by the hand. I turned to see the mother orang-utan standing beside me, up on her two legs now, the three little ones clinging on to her. The strength in her grip was so powerful that, like it or not, I had to get to my feet and go with her, go wherever she wanted to take me, do whatever she wanted me to do. Her eyes were pleading with me, trying to make me understand. I knew she was telling me something. One look at her arm was enough to know what it was.

From the way she was holding it, I could tell it must be hurting her dreadfully. It was obvious to me then that she could not cope on her own any longer with all three of them, that she needed my help, that she was asking for it. When I reached out a hand, there was barely a moment's hesitation before Bart grabbed it, and swung himself up on my shoulders, where he grasped my hair with his fists, and hung on, painfully. Tonk followed suit, without even being prompted, and nestled himself contentedly in the crook of my arm. Seemingly satisfied now, the mother orang-utan released my hand, and set off along the trail ahead of us walking three-legged, with Charlie's arms wrapped round her, and looking back all the while at me over her mother's shoulder.

I was unsure at first whether I should follow her or not. But when the orang-utan stopped and turned to look back at us, I was left in no doubt then she was waiting for us, that she meant us to follow her, and that she knew exactly where she was going. I had the distinct impression that she was taking charge. Oona seemed to sense it too for she began to move on along the trail following the orang-utan, and without stopping to offer me a ride either. I was a little disappointed at that, until I thought about it. I'd forgotten just how intelligent Oona was, how wise. It took me a while, but I soon understood that she must have known I was far better off where I was, down on the forest floor, out of the worst of the smoke.

Progress was slow now. We were having to travel at the leisurely pace of the mother orang-utan. And in places, where the trail was overgrown, or where it disappeared altogether, we were having to make our way through dense undergrowth. But at least, as we went, the air was becoming easier to breathe for all of us. Little Charlie was still suffering a bit. I could hear her struggling for breath sometimes, wheezing and coughing. We kept moving all through the heavy heat of the day. Then, towards evening a sudden breeze blew up, clearing

the smoke at last.

When it came on to rain, when lightning crashed and thunder rolled and rattled over the jungle, it didn't bother me in the slightest. Bart and Tonk were hating every moment of it, burrowing their heads into whatever crannies in me they could find, an armpit or a neck, but I knew that if this storm could only last long enough, then it would put out any fire Mister Anthony had started.

With the smoke gone, and weary of walking now, I begged a ride up on Oona. I had Bart and Tonk still attached, but as we rode, both of them seemed surprisingly unfazed either by Oona, or by their novel mode of transport. Ahead of us, the mother orang-utan plodded on with Charlie, showing no sign of slowing or stopping, even though the light was beginning to fail. There was an intrepid determination about her gait. Uphill, downhill, she just kept on going. I could see that she knew where she was going too. She wasn't just wandering aimlessly through the jungle. There could be no doubt about it. This was a trail she knew well. She was our pathfinder, she was showing us the way. We would stop when she was good and ready to stop, and not before.

But then, high above us, I heard and saw that Other One was still with us. He wasn't shadowing us though, he wasn't simply accompanying us. He was going on ahead of us, swinging through the trees, in front of the mother orang-utan. It was he that was leading us on our way, not her. I'd got it wrong. She was following him, and we were following both of them. More and more I was coming to think of Other One now as our guardian orang-utan, our guardian angel, that maybe he had been all along, from the very start.

It was nearly dark when we emerged at last out of the forest, into a different world, it seemed to me, and a lighter world too. We were being led along a narrow track, that wound steeply ever upwards, a sheer cliff face to one side of us. The track was only just wide enough for Oona. She trod gingerly, as surefooted and as careful as ever, and I was thankful for that, because I could see there was a drop on the other side of the trail, hundreds of feet down to a river and to the canopy of the forest below. As I looked back I could see all across the distant horizon the glow of a great fire, still burning bright despite the storm, and above it a blackened, apocalyptic sky, flickering with forked lightning.

Oona had stopped in her tracks and I soon understood why. The mother orang-utan had vanished, disappeared with Charlie into the cliff face itself it seemed. But she reappeared some moments later. She was up on two legs now, and appeared to be waiting for us. As we approached her I could see that she was standing outside the mouth of a cave, and making it quite plain that this was to

be our refuge for the night.

Oona wasn't at all sure about this. She used her trunk as her antenna, satisfying herself that all was well before she ventured in. She took her time, and it was just as well. A sudden cloud of screeching bats came whirling out of the cave above our heads, a great roaring rush of them. This mass exodus seemed to go on and on. I was mightily relieved when it was over. Even after so long in the jungle, I still could never look at a bat without thinking of vampires. I knew they were only fruit bats, but they always alarmed me, particularly when they filled the air like this, in their thousands. Inside, the stench of the cave was so rank and foul that at first I could hardly bear to take a breath at all. But I got used to it.

The cave turned out to be a welcome resting place all the same, and not just for me either. I knew well enough that orang-utans loathed getting wet, and this at least would be dry. I liked dry too, even if the stench was foul. Oona seemed rather disappointed that there wasn't food about, but that didn't stop her searching. She found some in the end, as she always did. I could hear her exploring deep in the blackness of the cave. It sounded as if she was rubbing away with her trunk at the roof of the cave. Whatever it was she had discovered there – I thought it must be minerals or salt in the rock maybe – it kept her busy, and happy too. I could tell she was enjoying it, from the endless rumblings of satisfaction that echoed through the cave all night long.

I woke in the middle of the night to find Charlie crawling over me, her breath on my face, and the mother orang-utan sitting beside me holding my hand in hers. I thought then of Mum, of the night after we'd heard the news of Dad's death, how she'd lain beside me on my bed, how she'd held my hand all night. It was the first time that I'd thought about that in a very long time. I lay awake for the rest of the night, remembering but not crying. I felt strangely unaffected by it. I was remembering it as if it had happened to someone else. It was during that night in the cave that I think I finally accepted that Mum was really gone, that I wouldn't see her again, whether or not I ever got out of this jungle, whether or not I ever got back home. And there was something else too. It occurred to me that I wasn't sure I ever *wanted* to get back home at all.

At first light the mother orang-utan led the way out of the cave, down the treacherous track below the cliff, and then back down into the forest. For the first time now, I saw Other One down on the ground, walking on ahead of us all, way ahead – he liked to keep his distance wherever he was. He didn't only know the way, he also seemed to know where all the ripe fruit grew as well. Within a couple of hours we were feasting on figs again, but there was only one tree of

them. So between all of us we had very soon stripped it bare.

We were just about ready to move on when the mother orang-utan became suddenly agitated. She was swinging through the trees, calling out, searching frantically. I soon understood why. Charlie was nowhere to be seen. She wasn't playing in among the lower branches with Bart and Tonk where I'd last seen her. I wasn't too worried, not at first. Charlie was always wandering off from time to time – they all did. But once I'd thought about it, I realised that if her mother was alarmed, then she had good reason, and I should be worried too. So I was very relieved when, moments later, Charlie came scampering out of the undergrowth – until, that is, I saw that she was not alone.

Lumbering through the trees after her came a bear, not a bear like any other I had ever seen. It was small, and with a pale, pointed snout, but it was a bear nonetheless, and Charlie was running for her life. Only instinct could have made me do what I did. I ran at the bear waving my arms, shouting and screaming at the top of my voice. Taken by surprise, the bear stopped in his tracks and reared up on his hind legs, panting through his teeth. I could see his terrible claws, and the dark glint of anger in his eyes. For a few moments, moments that seemed like a lifetime, the two of us stood there confronting one another, as Charlie ran squealing into her mother's arms. I could feel my heart pounding in my ears. I wanted to turn and run. I didn't stand there because I was brave. On the contrary. Sheer terror had simply rooted me to the spot. I couldn't move. Then Oona was there beside me, tossing her head and trumpeting. The bear didn't think twice then. He turned and ran off into the jungle.



After her trauma with the bear, Charlie stayed firmly attached to her mother for days. They turned out to be days of the worst heat and humidity I had ever known, sapping my strength, draining my energy. There was fruit enough, and some water from the leaves. But I longed for a stream to plunge into. I longed to be cool. It was late one afternoon that we emerged from the shadows of the forest, where at least we had been protected from the glare of the sun, on to the edge of a vast plantation of small palm trees, tens of thousands of them, millions of them maybe, that stretched away as far as the eye could see, rows and rows of them, with little but bare brown earth in between.

Gazing out over this strange new landscape from high up on Oona, it was as if we had arrived on another planet. Within an hour or so of being in this arid place, I was longing for the rainforest we had left behind us. With all its dangers and discomforts, it had been alive with scents and colours and sounds. But only palm trees grew here, in this new planet, nothing else. There was no bird song, no clamour and chatter of the jungle, no butterflies, no bees, none of the hum

and hubbub of the world to which I had become so accustomed. In comparison to the jungle, this was, to me, a dead place.

But Other One and the mother orang-utan seemed to know their way even in this featureless plantation. With Charlie still clinging round her neck, the mother orang-utan followed along behind Other One, her pace as constant as his, both of them tireless in their determination to keep going. Oona would pause from time to time to feed from the young palm trees, tearing away the leaves to get at the soft hearts of them, which were clearly delicious to her. But if ever Oona stopped too long to feed, the mother orang-utan would soon turn and give us one of her meaningful looks, and pretty quickly Oona would move on again. With no tall trees to shelter us, the sun was cruelly hot. I asked Oona to let me down, and made my own makeshift sunhat, from a huge palm frond she'd torn off. It worked too. Holding it over my head did pain my arm a bit after a while, but at least it served to protect me, and Bart and Tonk too, from the worst of the sun.

It took us many long days and nights to cross the desert of palm trees. I came to hate this barren place with a passion, and not just because the travelling seemed endless and monotonous, not just because I was always hungry, always thirsty – all of us were, except Oona. That was bad enough. But it was worry that was getting to me, worry that if Mister Anthony's hunters caught up with us now there would be nowhere for us to hide, nowhere for us to run to. The plantation seemed to go on for ever on all sides. I wondered if we would ever come out of it, and for the first time I began to question the wisdom of our guides, Other One and the mother orang-utan. They seemed to me to be leading us relentlessly on into nowhere.

But I should never have doubted them. I remember one morning noticing that the pace of our walk had quickened, that Oona was striding out purposefully again, not just strolling along as she had been. I was wondering why, when I looked out ahead of me from under my palm-frond hat and saw the great trees of the rainforest ahead of us in the distance. My heart rose. It seemed to me like I was coming home, and that's what it felt like too when we got there. I loved being back in the shade of it, searching for its fruits again, hidden in the safety of it. But best of all, after we had been back in the jungle only a short while, we found ourselves coming out into a clearing, a clearing which turned out to be the banks of a river, where the water was wide, and softly flowing, and dancing in sunlight. I thought it was the most welcome sight I'd ever seen.

Other One led all the orang-utans down to the river's edge. I imagined that like Oona he must have had crocodiles on his mind, because like her he was

being very cautious. He took his time, looking up and down the river, before allowing them to drink their fill. Oona and I joined them, but of course, for the two of us, water wasn't just for drinking, it was for washing in, and it was for messing around in. It was here that I lost my yellow T-shirt at last. I pulled it off before I dived in, and when I surfaced I saw Bart and Tonk playing at tug-of-war with it. I yelled at them, but it was no use. A few moments later it was in shreds. So now I would have to go naked, as they were, as every creature in the jungle was. It didn't bother me one bit. In fact I wondered why on earth I had gone on wearing it all this time. *Out of habit*, I thought, *out of nothing but habit*.

As we cavorted in the river, the orang-utans on the shore looked on, as if we were both completely mad. We would have stayed there for ever if we'd had our way, but the mother orang-utan would have none of it. They were moving on already. She kept turning and giving us that same long and meaningful look. "Come along, children," she was telling us, "come along." I don't know why, but I presumed we would be following the river bank, and so we did, for a while. But Other One kept stopping and looking out across the river, before moving on again hesitantly. He seemed suddenly unsure of himself, as if he'd lost his way, and was trying to find it again.

I noticed also that the mother orang-utan was doing much the same thing. She was gazing across into the forest on the far side of the river. Then, with Charlie hanging on to her good arm, she was pacing up and down the river bank. Like Other One she seemed to be searching for something. Maybe, I thought, they were still checking the river for crocodiles. Both of them looked uncertain as to what to do next, or where to go. And that wasn't like them at all.

Other One stood upright for a few moments, looking upriver, downriver, the water lapping round his feet, the mother orang-utan right behind him. I didn't anticipate at all what happened next. But Charlie had clearly sensed something I didn't. She was clambering all over her mother, squealing in her anxiety. I could see she was longing to jump down and run away, but never quite found the courage to do it. Her mother's arm came round her, and held her firmly.

Then, to my amazement, I realised that Other One and the mother orang-utan were picking the spot. They were going down into the river. They were going to swim, and not for fun, not to cool off, but to get to the other side. Until then I had never imagined that orang-utans could swim at all. The little ones had never shown any inclination to go anywhere near water, unless it was to drink, and even that took some persuasion. Other One was leading the way, and she was following. They were up to their necks in the river now, and swimming, Charlie

clinging on, terrified. Oona looked as if she wanted to go too, so with Bart and Tonk hanging on to me and becoming ever more agitated, I shinned up her trunk and up on to her neck. Oona waited till we were settled, then made her way slowly down the bank and into the river. That was the moment, I remember, when I first began to feel strange. I thought it might be the water swirling all about us that was making my head spin.

I didn't know what had come over me. All I knew was that I was feeling suddenly sick, and that the spinning in my head would not go away. I tried not to look down into the water, tried to forget my giddiness. I kept hoping it would pass. Oona was deep in the river now, first wading, and then swimming out into the flow. I dug in my heels and sat there on her neck, my feet in the water, then my legs too. I had Tonk and Bart both clutching me tight round my neck, clinging on by my hair and my ears, and squealing, reminding me all the time that I had to concentrate. Somehow, I had to hang on, to keep my balance.

Out in the middle of the river the flow was eddying, and much more turbulent than it had looked from the bank. The river was rushing past me, the current far too fast for me to be able to swim if I fell off, especially with two terrified orang-utans clinging to me, half throttling me now. But then I could tell Oona's feet were on the river bottom and she was wading again. We were going to make it. Other One and the mother orang-utan were out of the water already, and standing there exhausted and dripping on the shore, Charlie still wailing in her mother's arms. In no time we were across the river too, clambering out of the water, up the bank the other side and into the forest beyond.

Almost as soon as we were in among the trees, I began to feel ill again. I remember the branches high above us rustling and shaking, that there was a lot of crashing about. It was as I was looking up into the trees to see what was up there, that I realised I couldn't see properly, that everything was blurred. I was finding it difficult to make any sense of what was going on around me. There were orang-utans up there, that much I knew by now, and not just one or two. There seemed to be dozens and dozens of them, and all swinging down into the lower branches to investigate us. But none of this seemed at all real to me. I felt I was drifting into a world of dreams. Yet at the same time I was sure I was still riding up on Oona, that Bart and Tonk were becoming more agitated than ever. They were choking me, and I was fighting for breath. I had a sudden pain in my temples, a throbbing that wouldn't go away, and I wished it would. All the while I was aware that I was being carried on through the jungle, accompanied by this boisterous, noisy escort of orang-utans.

It must have been late afternoon when I was brought out of the forest into a broad sunlit clearing where the grass was cut short, just as it was back home, and where there was a group of well-tended, wooden houses, and a jetty and a river beyond. There were well-tended flower beds, and washing hanging from a line. Now I knew I was dreaming. Sitting on the top step of one of these wooden houses, the door open behind her, was a woman dressed all in white.

When she stood up I saw that she was wearing loose floppy trousers with a brightly coloured belt tied around her waist, all the colours of the rainbow. She had on a tatty-looking straw hat. She came walking down the steps, and out across the lawn towards us, her pace quickening. The mother orang-utan scuttled on ahead of us right up to her, and took her at once by the hand. Other One seemed to have disappeared. I thought all this was impossible and odd, too odd to be real. But then, if I was dreaming, why shouldn't it be odd? Dreams were often odd.

"Mani?" said the woman, bending over the mother orang-utan so that their faces were almost touching. "It is you, Mani, isn't it? You've come back again. And you've another little one with you, I see. Not a year old yet by the looks of her. Is it all right if I say hello?" She put her other hand out then to Charlie, who took her finger, put it to her lips and sniffed it. Then she was looking up at me. I wasn't sure whether she was smiling at me or squinting into the sun.

"I think maybe you've got some explaining to do, Mani," she went on. "You know I always love to see you, Mani. I'm not complaining, not one bit, of course I'm not. I know how you like to come back from time to time when you feel the need, like a lot of my old girls. And that's fine by me. But would you mind telling me what on earth you've brought along with you this time? I mean, I'm sitting there on my porch, having a catnap in the evening sun, like I do. I open my eyes, and what do I see? My old Mani back again, and with a baby too. But this time she's brought along an elephant, two more little orang-utans, and, if I'm not much mistaken, a boy – a wild-looking boy at that – and without so much as a stitch on him. I mean, would you believe it? You wouldn't, would you?"

I could see she was smiling at me, and I felt at once that her smile wasn't one of politeness. It was a smile of genuine warmth, almost as if she knew me, had been expecting me. I liked her at once. I hated polite smiles, because I knew they were always empty. And I liked her also, because she looked so like Mum, a little older perhaps, but she smiled like Mum. She spoke like her. She was her. She had to be her. She was alive! I had found her!

I wanted to ask her so many questions, about how she had escaped the *tsunami*, about how it was that she'd known the mother orang-utan by name, how come the two of them had greeted each other like old friends. But somehow I couldn't speak the words. I couldn't make them come, and I couldn't work out why. And I wondered too why it was that when she was speaking I could only hear her as if she was speaking from somewhere far away. I could see her lips moving. I saw the concern on her face as she reached out her arms to me. I knew she was talking, but her voice seemed to be fading away all the time. The nausea was rising again in my stomach, and I felt a strange sense of detachment coming over me, as if I was leaving my body altogether. I longed only to fall asleep now. I tried all I could to resist, because I knew that if I gave in to it, I would be leaving Mum and Oona for ever, and I would be dead.

There was nothing I could do about it though. I was going to fall. My last thought was that Bart and Tonk must somehow have known it, because I could feel them hugging me even tighter, their fingernails digging into my skin so hard that it hurt. I heard myself crying out, and then I was falling into a whirlpool, a whirlpool of emptiness.

Sanctuary



I had no idea of the passing of time, nor of anything much, only that I must be ill, because when I was conscious, I knew that I was in bed and unable to move. I was either pouring sweat or shivering with cold. There seemed to be many different voices in the room around me, but nothing they said made any sense to me. I wasn't even sure if they were real voices anyway, or just inside my head. I wondered often if I was going to die, if this was what dying was like, but I felt so sick and weak I didn't much care one way or another.

I tried all I could to wake up properly and discover where I was, to find out to whom the voices belonged, and to understand what they were saying. But for most of the time I lay there unable to escape this strange limbo I was living in, somehow unable to reach the real world beyond, the world I remembered, that I hoped would be full of the faces and places I knew. I think I always believed I would get there, but I wasn't at all sure that when I did I would find myself in the living world, or in the world of the dead.

I woke one morning and saw there was sunlight streaming in through an open window beside my bed. I was lying in a small room. Above me there was a wooden ceiling and a paper globe lampshade like the one in the hallway back home. It was swaying gently. I turned my face towards the window because I could feel there was a cooling breeze wafting through. I breathed it in deep, so relieved I had woken up at last, and overjoyed to find myself in the land of the living.

I only really began to make some sense of anything when I saw Oona's trunk reaching in through the window. I hadn't the strength to sit up, nor to reach out to touch it, nor to speak to her, but I was sure that it would not be long now until I could. To begin with, I was never conscious for that long – sleep seemed always to be waiting to ambush me. But whenever I woke Oona, or some part of

her, was there at my window. That cheered me so much, lifted my heart every time. What I could be quite certain of by now was that when I next woke, Oona would be standing guard out there, waiting for me, and I knew she'd always be there while I was asleep too. It might be her trunk searching me out again, or her weepy eye looking in on me, or maybe it would be the great pink-grey bulk of her blocking the window. I didn't mind. It would be Oona.

Sometimes, when I woke, I found that I had been propped up on a pile of pillows. I could often see past Oona then, and catch glimpses of the wide green lawn with low wooden huts all around. I remembered this place. Beyond them was the forest, and the sounds of the forest. There were comings and goings outside that I could make no sense of at all. Strange games were being played out on the lawn. One moment it would be empty all together, except for a strutting peacock or maybe the occasional orangutan – once or twice. I did think I recognised Other One sitting there at the edge of the forest – and the next moment it seemed that the whole place became some kind of nursery or playgroup for tiny orangutans, all with someone to look after them, a minder or a nurse, and these women were always dressed in white.

The smaller orangutans, I noticed – and it made me smile each time I saw it – were wearing nappies. Some were being fed from a bottle, but mostly they would be playing, rolling and tumbling and clambering over their minders. Of course I looked at once for Bart and Tonk and Charlie in among them, but if they were there, I didn't recognise them. There were far too many of them, and they all looked so alike.

I would see a few older orangutans mooching around too, and usually the lady in the straw hat was out there somewhere, crouched down among the little ones maybe, or sometimes sitting cross-legged on the lawn, and playing with the older ones, talking to them. Once or twice I thought I recognised one of the mother orangutans I saw as Charlie's mother – hadn't the lady in the straw hat called her Mani? My memory was becoming less muddled now all the time, but it was still unreliably patchy. This orangutan had a little one always clinging to her, and she might have been Charlie, but I couldn't be sure. I couldn't be sure of anything. This whole orangutan nursery was so bizarre, so unlikely that sometimes I wondered whether what I was seeing was real at all, or whether it might all be part of some fantastical dream.

But I never doubted for one moment as I lay there that Oona was real, and that she was there outside the window. Even by night, when I couldn't see her, I could hear her rumbling away, groaning and chomping on her food, and farting.

Farting she did a lot. It was my constant lullaby and I loved it. Every time she did it, I absolutely knew that Oona could not be part of some crazy dream, because I could smell her. It was her constant presence, the reassuring sound of her, and that familiar smell of her, that began bit by bit to make me feel alive, and part of a real world again – however improbable and strange this new world might seem to be.

Sometimes I could smell lavender too. There were early mornings when I'd wake up to see the woman in the straw hat sitting on a chair beside me, reading a book or writing. Sometimes I still believed that she was Mum, because Mum too had often smelled of lavender. But then she would speak. She had a lilt in her voice that wasn't at all how Mum spoke, and I would know then that it couldn't be her after all. And I would remember that Mum was dead in the *tsunami*. It hurt my heart to realise it, but it was true. This was not Mum.

I longed to talk to this woman in the straw hat. I still didn't even know who she was. She'd talk to me, take my temperature, tell me how much better I was looking. She'd feed me, and bathe me, but I was still too weak to utter a single word to her. But with every day that passed I was making more and more determined efforts to communicate with her. She could see that I was, and would encourage me. But the effort always proved to be too much, and I would find myself drifting back to sleep again. It made me so angry and frustrated every time I gave in to sleep, but I couldn't help myself. My need for it was too strong.

I needed it, but I dreaded it too, because of the dream. It wasn't always exactly the same, but once it started I knew it would always end up the same way, and that was what I dreaded. It would begin well enough. I'd be riding through the jungle high on Oona. Everything was fine. I'd be frolicking with her in the river. That was fine too. Then I'd find myself up in a sleeping nest high in a tree, with Charlie and Bart and Tonk crawling all over me, and they'd be wearing nappies, and the lady in the straw hat would somehow be up there in the nest too. And all that was fine, and funny too.

But then without warning there was fire burning all around us and I couldn't breathe for the smoke, and I'd be looking everywhere for Dad, stumbling through the smoke, but I could never find him. I was running then through the jungle and the hounds were after me. Sooner or later I would find myself on the beach, still running, and the towering green wave was coming in, and I would see Mum trying to escape it, but it curled over her and she disappeared into it, and the green water was coming into my mouth and I knew I was drowning too.

That was always the moment when I woke up. I'd wake choking, and the

woman would be there, her arm around me, giving me water to drink. I couldn't tell her, but the last thing I wanted to swallow was water. I'd taste it and discover there was no salt in it, and only then did I really understand it had all been a dream. But at the same time I'd also remember that so much of the dream had been true.

The day came when I woke and felt I could sit up on my own if I tried. So I did, I managed it. And moments later when the woman in the straw hat came in carrying a tray, she looked so surprised. "Well you certainly took your time, didn't you? Weeks you've been lying there," she said. "Do you feel like a bit of breakfast? Will you be able to feed yourself now?"

"I think so," I replied, surprised at the sound of my own voice, surprised it was working.

She put the tray down on the chair, and sat down on the bed beside him. "You gave us all quite a fright, you know. But the doctor was right. He said it would take a while, but that you were as strong as an ox and that you'd come out of it fine, and you have. What's amazing is that you survived at all out there. What you need now, young man, is rest and a lot of good food inside you." She reached out and brushed the hair away from my forehead in much the same way as Mum used to do. At that moment the end of Oona's trunk curled in through the window.

"For goodness' sake, will you get that wiggly thing out of here and let the boy eat!" she said, pushing the trunk away. "Do you know that elephant has hardly budged since the very first day you came in here? And what an entrance that was! Naked as a newborn babe you were, did you know that? You gave me one look from up there on that elephant, went as white as milk and just tumbled off. Nearly flattened me you did when you fell. Ever since you arrived she's been moping around out there. She goes down to the river for a drink from time to time, but that's all she does, that's as far as she goes. We've had to bring her all her food because she wouldn't go and get it herself. I thought, to start with, she was just a lazy old thing."

"Oona," I told her. "She's called Oona, and she's not lazy"

"Pretty name," she said. "And I know now that Oona's not lazy, not at all, of course I do. She wouldn't leave your side, that's the truth of it. She'd have starved herself to death rather than leave you, honest to God she would. All very noble, I'm sure, but do you know, young man, how much an elephant eats? Tons and tons of the stuff, I'm telling you, and we've had to fetch it for her, every last leaf of it. I mean it's been nonstop, and what's more we've had not a word of

thanks from her.”

She got up and lifted the tray on to my lap. “Here. Breakfast. The ladies make it up specially for you, so you eat it now. They’ve taken quite a shine to you. We all have, if I’m honest. Orangutans we’re used to, but a boy – well, you’re the first.” She pushed Oona’s trunk away again. “Get out of it, will you!” And she wagged her finger at me. “And don’t you be letting her have any of it, do you hear me? Promise me now.”

But I wasn’t interested in food at all. I had other things on my mind. “Where am I?” I asked her. “What is this place? All these orangutans, and you ...”

“Questions, Will, questions. They can all wait,” she told me. “You and me, we’ve got all the time in the world to find out about one another, haven’t we? If you want to get better, and build up your strength, you need to eat. You’ve been very ill, you know. Some nasty little bug off the forest floor, the doctor said. You’re over it. But you must eat.” She smoothed my hair again. “I’m glad you came, Will. We don’t get many visitors out here.”

“You called me Will,” I said. “How d’you know my name?”

“Let’s just say that it’s a long story. I’ll tell you soon enough, when you’re better, when you’re fit and well again.” And that was all she would tell me.

I forced myself to eat, because I wanted to get better, because I knew she was right about that. But for days and days I had no real appetite. I didn’t have the strength yet to be out of bed for long, but I was getting bored just lying there talking to Oona through the window all the time. I wanted to be up and about. So one morning I ventured down the steps and walked out on to the lawn to be with the minders and their little orangutans. In fact, they seemed to me to be more like foster mothers than nurses or minders. In no time at all the orangutans became accustomed to my being there.

Oona didn’t come with me – she seemed to know when to keep her distance. I sat down, and at once they were right there, half a dozen of them, clambering all over me. And then I saw them – Bart and Tonk running across the grass towards me. They were in nappies now, and each of them had a foster mother of his own in hot pursuit. Best of all was when Charlie appeared on the lawn with her mother. She scampered over to me at once, and soon displaced the others, sitting herself on my head and grooming me, like the old days. Mani didn’t seem to mind. She’d just stay sitting nearby, keeping an eye on things. And that was when I noticed Other One sitting in the shade on the edge of the forest, watching over us all, but still keeping himself to himself.

After that I was out there on the lawn whenever I could be. If I wasn’t there I

felt I was missing out. Charlie was always full of beans, but I could see that there were many others who were listless and withdrawn, clutching on tight to their foster mothers as if they'd never let go. I was particularly drawn to these sad little creatures with their wild, frightened eyes. When Charlie and Tonk and Bart left me alone for long enough, I'd go and sit quietly for a while beside one of them, and hold out my hand. Many were far too nervous to take it, but some did, gripping a finger and clinging on. To be trusted, completely trusted, I was learning, is the best of feelings.

Oona would sometimes wander over to remind me she was there, that perhaps it was about time I paid some attention to her now. I couldn't walk far yet, so I'd sit on the steps of the house, hold her trunk and talk. She would snuffle at my hair, and do her groaning and her rumbling. She was happy.

These were peaceful times and healing days for me. My appetite and my strength were growing every day. I got to talk with many of the orangutans' foster mothers, many of whom could speak a little English. But whether or not we understood one another, I had the feeling that I had been 'adopted' by all of them. Sitting among them on the lawn I began to understand what a truly amazing place this was. I was living on an island sanctuary in the jungle surrounded by the river, in an orphanage for orangutans, set up by the woman in the straw hat, whom they all called Dr Geraldine.

As I had supposed, all these infant orangutans had a foster mother, who never left their sides. They fed them, played with them, taught them to climb trees, slept with them at night, and loved them. Little by little, they were helping me to make some sense of everything that had happened, how it was that Mani had brought us here for instance, how she herself had been one of their orphaned orangutans. Dr Geraldine had rescued her years ago, they told me – she'd been discovered caged up and locked away in someone's garage – and had grown up in this place, and lived like all the others with a human adoptive mother. Then, once Mani had been taught to climb, once she could feed herself and fend for herself, she had been released back into the jungle, but to begin with, only as far as the island itself, where the orangutans would be safe, where Dr Geraldine could keep a watchful eye on them to see how they were managing.

After some while living in this 'university of the jungle', as Dr Geraldine called it, they'd be taken away to a huge reserve – it sounded like some kind of national park – miles away upcountry, where they could live out their lives in the jungle proper, as wild orangutans. A few, like Mani, did find their way home to the orphanage again sometimes, but most settled, and were safe enough, so far as

I could understand, provided they didn't stray from the reserve, and provided that hunters didn't trespass on the reserve and kill them, or kidnap them, or burn them out. But this was happening all the time, they said. That much I knew only too well.

The orphanage, I learned, had been built almost single-handed by Dr Geraldine herself. She had saved hundreds, maybe thousands of orangutans, over the last twenty years or more, sometimes risking her own life to rescue them, they said. To begin with, she'd tried to care for them all herself, but very soon there were just too many of them. So she'd gone into the villages up and down the river to recruit the helpers she needed, to mother the little orangutans, and to try to teach them what their orangutan mothers would have taught them, until they were ready to be released back into the wild.

Dr Geraldine hadn't spoken to me herself about any of this. She had been kind, kindness itself, but she was sometimes away for a day or two – I didn't know where, and she didn't say. When she was home, she seemed always busy and preoccupied, tired too, and because of this I didn't find her at all easy to talk to, not to begin with. She was accustomed to silence in her home, I could tell that, so I didn't feel I could interrupt it with my questions – and I had plenty of them. Everything I knew about her, about this place, I'd found out from the foster mothers, who, like the orangutans themselves, so very obviously trusted and adored her.

One evening out on the lawn, one of them was singing her praises yet again. "Without Doctor Geraldine," she was saying, "without her, these creatures would have no life, no future, no hope."



“And without Doctor Geraldine we would have no work either,” said another. “We love the work as much as we love her. She’s an angel for the orangutans, and for us too.

“Enough of your tittle-tattling,” came a voice from above me. “An angel I most certainly am not.” I looked up to see Dr Geraldine standing there in her hat. It occurred to me then that I’d never once seen her without her hat on, inside or outside the house, and I wondered what she’d look like without it.

She held out her hand to help me up on to my feet. “I thought if you felt strong enough, Will, if you’re up to it, you might like to come for a walk with me. Not far, just down to the river and back. It’s my constitutional, my evening stroll. Be good to have company.”

We walked for some time in silence down the path, Oona following along some distance behind, Other One alongside her. The two were often together these days, I noticed. I asked about him then, about Other One, whether like Mani he had been one of her orphaned orangutans. “No,” she told me. “He’s a bit of a strange one, an interloper, you might say. He comes and he goes as he pleases. Sometimes I think he’s inspecting us, checking us out to see if we’re

doing things right. I think he approves; I certainly hope so.”

The walk was quite a bit further than I had gone before, and I got tired quickly. So I was happy to reach the end of the jetty and sit down at last. We dangled our legs, and smiled at one another. She took off her hat then, and shook out her hair. “I love this place, Will,” she said. “I come here most evenings if I can, as the sun goes down. It’s a good thinking place, the most peaceful place in the world for me. It’s where I think all my big thoughts, and a lot of my little ones too, come to that.”

I wasn’t really listening. I was staring at her head. She had a large bald patch, from her forehead up to the crown of her head. I could see the skin was puckered and scarred. “Ah, that,” she said, touching the place. “Not a pretty sight. You make enemies doing this kind of work, Will. You know what’s funny? It was a present from someone I don’t even know, one of the big boys in Jakarta who are burning down the forests, killing the orangutans, selling off the babies. One night, it’d be maybe ten years ago now, they came and tried to burn us out. They very nearly succeeded too. My hair caught fire as I was running out of the house. It’s a secret I like to keep under my hat, if you see what I’m saying.”

She laughed a little at that, but I didn’t. “But there’re worse things than losing your hair, Will,” she said. “You know what? All it did was make me more angry, more determined. They didn’t stop us then, and they won’t stop us now, not ever, not while I’m alive and kicking. We’ve saved quite a few orangutans – not enough, never enough. But we’re going to save a lot more, because we have to. Shall I tell you something, Will? If we don’t save them, and if we don’t save the rainforests where they live, then five years from now there won’t be any orangutans left in the wild. That’s the truth of it.”

“Does it hurt?” I asked her, unable to take my eyes off her scar.

“No, not at all,” she said. “Not any more – well only when I think about it maybe. But that’s not at all what I brought you here to tell you. I want to tell you another truth. I’ve wanted to for a long time, and now I can.” She reached out then and took my hand in hers. “You remember you asked me once, when you first turned up, how it was that I knew your name? The truth is, that I knew a lot more than just your name, Will. I know how you come to be here too – not the whole story of course, but some of it. I’ve known right from the very first moment I set eyes on you.”

“I don’t understand,” I said.

She took a deep breath before she went on. “It was a while ago, April 2005, a few months after the *tsunami*. I know the exact date, because I wrote all about it

in my diary. I was walking along the river bank on my evening walk, when I saw a boat coming upriver, towards the jetty. An elderly couple got off. It was late and they were tired, so I offered them a bed for the night. They didn't want to stop, they said. They'd only dropped by to give me some leaflets, to hand out wherever I could, then they'd be on their way. But I managed to persuade them to come in and at least have some supper with me, and I'm glad I did too. That's when they told me more about why they had come, what the leaflets were for. They were the grandparents, they said, of a nine-year-old boy lost in the *tsunami*. He was called Will, and he was their only grandchild."

"Grandpa? Grandma?" I breathed.

She nodded and went on. "Will's mother, they said, had been drowned in the *tsunami* on Boxing Day 2004, and his father, their only son, had been killed in the army in Iraq only a short time before. You don't forget it when people tell you such sad and terrible things. They showed me the leaflet with your photo, Will. When I first saw you, you looked a little different, of course – shorter hair, younger maybe, but quite recognisable. And besides, there aren't many boys like you, just wandering around the rainforest with an elephant. I knew about the elephant too. They had some hope you must still be alive, because of a story they'd heard more than once while they'd been out here looking for you, a story about an elephant, a beach elephant, that was seen taking off into the jungle as the wave was coming in, with a boy on her back, a boy with fair hair. These two wonderful people had been searching for you for months, all along the coast, and now inland too, dropping off their leaflets everywhere they went, and asking if anyone might possibly have seen you, or heard of you. When they'd gone I couldn't stop thinking about them, about how determined they were to find you. They had so much love in them for you, so much faith and belief. They never gave up on you. They were willing you to be alive. And you were too, weren't you?"

"They were really here?" I said. It was so hard for me to take it in.

Dr Geraldine nodded. "I promise you. I've still got one of their leaflets in my desk. I'll show you. So now you know, now you understand, Will. But there's a whole lot of things I don't understand. The *tsunami* was over a year ago now. You've been gone all that time, you and that elephant. How on earth did you survive out there? That's what I want to know. But then maybe you don't want to talk about it. That's fine. You don't need to tell me, not if you don't want to."

But I *did* want to. I don't know why, but suddenly I wanted to tell her everything. So I did, and as I did, I felt I was living it all again, from that first

stampede up the beach into the forest to the day we'd swum across the river and reached her orangutan orphanage. Dr Geraldine listened in silence all the while, as darkness came down around us. The memories were so vivid to me, and often so painful, that at times I found it difficult to go on. At moments like this she'd squeeze my hand tight. Every time she did so, it reminded me of how a long time ago, a whole lifetime ago it seemed, Mum had done much the same thing, and for much the same sort of reason too. After I'd finished Dr Geraldine asked me no questions, and I was glad of that. I'd said all I wanted to say, and I think she knew it. The two of us sat there for a while, listening to the river running by, to the orchestra of the jungle all around, to Oona groaning and grunting, slapping the river with her trunk.

"Will?" Dr Geraldine said, putting her arm round me. "There's one more thing I've got to tell you. On the leaflet your grandparents left, under the photo of you with your name and your description, there was a telephone number to ring if anyone found you. That first day you arrived I tried it, but either I couldn't get through, or the number didn't answer. I don't know. It's taken me a long while to find them. But I tracked them down in the end through the Red Cross. I finally spoke to your grandmother and your grandfather only a few days ago, Will. They'd been away, still looking for you all this time. They'd only just got back home. If you could have heard them, Will, the relief and the joy in their voices. It was the best phone call I've ever had to make in my life. They're on their way back out here right now, Will. They're coming to take you home."

Elephant's child



spent the next few days trying to put Grandma and Grandpa out of my mind, trying to forget they were coming, and then feeling guilty about it. I knew it was wrong to feel as I did about them. On the one hand, I really was looking forward to seeing them again. But the trouble was that I couldn't help thinking they were part of a world I had left behind, that I wanted to forget, and had come to believe I would never see again. What was worse still, was that I knew all too well that they weren't just coming to see me for a visit. As Dr Geraldine had said, they were coming to take me home, away from Oona, from all the orang-utans, from the jungle. That was the thought I couldn't stand.

Every morning when I woke up, instead of feeling overjoyed at the thought of this happy reunion with Grandpa and Grandma, as I knew I should have been, I would be hoping that this would not be the day they arrived. I decided there was only one thing for it: I would live every single day I had left in this place to the full, as if it was the last. I was feeling better in myself every day, and so was able to busy myself about the place, filling feeding bottles, cutting up fruit in the kitchens for the orang-utans, helping out with the laundry, fetching and carrying supplies from the jetty, playing with Charlie, Tonk, Bart and the others on the lawn, and at night sometimes sleeping with the little orang-utans and their foster mothers on the floor of the dormitory. I'd often wake to find that either Charlie or Tonk or Bart, all three of them sometimes, had crept over during the night and were lying on me or beside me, snuggled up to me.

The times I loved most now though were when Dr Geraldine took me with her on expeditions into the deepest jungle on the island to see how the older orang-utans were coping with life in the jungle. Oona and Other One always came with us on these long treks, shadowing us all the way. Oona never liked being left out of anything, and where Oona went, Other One went too. When Dr Geraldine said

she was getting a crick in her neck with Oona and Other One trailing us all day, I suggested we both hitched a ride on Oona. I knew that Oona would be more than happy to oblige.

Dr Geraldine had ridden an elephant before, she told me, but not for a while, so it took her some time to relax. But the more we rode, the more she was enjoying it. We hardly walked at all after that; Other One was our path-finder or our shadow, sometimes walking, sometimes swinging through the trees above us.

These long rides into the jungle were always silent. Dr Geraldine was very strict about it. We rarely talked, hardly a word. As she had explained to me, it was important that we disrupt the lives of the orang-utans as little as possible. The whole point of the orang-utans' time in 'the university of the jungle' was to persuade them not to rely any more on human contact. So the less they saw and heard of us the better. They had to learn to keep their distance from people for their own safety, to become wild again.

Dr Geraldine had to keep an eye on them, but at the same time remain as unobtrusive as possible. It was, she once told me, the most difficult decision she had to make, to know when the time was right for an orang-utan to be taken from 'the university' and released into the reserve. Do it too early, when they weren't yet ready for it, when they couldn't cope properly, and she could be condemning them to death. Once out there in the reserve, they were on their own.

In the evenings I would often sit down with Dr Geraldine on the steps of the house after supper, and we'd talk. We talked more and more these days. Other One would be off in the jungle somewhere by this time, up in his sleeping nest. But Oona was never far away of course. "You know something, Will," Dr Geraldine said to me one evening, "I think I might have to change my mind about that elephant of yours. I have to say that when she first came I thought she was good for nothing except eating herself half silly. But have you noticed how the orang-utans out in the jungle take almost no notice of her? I mean, they're always a little curious at first, of course they are. She's a new thing for them – and let's face it, she's a big thing too. I don't know what it is about her, but wherever she goes, that elephant, she radiates a calm and a peace. I'm not imagining that, am I?"

"No," I said. "You're not."

The very next day we had ample proof of that. We were riding up on Oona, through the forest, Other One swinging through the trees above us, when we saw

a huge male orang-utan walking towards us on all fours. From the way he was walking, from the way he was looking right at us, rolling his great shoulders as he came, it was obvious he meant business. He was not looking at all pleased at this intrusion. I thought I might have caught a distant glimpse of a big male like this a while back, crashing about high above us in the canopy, his voice booming through the forest. But this was the first time I'd come face to face with one this big, this close, down on the forest floor. Dr Geraldine put a hand on my shoulder. "This is Ol," she whispered in my ear. "He's fine when he's fine. So we just keep very still. That way we keep him fine."

It reminded me of the meeting with the tiger all that time ago. Oona stood quite still, and for a while so did the orang-utan. He had huge black cheek-flaps, deep piercing eyes, and a golden beard, *like a Viking's beard*, I thought. Oona looked down at him quite unperturbed, then as if he wasn't there at all, began to browse for food. Meanwhile, the orang-utan was showing no overt signs of aggression, but he was also showing no sign of moving. He seemed to be making it quite clear that he would move when he felt like it and not before, however big this new giant was. He sat down for a while, scratching his ear, and then looked the other way, very deliberately ignoring us, making out he hadn't a care in the world.

After some minutes of this charade, once he was satisfied everything was as it should be, I suppose, that Oona was neither a threat nor a challenge, that he'd stayed long enough not to lose face, he simply walked off into the trees and was gone. "Oona," Dr Geraldine whispered, "you're a star. You did that beautifully, beautifully."

That same evening, sitting on the end of the jetty, Dr Geraldine told me about how she had discovered Ol several years before, only a couple of months old, sitting next to the charred body of his mother after a jungle fire, burnt, half starved and covered in sores. I remembered then that photograph in the magazine back home, saw again in my head the little orang-utan clinging to the top of the charred tree. It could have been Ol. "He won't ever go back into the wild," she went on, her voice catching as she spoke. "He's too traumatised, even now. He always will be."

She was turning her face away, so that I couldn't see she was crying. "Will you look at me?" she said, wiping away her tears. "Crying my stupid eyes out. I ask you, Will, how's that going to help anyone? It's not because I feel sorry for myself, I promise you. I'm just angry. I need eyes and ears in the jungle. I need to be out there, to be on the spot, to stop the burning and killing before it

happens. And if the worst did happen, then at least I could be there quickly. I could fetch them back. I could save them before it was too late. So many of them die, Will, and there's no one out there to help them. But I can't be out in the jungle, and back here at the same time. It makes me so angry that I can do so little."

"It's not so little," I told her. "When you save one of their lives, like you do, I think it's like saving a whole world each time." I felt her hand reaching out, holding mine and squeezing it tight.

"We make a fine team, you and I," she said. "I'm going to miss you when you go. So will everyone here, that elephant most of all."

"You know I don't want to go, don't you?" I told her.

"I know," she replied. "I've got eyes. I've got a brain too. I know what you've been thinking, Will."

"What if I asked them if I could stay?" I asked her.

"You could ask, but you'd be breaking their hearts if you did," she told me. "I can't tell you what to do, Will. You'll have to make up your mind for yourself. But I will say this, and it's maybe something you should think about. Nothing in the world matters to those two grandparents of yours more than you. They've lost their son in a war, and their daughter-in-law, your mum, in the *tsunami*. And they thought they'd lost you too. That's their whole world, their whole reason for living, gone. I don't need to tell you of all people what they must have felt like, do I? And then they get a phone call from me to tell them you're alive after all. You're right when you say that every one of those little orang-utans is a whole world. And that's what you are to your grandparents, Will. You're their whole world. Whatever you do, you mustn't forget that."

All that night I lay there trying to reconcile myself to the idea that Dr Geraldine had been right about Grandma and Grandpa, and that I had no choice but to leave with them when they came for me. After all Grandpa and Grandma had done to find me, I couldn't disappoint them. I had to go back to England, to my old life. But trying to convince myself I was looking forward to it was another matter. It wasn't that I didn't want to see them. Of course I did, although I was becoming increasingly nervous about it. And most certainly it wasn't that I didn't like the idea of making my home with them back on the farm in Devon – that's what I presumed would happen. Nowhere could be better. It was simply that I didn't want to leave this place. I did not want to leave Oona, or Dr Geraldine, or the orang-utans, or the jungle.

It did not make it any easier, as I lay there on my bed, that the music of the

jungle seemed to be particularly loud and insistent that night, as if every creature out there was calling to me, begging me to stay. And neither did it help that I could hear Oona outside my window all night, groaning away. She kept reaching in with her trunk to touch me – it was to remind me she was there, I was sure of it. I had no doubt at all that this was her way of asking me not to leave her.

Unable to sleep, I went and sat out on the steps to clear my head. When Oona came wandering over, and stood there looking down at me with the moon in her eye, her trunk exploring my hair, I knew that I couldn't keep silent, that I'd have to tell her everything, all about Grandpa and Grandma and how they'd been looking for me all this while, that now they were on their way, and that I'd be going home with them. "I don't want to go, Oona, you know that," I said. "But I must. It's like Doctor Geraldine says, I'm all they've got. You understand, don't you? I won't forget you, Oona, I promise. And I know you'll never forget me, because elephants never forget anything, do they?" I couldn't speak any more. My tears wouldn't let me.

I leaned my head against her trunk and hugged it, hugged her. "Sometimes, Oona," I told her, "sometimes I really feel like I'm your child, like I'm an elephant's child." We stayed together until first light, until we heard Dr Geraldine humming to herself as she got up. Oona wandered off then, looking resigned and disconsolate, no more happy about the idea of the parting to come than I was.

Breakfast that morning was a silent affair. I think we had said all there was to be said the night before, and each of us knew what the other was thinking, so there was no point in talking. I kept reading the poster on the wall. I'd seen it before, but hadn't taken that much notice of it. Until now, I think I'd been more interested in the collage of photos of orang-utans all around it.

*'When all the trees
have been cut down,*

*when all the animals
have been hunted,*

*when all the waters
are polluted,*

when all the air is

unsafe to breathe,

*only then will you
discover you cannot
eat money.'*

(Cree prophecy, North America.)

I was still thinking about that as, later that morning, Dr Geraldine and I were riding out again into the jungle to check on the orang-utans, accompanied as usual by Other One, and this time by Mani and Charlie too. But Oona wasn't herself, I could feel it right away. She seemed unsettled, more irritated than usual by the flies, and less willing to respond to anything I asked her to do. She paid little attention either to my voice or the pressure of my heel on her neck. She was going to go where she wanted, and at her own pace too, faster, slower, whatever she felt like, and there was nothing I could do about it.

She kept tossing her head, a sure sign she was not happy. And from time to time she would stop suddenly, unexpectedly, and it wasn't to feed either. She'd just stand there listening. I thought it could be that Ol was shadowing us, following along the trail behind us, or swinging through the trees, that his invisibility was unnerving her. I kept looking for him, listening for him. Other One was there, plodding along with Mani and Charlie, and they were all calm enough. There was no sign of Ol. I could see no reason at all why Oona should be like this.



When the thunder rattled and echoed about the sky, when the lightning crackled, and the rains came down, I thought that might be enough in itself to

explain Oona's strange behaviour, that she must have felt the storm coming. But when the storm had passed over, she was just as difficult, just as unpredictable, tugging and tearing impatiently at the branches, but never once stopping to feed properly on the move, as she usually did. I came to the conclusion that she wasn't frightened, that there was nothing to be frightened of. But she was upset, as upset as I'd ever seen her. Dr Geraldine kept asking me what the matter with her was, and I couldn't tell her. "Maybe she's unwell," she said. "Maybe she's eaten something that didn't agree with her."

I was still wondering if she could be right about that, when we reached the river on the far side of the island. It looked to me as if Oona wasn't going to stop at all, that she was going to wade right in. But she did stop, at the very last moment, and stood there on the bank for a while, gazing out across the river at the jungle on the far side. Then she turned, and began to walk very slowly, reluctantly, back the way we had come. She took her time, not walking so much as meandering, so we didn't come out of the forest and back to the orphanage until the light was fading. That was when I saw them.

On the steps of Dr Geraldine's house sat Grandpa and Grandma, a suitcase beside them. Grandpa was wearing the same tweed jacket and flat cap he always wore, and Grandma, dressed in one of her flowery dresses, was fanning herself with her hat. They looked older, smaller, more shrunken than I remembered, and greyer too. Oona stopped where she was when she saw them. She lifted her trunk in the air and tossed her head. I thought for a moment she was going to trumpet at them, but she didn't. It took a while for me to persuade Oona to let us down. They were coming towards us now across the lawn.

"Will? Is it really you?" Grandma breathed – she could barely speak.

"Course it's him," Grandpa said, walking straight up to me. "Who else would it be?" He put his arms round me then, and held me. Both of us were choking back our tears. "I always knew you were alive, Will. I always knew." Then he was holding me at arm's length, and looking me up and down. "You're a sight for sore eyes, Will," he said. "You've grown too. Young man almost. Nearly as tall as me, you are. Isn't he, Grandma?" But Grandma had her hands over her face and was sobbing. I went to her at once and hugged her. She felt thinner than I had remembered her.

"What did I do to you, Will?" she cried. "What did I do?" I felt her head heavy on my shoulder. "If I hadn't sent you off like that, on that stupid, stupid holiday. If only I hadn't done it, she would still be with us. You'd still have a mother."

"She blames herself, Will," Grandpa said. "Ever since, she's always blamed

herself.”

Until that moment I think I had always been a little frightened of Grandma. But now I knew she needed comforting, that I was the only one who could do it. I chose my words carefully.

“You’re wrong, Grandma,” I told her. “It was the tidal wave that killed Mum, not you. I don’t know who made that happen, Grandma, but you didn’t.”

Dr Geraldine waited for a while before she came over and shook them both by the hand. “I’m the one who phoned you. I don’t know if you remember me, but I’m Geraldine,” she said. “Welcome back. It’s lovely to see you again.”

“We remember you, of course we do. And we remember this place too, so well.” Grandma was still trying to collect herself as she spoke. “We remember the little orang-utans. We went to lots and lots of places along the river, delivering those leaflets. But this one we never forgot. We’ve talked about it ever since, haven’t we, Grandpa?”

But Grandpa wasn’t listening. He was looking up at Oona, who had wandered across towards us. “So this is her then, the one who saved your life. How d’you go about thanking an elephant, Will?”

“You just tell her,” I told him. “She’ll understand.”

And that’s what Grandpa did. He reached up and laid his hand gently on her trunk. “Thank you. Thank you.” He said it softly, looking her right in the eye. He turned back to me then. “Don’t hardly need a tractor any more do you, Will, not with a giant like this for a friend?” He laughed at that. I knew he was only laughing to hide his emotion, but even so I couldn’t laugh with him. I couldn’t even smile, and that troubled me.

I felt troubled all evening as the four of us sat eating our supper in Dr Geraldine’s house. “We’ve looked you up on Google, Geraldine,” Grandpa was saying. “Will taught us to do all that. You remember, Will? That’s how we found out all about the orang-utans and the orphanage. To be honest, the last time we came, I don’t think we understood much of what was going on here. We had our minds on other things, I suppose. Quite a set-up you’ve got, Geraldine. Must have taken a lot of work, and ... well, dedication. Yes, that’s the word I was looking for, dedication. Marvellous what you’ve done. Marvellous.”

Grandma seemed to have quite recovered her composure by now, and was becoming more and more her old self as the evening went on, more the Grandma I remembered. She was doing most of the talking, interrupting Grandpa, contradicting him. It was all very familiar. Only now I didn’t have Mum there to wink back at me across the table in solidarity. I missed her suddenly, achingly,

and was finding it very difficult to concentrate on what Grandma was telling me.

“Will?” she was saying, “Will, are you listening to me? We’ve got so much to tell you, about the farm, about your new school. It’s difficult to know where to begin. But it’s all going to be fine, you’ll see. I’ve arranged everything. Your old room’s waiting for you, just as you left it.”

I could hear Oona rumbling and groaning outside, letting me know she was there, reminding me, not allowing me to forget. I was hoping she would fart. It would be the perfect moment, I thought. Amazingly, just as I was thinking that, she did it, one of her longest and loudest. Dr Geraldine’s eyes were pleading with me not to laugh, and I knew why – she wouldn’t be able to help herself if I did. I contained myself, just.

“What on earth was that?” Grandma said, her eyes wide with alarm.

“Oona,” I told her. “It’s only Oona, Grandma. It’s how she talks.”

“Oh dear, oh deary dear. She gave me a turn, quite a turn. Now, as I was saying,” she went on, “before the elephant interrupted, everything will be just as you want it, Will. Do you know what I did before we came away? I rang up the local school and told them all about you. The head teacher sounded very nice. She can’t wait to have you there. They’re over the moon. Lovely uniform too – striped blazers, maroon and black. Very smart, isn’t it, Grandpa? You’ll like it, Will. Before you know it you’ll have lots of new friends. You’re quite a celebrity back home in England, you know. In fact you’re quite a celebrity all over the world, come to think of it.”

“What do you mean?” I asked. I couldn’t understand what she was talking about.

“Well, you’ve been in all the newspapers, dear, *Sun*, *Mirror*, *The Times* even. Front page too. We’ve saved all the press cuttings, every one of them. You’re big news. It’s a big story, all about how that elephant ran off with you when the *tsunami* came in, and about you being lost in the jungle all this time. ‘Little Tarzan’ they’re calling you. And when we get to the airport tomorrow, there’ll be photographers, Will, dozens of them. Isn’t that exciting? I wanted to bring them here to see you, you know, with all the orang-utans and the elephant; but Grandpa said no, said you’d need a bit of time to get used to things. I’m still not sure he was right. But anyway, we’ve got to be back by six o’clock tomorrow evening for a press conference at the airport. The embassy in Jakarta have arranged it all. Very nice man, the ambassador, wasn’t he Grandpa?”

“Tomorrow?” I said. “We’re going tomorrow?”

“Yes, dear. We must,” she replied, reaching across then, and touching my hair.

“Your hair, it’s the same colour as your father’s, Will – a little lighter maybe, but that’d be the sun. He had his long like yours – well, not as long as yours maybe – before he went into the army. But they wouldn’t let him have it long in there, would they, Grandpa? He hated having it cut off, just hated it. They’re still fighting that war in Iraq, you know. It’s all madness. Young soldiers dying, and all for nothing.”

Her voice was trembling now. “And they’re all sons, and brothers, daughters, and husbands, every one of them. Don’t mind me,” she said, wiping her eyes, “I’ll be fine in a moment.” Grandpa put his hand on her shoulder to comfort her. It was a while before she could bring herself to go on. “Where was I? Oh yes. Your hair, Will. I mean, we’ll have to get you a haircut, you know, before you go back to school.”

“Why?” I said, and I spoke sharply, more sharply than I’d intended. “I don’t need a haircut, Grandma.”

Everyone was looking at me. I knew I’d upset her. I said nothing else all evening, because I didn’t trust myself.

That last night I went to sit down outside on the step with Oona. I couldn’t sleep – I didn’t want to. I think I talked to her all night long, speaking all my thoughts and feelings as they came tumbling into my head, as I always had. There was never anyone else I could talk to like that, and I knew there never would be. I wanted that night to last for ever, for morning never to come. But it did, all too soon.

We had a hurried breakfast together the next morning, but I didn’t feel like eating a thing. Oona was waiting for me outside all the while. When the time came to say goodbye, it felt to me as if I was betraying her, abandoning her. All I wanted to do was get it over quickly. I couldn’t bear to look at her. I just closed my eyes and hugged her trunk. “I want you to stay here, Oona,” I whispered. “If you come down to the boat with me, I’ll cry. And I don’t want to cry.” When I opened my eyes, I saw Other One at the edge of the forest, watching.

I left Oona and walked away, down towards the jetty. Everyone was there, everyone who worked at the orphanage. They were all lined up there, all the foster mothers with the little orang-utans in their arms. I found Mani walking alongside me, and then Charlie was there too, holding my hand all the way, gripping it tight. I wanted to stop and say goodbye to Bart and Tonk, but I didn’t dare, because I knew I couldn’t hold myself together for much longer. But Tonk reached out as I passed by and grabbed my arm. It was a while before his foster mother could persuade him to let go of me.

I think it was then, as Tonk was trying to cling on to me, that I changed my mind. As Dr Geraldine came to say her goodbyes, I stood up on tiptoe and whispered to her. "I'm an elephant's child. I belong here with Oona, with the orang-utans, with you. I'm staying. I'll be your eyes and ears in the jungle."

I turned to Grandpa and Grandma then. I could see at once in their faces that both of them understood what I had in mind, what I was going to do.

"I'm sorry, Grandpa, sorry, Grandma. But this is my home now," I told them. Grandma reached out to me, pleading with me. But Grandpa put his arms round her and held her.

"You stay, Will," he said, his eyes filled with sadness. "If it's where you want to be, then stay. Be happy. Grandma and me, we'll be happy, if we know you are."

I turned away and ran from them then, back down the jetty. Oona was waiting for me, where I had left her outside Geraldine's house. She saw me coming, and was kneeling for me already. I was up and on to her neck in a trice, and she was striding out across the lawn, and then we were into the jungle, Other One swinging through the trees above us, and we were running now, running wild.



Postscript

Written by Will's grandfather January 1st, 2009

I wish with my whole being that this story had never happened at all. But it did happen. And as it turned out, while it is a story that began with a tragedy, it has been in so many ways the most joyous, certainly the most important happening of my entire life, and that's in over sixty-five years. We lost a dear son, then a wonderful daughter-in-law, and we very nearly lost Will too, our grandson. But miraculously he survived, and we found one another again. Out of sorrow can come sweetness.

Then almost as soon as we'd found him again, it seemed we might be losing him, this time for ever. Once he'd disappeared into the jungle with Oona that day, his grandmother and I could not bring ourselves to leave. We made a decision, as it turned out, the best decision of our lives, we think. The long and the short of it is that we went off home to England, back to Devon, for a couple of months to sell up the farm. Then we came back here to make our lives with Geraldine and her orphan orang-utans. We wanted to be as near as we could to Will.

Geraldine always said she was sure he'd be back, and she was right. Come back he did, and he does, bringing in orphaned orang-utans from the jungle so that they can be cared for here at the orphanage. His grandmother became a minder – she's fostered three of them now, trained them up to go out into the jungle again, to be wild again. She's on her fourth. She loves it, and she does a fine job of it too – she was always good with orphan lambs back on the farm.

And as for me, I bury myself in all the administration and fundraising for the orphanage, working alongside Geraldine. This is home for us now.

Will comes back as and when he needs to. He's over fifteen now, not a boy any more. Each time he comes, he stays for a few days, and tells us a little more about his great escape from the *tsunami*, and of the months he spent in the jungle with Oona. Some of it I could see he didn't really want to talk about. I think it still hurt him too much. But bit by bit he told us more and more.

It wasn't Will's idea that his story should be told, it was Geraldine's. We were all there sitting around one evening, chatting after supper and Scrabble, Will leaning up against Grandma's knee, Oona's eye looking in at the window as usual. "I've been thinking, Will," Geraldine began. "I think your story should be told; written down, I mean. It should be put in a book so people can read it. It's an important story, Will, a story everyone in the world should know, because it's full of hope and determination. And we need that. Someone should write it. It would be a very different kind of a book, because the end is still being decided, and that's because it's a living story that's still going on. The book could be part of its own story, so to speak, it could change how things turn out, how the story ends."

"I think you should write it, Grandpa," Will said. "You used to do a bit of writing, didn't you?"

"Only a little weekly column for the local paper," I told him. "I can't write a book."

"Course you can," Grandma said, "you're a good writer, and what's more you're the only one who can do it. I can't write for toffee, and Will's always coming and going on that elephant, so he can't do it, can he? You know Will better than anyone, excepting that elephant perhaps. You know both the worlds he's lived in, all the important people in his life. Go on, Grandpa, you can do it. Keep you out of mischief."

I was warming to the idea all the time they were speaking, but still unsure of myself. "What d'you really think, Will?" I asked him. "It's your story."

"Go for it," Will said, smiling up at me. "There's no one else I'd want to do it. I'll tell you everything you need to know, Grandpa, everything. Geraldine's right, people have to know what's going on out there in the jungle, before it's too late. You tell them, Grandpa. But when you write it, I want you to be me, to tell my story as I lived it, as if you were me. Can you do that?"

"I can try," I said.

Will looked up at Oona at the window.

“She speaks with her eyes, Grandpa. She says, write the book. Tell them how it was, how it is. She’s fine with it. So am I.”

I began writing the next morning.



Author's Note

Several events seem to have come together and compelled me to write this book. Many years ago, sitting on my bed, my mother first read me 'The Elephant's Child' from Rudyard Kipling's *Just So Stories*.

I loved that story with a passion, I still do, and as a consequence I have loved elephants all my life. Later I read for myself Kipling's *Jungle Book*. I wasn't a great reader, but this was one of those rare books I felt I was actually living as I read it. So in the back of my mind, ever since I began writing books, I have always harboured the idea that one day I might try to write a story about a boy lost in the jungle and living wild, perhaps with an elephant as a companion. But I could never find the way of making such a story my own, never felt that it could be anything other than a dim echo of Kipling's two great stories. The truth is, I suppose, that I never felt *compelled* to write it.

Then a series of tragic historical happenings conspired to persuade me that this was a book I had to write, and that I *could* write. I discovered that at the present rate of attrition, orang-utans would not survive in the wild for more than five years, destruction of habitat being the main cause of this genocide. I discovered, too, that there is an extraordinary woman who has spent her whole life living in the rainforest, trying to save and then rehabilitate orphan orang-utans.

Then, on Boxing Day 2004, the Asian *tsunami* hit the coasts of Indonesia and Sri Lanka, killing hundreds of thousands of people. I learned that elephants and other animals seemed to sense the coming of the *tsunami* long before people did, many of them running up into the jungle, to high ground, to save themselves. And I heard the true story of an English boy, on holiday with his family, who

was on an elephant ride along the beach when the *tsunami* came in, and whose life was saved when the elephant he was riding took fright and ran off into the jungle. It was a story of survival against all odds, a story of hope amidst the horror of a disaster that had such cruel consequences for the victims and their families, and for the countries and the people affected by it.

All this was happening at the same time as the six-year war in Iraq. The number of civilian casualties in the Iraq war is still fiercely debated, with some studies estimating the dead at more than half a million, and others denying such a shocking statistic. But whatever figure is right, it seems certain that at least 100,000 ordinary Iraqis – not soldiers – were killed between 2003 and 2006. We know much more accurately how many soldiers have died: to date, about 3,000 Americans and 200 British, with many thousands more injured and maimed.

Somehow these dreadful events, as well as those favourite stories of my childhood, fused together to inspire *Running Wild*. Now there seemed a real reason to write it, a *need* even.

Maybe, though, none of these was the true seed-corn of this story. Maybe it was a poster on the wall of my classroom when I was ten, a poster of the poem ‘The Tyger’, written and illustrated by William Blake. I used to look at it a lot when lessons became boring, which they often did. I think it was the only poem I knew by heart when I was young, and one of the most powerful I’ve ever read.

Michael Morpurgo, May 2009



Post postscript

Many of you may want to know more about these real events, about the whole background to the making of *Running Wild*. So, in brief:

The Iraq War

Iraq is an Arab republic in South West Asia and is bordered to the north by Turkey, to the west by Syria and Jordan, to the south by Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and the Persian Gulf, and to the east by Iran. Iraq is a fairly young country, only created in 1921 by the British Government. Iraq used to be part of a much larger region, ruled by the Turks, called The Ottoman Empire. When the Ottoman Empire fell, British rule took over – until Iraq was given independence in 1932. A number of different governments controlled the country after that, until Saddam Hussein seized power in 1979. The UK and USA supported him because he was helping them to fight a neighbouring country, Iran. But it was quickly apparent that Saddam Hussein was a ruthless tyrant. He used terror to suppress all opposition. However, when Iraq invaded Kuwait for its oil in 1991, many countries – including the US and UK – joined together to force Saddam Hussein's army out of Kuwait, in what has come to be called the Gulf War.

Following the Gulf War, a decade passed. But then, around 2002, the US began to focus again on Saddam Hussein. There were fears that he might use weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) to attack Western countries – missiles that might, it was thought, have warheads containing poisonous gas or even nuclear explosives. Saddam Hussein had already used gas against the Kurds in Iraq. The US and the UK called for an invasion of Iraq, in order to destroy these

weapons and prevent their use. The Iraq War began on March 20th, 2003 with the invasion of Iraq by a multinational force led by and composed almost entirely of troops from the US and the UK. It was an invasion not sanctioned by the United Nations.

Control of the country was taken very quickly from Saddam Hussein. He was captured, put on trial, found guilty of murder and sentenced to death by hanging on December 30th 2006 in Baghdad, the Iraqi capital. But no WMDs were ever found. At the time of writing the British Army is withdrawing after six years in Iraq. The American and British governments hope that when the Iraqi army is able to take over responsibility for making the country safe, then the coalition forces can leave the country.

Iraqis voted for a new government in 2005. But some people in Iraq want all foreigners, particularly the soldiers, to leave straight away, and believe that by attacking them they will force them out. The conflict is still by no means over.



Deforestation

Indonesia is home to many famous endangered animals such as orang-utans, elephants and rhinos. Among relatively unknown endangered animals also living here are the clouded leopard, the sun bear and endemic Bornean gibbons. Borneo is the third largest island in the world and was once (around 1950) covered extensively with tropical rainforests, but the ever-increasing rate of deforestation over the last fifty years has rapidly shrunk the area of ancient Borneo's forests. Forests are home to many different animal and plant species, but are being burned, logged and cleared, in order to make way for agricultural land. The main reason for such excessive deforestation is the palm oil plantations that have now replaced many ancient forest areas. Half the annual global tropical timber acquisition comes from this area. Huge forest fires in 1997 and 1998 were also responsible for significant loss of rainforest.

If the current rate of deforestation continues, many species will perish, some even before we have had the chance to study them. Forests are not only important because of the different species that use them as their habitats, but also because their trees absorb carbon dioxide, which is vital in the fight against global warming. Sadly, experts do not think that the current rate of deforestation will decrease, as the world population is constantly growing, and this will lead to even higher demands for agricultural land. Worldwide demand for palm oil is growing annually. Palm oil is found in hundreds of food and domestic products and has the potential to replace fossil fuels – for heating homes and fuelling cars, among other things.



Orangutans

Native to Indonesia and Malaysia, Orangutans are currently only found in the rainforests on the islands of Borneo and Sumatra. A species of great ape known for their intelligence, they live largely in trees and are the largest living arboreal animal. They have longer arms than other great apes and their hair is reddish brown. They are 'great apes' as opposed to 'monkeys' (monkeys have generally got tails) and are closely related to humans, sharing some 97% of our DNA. The word orangutan is derived from Malay and Indonesian words 'orang', meaning person, and 'hutan', meaning forest, thus 'person of the forest'.

They are more solitary than other apes, with males and females generally only coming together to mate. Mothers stay with their babies until the offspring reach the age of six or seven. Although orangutans are generally passive, aggression towards other orangutans is very common, and they can be fiercely territorial. Unlike gorillas and chimpanzees, orangutans are not true knuckle walkers and walk on the ground by shuffling on their palms with their fingers curved inwards.

The Sumatran species is critically endangered, with only 7,300 individuals left in the wild, while the Bornean orangutan is endangered, with an estimated population of 45,000–69,000 in the wild. The destruction of their habitat by logging, mining and forest fires, as well as fragmentation by roads, has increased rapidly during the last decade. Orangutans are hunted for their meat and for the pet trade.

It is estimated that at the present rate of attrition it is unlikely there will be any orangutans living in the wild by 2015.



Tsunami

A *tsunami* is a series of waves that is created when a large volume of a body of water, such as an ocean, is rapidly displaced. It is a Japanese word, and can be literally translated as ‘harbour wave’. Earthquakes, volcanic eruptions and other underwater explosions – such as detonations of nuclear devices at sea, landslides and other mass movements above or below water – all have the potential to generate a *tsunami*. A *tsunami* produces waves of water that move inland, giving the impression of an incredibly high tide. *Tsunamis* are sometimes referred to as ‘tidal waves’, but this is not technically correct as *tsunamis* have nothing to do with tides.



Due to the immense volumes of water and energy involved, the effects of *tsunamis* can be devastating. There is often no advance warning of an approaching *tsunami*, but some animals seem to have the ability to detect such natural phenomena.

The 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake was an undersea tremor that occurred on December 26th with its epicentre off the west coast of Sumatra in Indonesia, and the consequent *tsunami* is known as the Asian *Tsunami* or the Boxing Day *Tsunami*. Sri Lankan media sources claimed that elephants heard the sounds of the *tsunami* as it approached the coast and their reaction was to move inland, away from the approaching noise. Large numbers of children from fishing communities drowned in the *tsunami*, because when the sea was sucked away before the wave came in, they saw thousands of fish stranded on the seabed. They rushed out to catch them, only to be overwhelmed by the great wave.

Tsunamis are not rare, with at least twenty-five occurring in the last century. Many of these were recorded in the Asia-Pacific region. The Boxing Day *Tsunami* caused approximately 350,000 deaths and many more injuries. It is not possible to prevent a *tsunami*. However, in some *tsunami*-prone countries, some earthquake engineering measures have been taken to reduce the damage caused on shore by the use of floodgates, channels and walls. Early warning is the only

protection.

Tyger Tyger

And lastly, here is 'The Tyger' by William Blake, the poem that first inspired this story.

*TYGER, tyger, burning bright
In the forests of the night,
What immortal hand or eye
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?*

*In what distant deeps or skies
Burnt the fire of thine eyes?
On what wings dare he aspire?
What the hand dare seize the fire?*

*And what shoulder and what art
Could twist the sinews of thy heart?
And when thy heart began to beat,
What dread hand and what dread feet
What the hammer, what the chain?
In what furnace was thy brain?
What the anvil? What dread grasp
Dare its deadly terrors clasp?*

*When the stars threw down their spears,
And water'd heaven with their tears,
Did he smile his work to see?
Did he who made the lamb make thee?*

*Tyger, tyger, burning bright
In the forests of the night,
What immortal hand or eye
Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?*



Acknowledgements

*My thanks to Durrell, on Jersey, for all the help they gave me while researching
this book*

—Michael Morpurgo

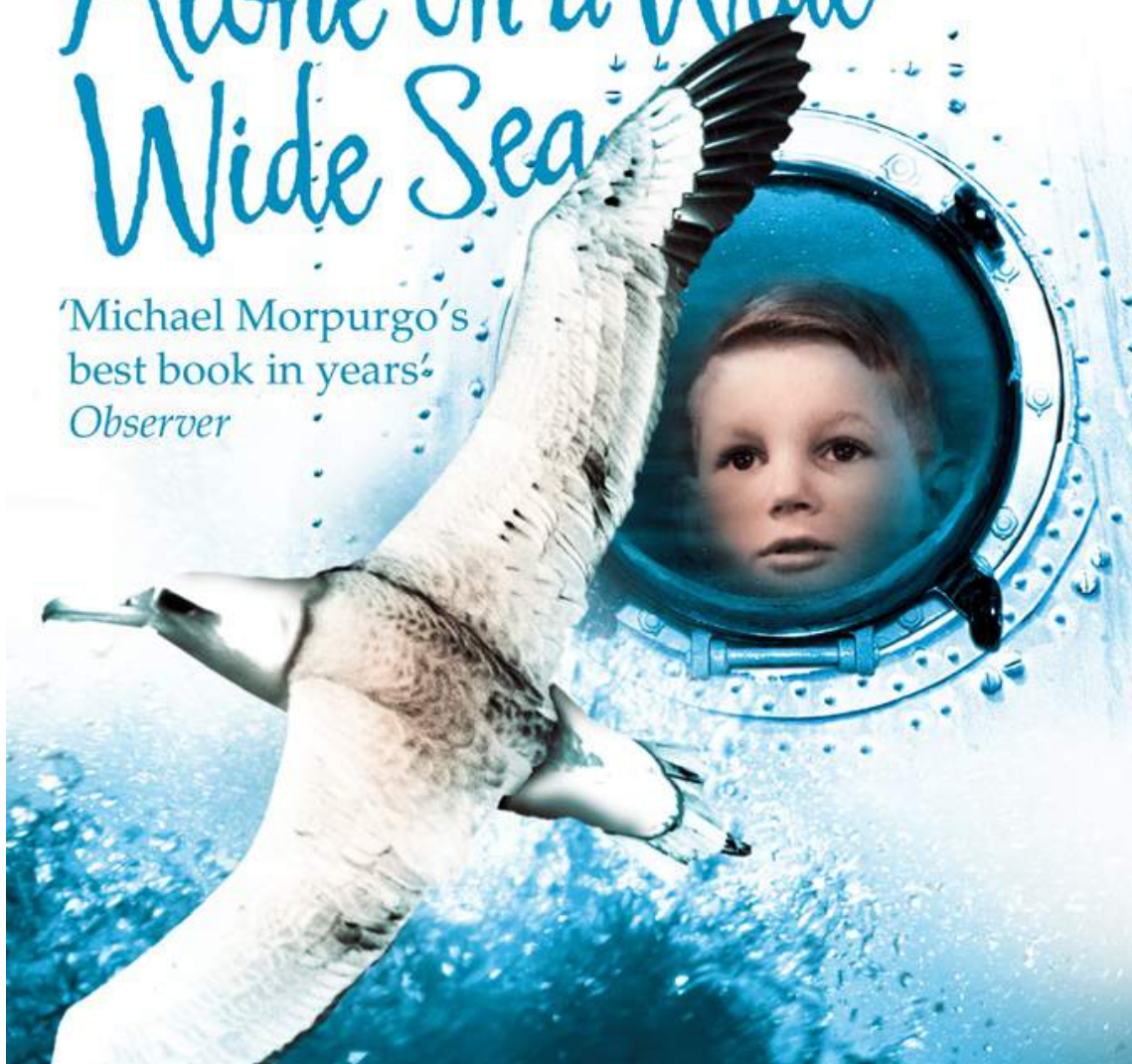
michael morpurgo

AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR OF

Private Peaceful

Alone on a Wide Wide Sea

'Michael Morpurgo's
best book in years'
Observer



Alone on a Wide Wide Sea

michael morpurgo



HarperCollins *Children's Books*

To Lula Léa and Clare, who helped make this book with me.

Contents

Dedication

Part One: The Story of Arthur Hobhouse

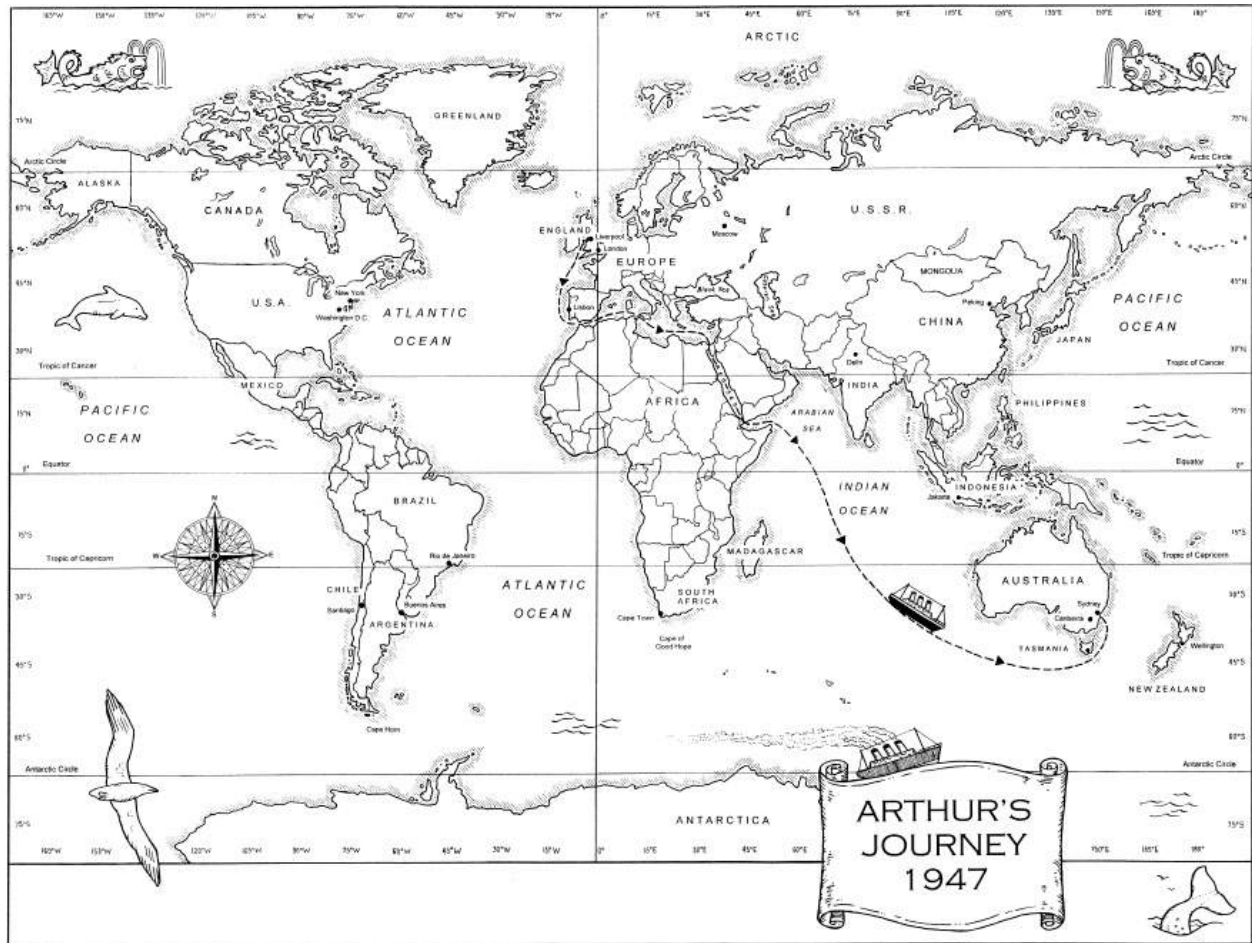
Arthur Hobhouse is a Happening
Three Red Funnels and an Orchestra
Kookaburras, Cockatoos and Kangaroos
Cooper's Station and Piggy Bacon and God's Work
Suffer Little Children
Wes Snarkey's Revenge
Saints and Sinners
Mrs Piggy to Ida
"Only One Way Out"
"Did We Have the Children Here for This?"
"Just Watch Me"
"For She's a Jolly Good Fellow"
Wide as the Ocean
"Couple of Raggedy Little Scarecrows"
Henry's Horrible Hat Hole
I Must Go Down to the Sea
Scrambled Eggs and Baked Beans
"You're my Boys, Aren't You?"
Freddie Dodds
One January Night
An Orphan Just the Same
Things Fall Apart
The Centre Will Not Hold
Oh Lucky Man!
Kitty Four

Part Two: The Voyage of the Kitty Four

What Goes Around, Comes Around
Two Send-offs, and an Albatross
Jelly Blobbers and Red Hot Chili Peppers
And Now the Storm Blast Came
Just Staying Alive
“Hey Ho Little Fish Don’t Cry, Don’t Cry”
Around the Horn, and with Dolphins Too!
Dr Marc Topolski
“One Small Step for Man”
Alone on a Wide Wide Sea
“London Bridge is Falling Down”
Now you’ve read the book

Afterword

Acknowledgements



Part One

The Story of Arthur Hobhouse

Arthur Hobhouse is a Happening

I should begin at the beginning, I know that. But the trouble is that I don't know the beginning. I wish I did. I do know my name, Arthur Hobhouse. Arthur Hobhouse had a beginning, that's for certain. I had a father and a mother too, but God only knows who they were, and maybe even he doesn't know for sure. I mean, God can't be looking everywhere all at once, can he? So where the name Arthur Hobhouse comes from and who gave it to me I have no idea. I don't even know if it's my real name. I don't know the date and place of my birth either, only that it was probably in Bermondsey, London, sometime in about 1940.

The earliest memories I have are all confused somehow, and out of focus. For instance, I've always known I had a sister, an older sister. All my life she's been somewhere in the deepest recesses either of my memory or my imagination – sometimes I can't really be sure which – and she was called Kitty. When they sent me away, she wasn't with me. I wish I knew why. I try to picture her, and sometimes I can. I see a pale delicate face with deep dark eyes that are filled with tears. She is giving me a small key, but I don't remember what the key is for. It's on a piece of string. She hangs it round my neck, and tells me I'm to wear it always. And then sometimes I hear her laugh, an infectious giggle that winds itself up into a joyous cackle. My sister cackles like a kookaburra. She comes skipping into my dreams sometimes, singing *London Bridge is Falling Down*, and I try to talk to her, but she never seems to be able to hear me. Somehow we're always just out of reach of one another.

All my earliest memories are very like dreams. I know that none of them are proper memories, none that I could really call my own anyway. I feel I've come out of half-forgotten, half-remembered times, and I'm sure I've often filled the half-forgotten times with made-up memories. Perhaps it's my mind trying to make some sense of the unknown. So I can't know for certain where the made-up ones end and the real ones begin. All the earliest childhood memories must be like that for everyone I suppose, but maybe mine are more blurred than most, and maybe that's because I have no family stories to support them, no hard facts, no real evidence, no certificates, not a single photograph. It's almost as if I

wasn't born at all, that I just happened. Arthur Hobhouse is a happening. I've been a happening for sixty-five years, or thereabouts, and the time has come now for me to put my life down on paper. For me this will be the birth certificate I never had. It's to prove to me and to anyone else who reads it that at least I was here, that I happened.

I am a story as well as a happening, and I want my story to be known, for Kitty to know it – if she's still alive. I want her to know what sort of a brother she had. I want Zita to know it too, although she knows me well enough already, I reckon, warts and all. Most of all I want Allie to know it, and for her children to know it, when they come along, and her children's children too. I want them all to know who I was, that I was a happening and I was a story too. This way I'll live on in them. I'll be part of their story, and I won't be entirely forgotten when I go. That's important to me. I think that's the only kind of immortality we can have, that we stay alive only as long as our story goes on being told. So I'm going to sit here by the window for as long as it takes and tell it all just as I remember it.

They say you can't begin a story without knowing the end. Until recently I didn't know the end, but now I do. So I can begin, and I'll begin from the very first day I can be sure I really remember. I'd have been about six years old. Strange that the memories of youth linger long, stay vivid, perhaps because we live our young lives more intensely. Everything is fresh and for the first time, and unforgettable. And we have more time just to stand and stare. Strange too that events of my more recent years, my adult years, are more clouded, less distinct. Time gathers speed as we get older. Life flashes by all too fast, and is over all too soon.

Three Red Funnels and an Orchestra

There were dozens of us on the ship, all ages, boys and girls, and we were all up on deck for the leaving of Liverpool, gulls wheeling and crying over our heads, calling goodbye. I thought they were waving goodbye. None of us spoke. It was a grey day with drizzle in the air, the great sad cranes bowing to the ship from the docks as we steamed past. That's all I remember of England.

The deck shuddered under our feet. The engines thundered and throbbed as the great ship turned slowly and made for the open sea ahead, the mist rolling in from the horizon. The nuns had told us we were off to Australia, but it might as well have been to the moon. I had no idea where Australia was. All I knew at the time was that the ship was taking me away, somewhere far away over the ocean. The ship's siren sounded again and again, deafening me even though I had my hands over my ears. When it was over I clutched the key around my neck, the key Kitty had given me, and I promised myself and promised her I'd come back home one day. I felt in me at that moment a sadness so deep that it has never left me since. But I felt too that just so long as I had Kitty's key, it would be lucky for me, and I would be all right.

I suppose we must have gone by way of the Suez Canal. I know that most of the great liners bound for Australia did in those days. But I can't say I remember it. There's a lot I do remember though: the three pillar-box-red funnels, the sound of the orchestra playing from first class where we weren't allowed to go – once they even played *London Bridge is Falling Down* and I loved that because it always made me happy when I heard it. I remember mountainous waves, higher than the deck of the ship, green or grey, or the deepest blue some days, schools of silver dancing dolphins, and always, even in the stormiest weather, seabirds skimming the waves, or floating high above the funnels. And there was the wide wide sea all around us going on it seemed to me for ever and ever, as wide as the sky itself. It was the wideness of it all I remember, and the stars at night, the millions of stars. But best of all I saw my first albatross. He flew out of a shining wave one day, came right over my head and looked down deep into my eyes. I've never forgotten that.

The ship was, in a way, my first home, because it was the first home I can remember. We slept two to a bunk, a dozen or more of us packed into each cabin, deep down in the bowels of the ship, close to the pounding rhythm of the engines. It was cramped and hot down there and reeked of diesel and damp clothes, and there was often the stench of vomit too, a lot if it mine. I was in with a lot of other lads all of whom were older than me, some a lot older.

I was in trouble almost from the start. They called me a “softie” because I’d rock myself to sleep at night, humming *London Bridge is Falling Down*, and because I cried sometimes. Once one of them found out I wet my bed too, they never let me forget it. They gave me a hard time, a lot of grief. They’d thump me with pillows, hide my clothes, hide my shoes. But sending me to Coventry was the worst, just refusing to speak to me, not even acknowledging my existence. I really hated them for that. They reserved this particular punishment for when I was at my most miserable, when I’d been sick in the cabin.

Sea-sickness was my chief dread. It came upon me often and violently. To begin with I’d do what everyone else seemed to do, I’d vomit over the rail – if I could get there in time. It was while I was doing this one day that I first met Marty. We were vomiting together side by side, caught one another’s eye, and shared each other’s wretchedness. I could see in his eyes that it was just as bad for him. It helped somehow to know that. That was how our friendship began. Some kindly sailor came along and took pity on us both. He gave us some advice: when it gets rough, he told us, you should go below, as far down as you can go. It’s the best place, because down there you don’t feel the roll of the ship so much. So that’s what we did, and it worked – mostly. Marty came down to my cabin, or I’d go to his. But sometimes I’d get caught out and find myself having to be sick on the cabin floor. I’d clean it up, but I couldn’t clean up the smell of it, so if I’d done it in my cabin they’d send me to Coventry again. It was to avoid having to face them that I sought out Marty’s company more and more. I think it was because I felt safe with him. He was a fair bit older than me, about ten he was, older even than the boys in my cabin and taller too – the tallest of all of us, and tall was important. I never asked him to protect me, not as such. But I knew somehow he might, and as it turned out, he did.

We were up on deck, the two of us, watching an albatross gliding over the waves – like me, Marty loved albatross – when a gang of these lads from my cabin were suddenly there behind us. They were northern lads, all of them – sometimes I could hardly understand what they said. One of them, their ringleader Wes Snarkey, started calling me names and taunting me, I can’t

remember why. I was “nowt but a poxy cockney!” Marty stared at Wes for a moment. He just walked right up to him and knocked him flat. One punch. Then he said very quietly, “I’m a cockney too.” They all slunk away, and after that life got a whole lot easier for me down in the cabin. It might have been just as hot and sticky, just as crowded and smelly, but at least they more or less left me alone. All Marty’s doing.

It was Marty too who explained it all to me – why we were on the ship, where we were going and why. I don’t know how much, if anything, I had understood before. We were going to Australia, that was all I knew for certain. All of us, Marty said, had been specially chosen from all the orphans in England to go out and live in Australia – that’s what he’d been told. Australia, he said, was a brand new country where there hadn’t been a war, where there hadn’t been bombings and rationing, where there was lots of food to eat, huge parks to play in, and beaches too. We’d be able to go swimming whenever we liked. I told him I couldn’t swim, and he said he’d teach me, that I’d soon learn. And, he explained, we weren’t ever going to be sent to an orphanage again like the ones we’d grown up in, but instead we were all going to live in families who wanted to look after us. So, with all that to look forward to, it was worth being sea-sick for a while, wasn’t it? Nothing was worth being sea-sick for, I said, and I promised I would never ever set foot on a ship or a boat again, not for all the tea in China. It was a promise I singularly failed to keep – often.

During that whole long voyage into an uncertain future, Marty cheered my spirits. He became like a big brother to me, which was why I confided in him about Kitty, about how she’d been left behind and how much I missed her. I showed him the lucky key she’d given me. I could never think of her or even say her name without crying, but Marty never seemed to mind me crying. But he *did* mind me humming *London Bridge is Falling Down*, said I was always doing it, and couldn’t I hum another tune? I said I didn’t know any others. He told me that, like as not, Kitty would probably be coming out to Australia on another ship, that there wasn’t room on this one, which was why they hadn’t let her on, that I’d see her again soon enough. That was Marty through and through, always hopeful, always so certain things would work out. But Marty, as I discovered later, didn’t just hope things would get better, he’d do all he could to make sure they did too.

You need people like Marty just to keep you going. Even if things don’t seem to be working out quite as you’d like them to, you need to feel they’re going to,

that all will be well in the end. If you don't believe that, and sometimes in my life I haven't, then there's a deep black hole waiting for you, a black hole I came to know only too well later on. I learned a lot from Marty on that ship, about hope, about friendship. Mighty Marty everyone called him, and it was a nickname that suited him perfectly.

Kookaburras, Cockatoos and Kangaroos

In my time I've sailed into dozens of harbours all over the world. None is more impressive than Sydney. Liverpool had been grim and grey when we left, Sydney was blue and balmy and bright and beautiful. It was an arrival I shall never forget. We came in to port in the morning in our grand red-funnelled ship, the ship's horn sounding to announce us proudly. And I felt part of all this new glory. Marty and I stood there leaning on the ship's rail, gazing in wonder – *agog* is the best word for it, I think. Everything about the place was new and marvellous to me, the warmth of the breeze, the hundreds of sailing boats out in the bay, white sails straining, the majesty of Sydney Harbour Bridge, the red-roofed houses on the hillsides all around, and the sea – I never knew blue could be so blue. Nowhere could have been more perfect. I knew without question that we were steaming into paradise. And as the ship crept in, ever closer, I could see that everyone was waving up at us and smiling. We waved back. And Marty put his fingers in his mouth and whistled. I was filled with sudden hope. I was aglow with happiness, and so was Marty. He had his arm around my shoulder. "I told you, Arthur, didn't I?" he said. "A brand-new country. We'll be all right now."

In all the bustle and chaos on the dockside they gathered all of us children together, gave us a roll call, and then, without telling us why, began to split us up into groups. When I saw what was happening I stayed as close to Marty as I could. The last thing I wanted was to get separated from him. But that's just what they tried to do. Marty grabbed my arm, held on to it, and told me to stay right where I was beside him. Quick as a flash, he said, "Him and me, Mister, we're cousins. Where Arthur goes, I go. Where I go, Arthur goes." The man ticking our names off his list said it was quite impossible, that arrangements had already been made and couldn't be changed. He was adamant, and bad-tempered too. He shouted at Marty to button his lip and do as he was told. Like everyone else on the dockside, he spoke English, but it didn't sound the same language as it had in England at all. I recognised the words, some of them, but the sounds

they made were different and strange.

Marty didn't shout back and scream. He didn't jump up and down. Marty, I discovered, had his own very individual way of dealing with authority. He spoke very quietly, perfectly politely, fixing the man with a steady stare. "We're staying together, Mister," he said. And we did too, which was why I found myself later that morning sitting beside Marty on a bus, heading out of Sydney and into open country. There were ten of us on that bus, all boys, and as I looked around me I was relieved to see that only one of the boys from my cabin was there. It was Wes Snarkey, the one Marty had thumped that day on deck – he'd never given me any trouble since, so that didn't bother me. Lady Luck really had smiled on me – that's what I thought at the time anyway.

The driver, who seemed a chatty, cheerful sort of bloke, told us he was taking us to Cooper's Station, a big farm over 300 miles away. It would take us all day to get there. Best to settle down and sleep, he said. But we didn't. None of us did. There was too much to look at, too many wonders I'd never seen before. For a start, there were the wide open spaces, hardly a house in sight, hardly any people either. But that wasn't all that amazed me that first day in Australia. All the animals and birds were as different and strange to us as the country itself. The bus driver told us what they were – and it turned out their names were about as odd as they were themselves – kookaburras and cockatoos and kangaroos and possums. They didn't even have the same trees we had back home in England. They had gum trees and wattle trees instead. This wasn't just a different country we were in, it was more like a different planet. And the scrubby surface of this planet seemed to go on and on, flat on every side as far as the horizon, which shimmered blue and brown and green. And the towns we drove through were like no towns I'd seen before. They had great wide dusty streets, and all the houses were low. If you saw another car it was a surprise.

I was hot and dusty and thirsty on that bus, and I thought the journey would never end, but I was happy. I was happy to have arrived, happy not to be seasick any more. Tired though we were, we were buoyed up by the excitement of it all. This was a new adventure in a new world. We were on a bus ride into wonderland and we were loving it, every single moment of it.

Evening was coming on by the time we got to Cooper's Station, but we could still see enough. We could see it was a place on its own, way out in the bush, and we could tell it was a farm. I mean you could smell it straightaway, the moment we clambered down off the bus. There were huge sheds all around, and you could hear cattle moving and shifting around inside. And from further away in

the gloom there was the sound of a running creek, and ducks quacking raucously. A gramophone record was playing from the nearby farmhouse, which had a tin roof and a verandah all around it. I thought at first that was where we'd all be living, but we were led past it, carrying our suitcases, down a dirt track and into a compound with a fence all around. In the centre of this was a long wooden shed with steps at one end and a verandah.

"Your new home," the man told us, opening the door. I didn't take much notice of him, not then. I was too busy looking around me. The gramophone needle got stuck as I stood there. I can never think of Cooper's Station without that stuttering snatch of a hymn repeating itself remorselessly in my head, "What a friend we have in Jesus, have in Jesus, have in Jesus, have in Jesus". I wasn't to know it then, but it was the eerie overture that heralded the darkest years of my life.

Cooper's Station and Piggy Bacon and God's Work

I think it was from the moment they first shut us in the dormitory block at Cooper's Station, and we heard the door bolted behind us, that I have hated walls about me and locked doors. I never lock the doors of my house even now – never. Ever since Cooper's Station, doors and walls have made me feel like a prisoner. I was about to find out, as we all were, not what it was *like* to be a prisoner, but what it *was* to be a prisoner. Worse still we were slaves too.

I've had a lot of time to think things over since. I'm still angry about Cooper's Station, about what they did to us there. But we weren't the first. Two hundred years or so before we were sent out from England to Australia, others had made the same journey we did. They had come in chains in the stinking bowels of transport ships. We may have come in a beautiful ship, with pillar-box-red funnels and an orchestra, but we were prisoners just like them. And they must have very soon discovered, as we did, that you weren't just a prisoner, you were a slave as well, and that when you're a slave they don't just take away your freedom, they take away everything else as well because they own you. They own you body and soul. And the soul, we were about to find out, was particularly important to our owners.

I can't pretend I had any understanding of all this then, lying there clutching my lucky key in the sweltering darkness of the dormitory during my first night at Cooper's Station, but I knew already that the dream had died. Marty lay in the bunk next to me, stunned to silence like the rest of us. He cried that night, the only time I ever heard Marty cry. I knew now this brand-new country we had come to was not a paradise after all. It was, as we were soon to discover, a hell on earth – a hell specially devised for children by Mr Bacon, Piggy Bacon we called him, who was to be our gaoler, slave-master, preacher and brand-new father, all in one.

I can honestly say that Piggy Bacon was the only person in all my life that I ever wanted to kill. But to be fair to him, he did at least tell it to us straight. That

first morning at Cooper's Station, after washing from the buckets lined up out on the verandah, after our breakfast of lukewarm, lumpy porridge, he told us exactly why we were there. We were all gathered there shivering outside the dormitory block. Mrs Bacon was at his side in her blue dungarees and flowery apron, tiny alongside his great bulk. He was a great thickset bull of a man, red-faced with short, cropped ginger hair and a clipped ginger moustache, and little pink eyes – even his eyelashes were ginger. He always seemed to me like a man on fire and about to explode. His vast stomach looked as if it was only just held in by his checked shirt and broad belt, a belt every one of us would have good cause to fear as the months passed. He wore knee-length boots which he'd whack irritably from time to time with the stick he used to carry – the same stick he would use for punctuating his speeches – speeches which, like this one, always turned into sermons. Sometimes he'd carry a whip for cracking at the dogs, at the cattle or the horses, or us if he felt like it. Stick or whip, it didn't matter to us – we came to fear both just as much.

Mrs Bacon smiled the same fixed nervous smile that day that I so often saw afterwards. We didn't know the reason she was nervous, not then. She seemed shrunk inside her dungarees – I think she always wore the same blue dungarees, only the aprons changed. I sensed from the first that Mrs Bacon was frightened, that she was hiding something. Her face was drained of all colour. I never in my life saw a woman look more weary. She stood there, her eyes downcast, as Piggy Bacon told us all the whys and wherefores, the do's and don'ts of Cooper's Station.

"You can count yourselves very lucky," he began, "that Mrs Bacon and I have taken you in. No one else would, you know. We did it out of the kindness of our hearts, didn't we, Mrs Bacon? Out of the kindness of our hearts, that's what it was. You are the little ones no one else wanted. You are the little ones thrown out of the nest, rejected and with no home to go to, no one to look after you, no one even to feed you. But we will, won't we, Mrs Bacon? We will feed you and house you, we will clothe you and teach you about hard work and the ways of God. What more could a child ever want? Mrs Bacon and I are God fearin' folk, Christian folk. We were brought up to know our duty. 'Suffer little children to come unto me,' the good Lord said. So we are doing his will, and this we shall train you to do as well. A child is born sinful and must be bent to the will of God. That is now our task.

"So we have offered to take you in, at our own expense mind, out of good Christian charity. We have built you this home for your shelter – your shelter

from the storm of life. You will help us make a garden of Eden, a paradise out of this wilderness. Mrs Bacon and I will be like a mother and father to you, won't we, Mrs Bacon? And your training in the ways of the Lord will begin right now. There will be no swearing, no idleness – I promise you, you will be kept too busy ever to be idle. You will work to earn your keep. And you will work because the Devil makes work for idle hands. If you work we shall feed you well. If you work well you may play for one hour at the end of each day, the last hour before sundown.

“Look out there!” he roared suddenly, waving his stick towards the horizon. “Look! Do you see? Nothing. Nothing but wilderness as far as the eye can see, and that nothing goes on for miles and miles north, south, east and west. So don't you ever think of running off. You'd go round in circles out there. You'd die of thirst, be shrivelled up by the sun. The snakes would bite you, the crocs would eat you up, or the dingo dogs would tear you to pieces. And even if you survived all that, the black fellows would soon find you – they always do what I say – and they'd just bring you right back here to Cooper's Station. Isn't that right, Mrs Bacon?”

Mrs Bacon did not respond. She just stayed there beside him, eyes still lowered, while he ranted on.

When she thought he'd finished she walked away towards the farmhouse, followed closely by her dun-coloured dog, a furtive frightened creature like his mistress, who slunk along behind her, his tail between his legs. But Piggy Bacon had not finished, not quite. He glared after her, and then slapped his boot with his stick. “It's God's work we're doing,” he said. “God's work. Always remember that.”

And so to God's work we went.

Suffer Little Children

Piggy Bacon kept his promise to us faithfully: he did indeed always keep us too busy ever to be idle. From that day on anything that needed doing on the farm we children did it. We were the slaves that tried to carve his paradise out of the wilderness for him. The work was either smelly or back-breaking and often both at the same time. There were thirty milk cows and their calves and a hundred bullocks or more on that station. We fed them, watered them, drove them, cleaned up after them. And before long we were milking the cows too. I ached from my fingers to my shoulders with the work of it. Then there were Piggy Bacon's chickens – he had hundreds of them – and his pigs and his horses too.

Mornings were spent mostly refilling the wash buckets from the pump, shovelling muck, wheeling it out to the dung heap from the calf sheds, or spreading it on the paddocks. And always the flies found you, every fly in Australia. They were all around you, in your eyes, in your hair, up your nose even, and they were biting ones too. And if you swallowed one – and you often did – you'd try to retch it up, but you never could. We couldn't escape them any more than the animals could.

Lunch was soup and bread brought to our long trestle table in the dormitory and ladled out into our bowls by Mrs Bacon, who scarcely ever spoke to us. We lived on soup and bread in that place. Then in the afternoons we'd be set to clearing the paddocks of stones, or we'd be fetching and carrying water to the troughs, and blocks of salt too. These buckets almost pulled my arms out of my sockets they were so heavy. You had to fill them right up too, because if ever Piggy Bacon caught you carrying a half-empty bucket you were in big trouble, and trouble always meant the strap. So we filled them up full to the brim every time. And when all the water-carrying was done, we'd be digging up weeds or filling in potholes in the tracks, or pulling out tree roots, all of us straining together on the ropes.

Our hands blistered, our feet blistered. Bites and sores festered. None of that mattered to Piggy Bacon. Once one job was done there was always another

waiting. We worked hard because he'd stop our food just like that if we didn't. We worked hard because he'd strap us if we didn't. We worked hard because if we didn't he'd cancel our evening playtime and make us work an hour extra at the end of the day. I so longed for that hour off – we all did – and we hated to miss it. That promise of an hour's playtime was what kept me going when every bone in my body ached with tiredness.

Feeding up the animals was the last task of the day, the only work I really enjoyed. Chickens, cows, pigs, horses – it didn't matter – I loved to see them come running when they saw us with our sacks of feed. I loved to watch them loving it. But the milking I never liked. My fingers couldn't cope. They swelled easily and I couldn't sleep afterwards for the pain. Marty and I – we always tried to be in the same work party – would feed a few by hand if we could, if Piggy Bacon wasn't around to catch us. The chickens tickled you when they pecked the corn out of your hand, and the horses' noses felt warm and soft as they snuffled up their feed – you had to watch out in case they snuffled up your fingers as well.

There was one horse in particular Marty and I loved more than all the others. He was huge, a giant of a horse, shining black all over except for one white sock. Big Black Jack he was called, and whenever we were lucky enough to get to feed him, Marty and I made sure he had all the food and water he needed, and then some. I'd crouch there by his bucket, watching him drink deep, listening to his slurping, laughing at his dribbling when he lifted his head out of the bucket. I'd sing *London Bridge is Falling Down* to him, and he'd like that. He was Piggy Bacon's plough-horse, and Piggy treated him just as he treated us, worked him to the bone, till his head hung down with exhaustion. Horses, I discovered, when they're tired or sad, sigh just like people do. Big Black Jack used to do that often. We'd look one another in the eye and I'd know just how he felt and he'd know just how I felt too.

Whatever job we were doing, whenever we were out on the farm, we could be sure Piggy Bacon would turn up sooner or later. He would appear suddenly, out of nowhere. He only ever came for one reason, and that was to pick on someone for something. Each time I hoped and prayed it was someone else he'd pick on. But sooner or later my turn would come around. We either weren't working fast enough, or hard enough. A water bucket wasn't full enough, or he'd find a field stone we hadn't picked up – any excuse would do. He wouldn't strap us there and then. Instead he'd tell us how many whacks the particular crime merited and then give us all day to think about it. That was the torture of it, the waiting.

The punishment parade would take place in the evening outside the dormitory hut just before supper and before we were locked in for the night. He'd call you out in front of the others and then pronounce sentence on you just like a judge. And you'd stand there, hand outstretched, trembling and tearful. It happened to all of us, and often. No one escaped it. But Marty got it more than most, and you could see that when Piggy Bacon strapped Marty he did it with real venom. There was a good reason for that: Marty's look.

It was the same look he'd used on that officious man on the dockside the first day we landed in Australia. The thing was that Marty would never be cowed. He would look Piggy Bacon straight in the eye, and that always set Piggy Bacon into one of his terrible rages. The rest of us kept our heads down, just tried to keep out of trouble. Marty fought back with silent defiance. And he didn't cry out like I did, like the rest of us did, when we were strapped – he wouldn't give him the satisfaction. He just stood there unflinching, his jaw set, his eyes stoney, no tears, no trembling. And to add insult to injury, he'd say thank you afterwards too, his voice as stony as his stare. I'd like to say we all took heart from that, but we didn't. We admired him though – everyone did. But he wasn't the only one who fought back. We soon had another hero to admire, a most unlikely hero too – Wes Snarkey.

Wes Snarkey's Revenge

Neither Marty nor I had ever much liked Wes, and Wes made it quite obvious he didn't much like us either. I could never forget how he and his cronies had tormented me almost every night on the ship, and I'm sure he could not forget how Marty had come to my defence and humiliated him on the deck that day. That must still have rankled with him. So the result was that we hardly ever spoke. In fact he hardly ever spoke to anyone during those first months at Cooper's Station. In the dormitory, at the line of wash buckets on the verandah, eating at the long trestle table, out at work on the farm, he kept himself to himself. Even at evening playtime when we'd all be kicking a football around, he'd sit there on his own, gazing out at nothing. Of all of us Wes Snarkey was the only loner. But then one day I found out that he wasn't really a loner at all. He had a friend – a best friend.

Time and again Piggy Bacon had strapped him for wandering away from his work. No one knew where he went and he didn't tell anyone. One moment he'd be there digging a ditch alongside you, the next he'd be gone. Strapping Wes didn't stop him from sneaking off, so I knew that whatever he was doing, wherever he was going, must have been really important to him. We were mucking out the pigs one day when I noticed he'd gone off again. I made quite sure Piggy Bacon wasn't about, and went looking for him. I found him by Big Black Jack's paddock. I crouched down behind the trunk of a fallen gum tree and watched him. He was standing by the fence, feeding Big Black Jack with some bread crusts, and he was talking to him as if he was a real person, not a horse at all. I was close enough to see everything, and to hear everything too.

Wes was telling him about a horse he'd known in England, in Leeds, a milkman's horse, a piebald mare she was, and how every morning he'd sit on the wall of the orphanage in the early morning and wait for her to come, how he'd save his bread crusts to feed her, how one day the milkman had let him sit on her, and they'd gone off down the street, how it was the best day of his life. "Will you let me ride you one day, Jack?" he whispered, smoothing his neck. "Would you? I could ride you out of here and we'd never come back."

I must have shifted then or maybe it was a gust of wind that rustled the pile of dead leaves where I was crouching. Whatever it was, Wes turned around and saw me there. We stared at one another, not speaking. I could see he had tears in his eyes, and on his face too. He brushed them away hurriedly with the back of his hand then ran off before I could say anything. And I was going to say something. I was going to say that I liked Big Black Jack too, that we could be friends now if he wanted.

As it happened it was only a few days later that Wes Snarkey became everyone's friend, and that was on account of Piggy Bacon and his whip. Down near the creek, which was dried up for most of the year, there was an old tree stump we couldn't pull out. We'd been digging around it, and trying to pull it out for a whole day. With all of us hauling on the ropes, and even with Piggy Bacon lending a hand himself – and that hardly ever happened – we still couldn't shift it. So in the end Piggy Bacon harnessed up Big Black Jack and got him to do the job instead. But no matter how hard Jack strained at the ropes, the stump would not budge. Piggy Bacon shouted at him, but it did no good. Big Black Jack was doing all he could, we could see that. Piggy Bacon took a stick to him then, and whacked him again and again. He was bellowing at him.

"Useless bag of bones! Lazy devil! You good-for-nothing, you!" Then Piggy Bacon used his whip on him. In a frenzy of fury and frustration he whipped him till he bled. That was when Wes Snarkey went for Piggy Bacon.

He ran at him, screaming like a wild thing, head-butted him full in the belly, knocking the wind out of him and sending him sprawling in the dust. They rolled over and over with Wes ending up on top, sitting astride him and pounding him with his fists. And we were all cheering then and leaping up and down, until Mrs Bacon came running out from the house and pulled Wes off him, but not before the damage had been done, not before blood had been drawn.

Piggy Bacon was never quite as frightening to us again after that. His temper could still be terrifying, and we still hated him just as much. But we had seen the wicked giant felled. We'd seen his blood. He made Wes pay of course. He made us all pay. We had no playtime for a week, and no bread with our soup for a week either. Wes got twelve strokes of the strap that night and didn't seem to mind a bit. He sat on his bunk nursing his hand afterwards grinning up at us, looking happy as Larry. He knew he'd made new friends of all of us, and he was happy. So were we. From that day on there was a solidarity among us. We smiled more. We joked more. All this had been Wes Snarkey's doing. He'd had his revenge and it was sweet revenge for us all. He wasn't just a friend now, he

was our hero too.

Saints and Sinners

Sunday at Cooper's Station was the only day we didn't have to work. We sang hymns and psalms, said our prayers and heard sermons instead. They went on all morning, outside the dormitory usually or inside if it was wet – which wasn't often. Piggy would stand on a box and harangue us with his sermons in between the hymns. Mrs Piggy, as we'd all come to call her, standing dutifully at his side, her dog lying at her feet fast asleep and twitching in his dreams, which broke the monotony of it. It was a welcome distraction and gave us something to nudge one another and wink about.

Mrs Piggy would play the squeezey box to accompany the hymns, and would sing out, her voice surprisingly strong, leading us all, her eyes closed in fervent concentration. This was the only time you would ever see her confident and full of conviction. She seemed to be carried away on the wings of faith, lost absolutely in the spirit of the hymns. Her piping voice rang out passionate with belief. After every hymn, she would cry out at the top of her voice: "Alleluia! Praise the Lord!" Then she'd lower her head and at once shrink back inside her shell, inside the Mrs Piggy we all knew, timid and tired and terrified, as Piggy Bacon launched into yet another thunderous sermon about the saints above and the sinners below, by which he meant us, about devils and hellfire and damnation. Through it all the dog slept blissfully. We just wished we could do the same.

But we weren't the only ones at the Sunday services. This was the only day the Aboriginal people, who lived in the country round about and who sometimes came to work on the farm – the "black fellows" Piggy called them – were allowed to come near the house. We'd see them often enough, the children mostly, when we were out on the farm, just crouching there in the distance watching us. Or sometimes we'd catch sight of a group of them moving through a heat haze on the horizon, not walking at all, it seemed to me, but rather floating over the ground. If ever they wandered in too close Piggy Bacon would go after

them on his horse and drive them away with his whip, calling them all thieves and drunkards. But on Sundays Mrs Piggy invited them in for cakes and prayers. Even then they didn't like to come too close, but they'd squat down at a safe distance from us to listen to the hymns and sermons.

Afterwards Mrs Piggy would go over to them carrying a tray of cakes and lemonade, and she'd make the sign of the cross on their foreheads and bless them. None of us had seen that many black faces before, just an occasional one passing by in a London street perhaps, and I'd noticed one or two black American GIs in uniform driving around in jeeps back home. These people went barefoot in ragged clothes and their children ran about naked, and they made you feel uncomfortable because they seemed always so still as they squatted there scrutinising you, their dark eyes looking right into yours. They stared. We stared. But we hardly ever spoke. You could never tell what they were thinking. But I liked having them there. They were company. And in this desolate place of wide skies and wide horizons, where we saw so few people, just their presence was a comfort.

Hardly anyone besides them ever came to Cooper's Station. A truck coming down the long farm track was a real event for us, because it was that rare, maybe one or two a week, that's all – delivering animal feed, or fencing wire, or seed perhaps. The drivers often sat on the verandah and drank lemonade with Piggy and Mrs Piggy. They had cakes too. We got cakes and lemonade only on Sundays, our big treat of the week, one each with a cherry on the top. We'd line up and Mrs Piggy handed one to each of us. She'd bless us and sign a cross on our forehead too. I liked that. It was the only time she ever touched us. I always took the cherry off my cake, put in my pocket and kept it till last. Sometimes I'd keep it until I was in bed, and I'd lie there letting it melt slowly in my mouth, my hand grasping my lucky key all the time.

They tried to make us say our prayers at night. We'd all have to kneel there for ten minutes in silence. I never prayed, but I did wish. Every night, clutching the key around my neck, I wished myself out of there, wished myself back home in England, back with Kitty.

In that first year, like everyone else, I almost found myself liking Mrs Piggy, and not just because of her Sunday cakes either – though that certainly had something to do with it. The truth was I felt sorry for her, we all did. And in a way I suppose she had our respect too. Unlike Piggy Bacon himself, she worked as hard out on the farm as we did. She milked the cows with us in the morning and evening, and she made all our meals too. The porridge and the soup and

bread and the milky puddings may have been repetitious and tedious, but it was hot and it was regular. And Mrs Piggy did it all.

Then there were the good days, the only good days, when Piggy Bacon drove off in his truck into town, and we'd be left alone on the farm just with her. We still had our work to do, but she'd do it with us. And on these rare and happy days you'd see all the tension and the exhaustion lift from her shoulders, and even hear her laugh sometimes. We were the same. Without Piggy Bacon there, we could fool around, have fun! On those days she was a different person.

But every time it would be over all too soon. Unlike her there was some refuge for us, together in our locked dormitory at night. We had each other too. She still had Piggy Bacon. Sometimes, the worse for drink, he'd throw things at her – you could hear the sound of smashing crockery in the farmhouse. You'd hear him shouting at her, hitting her too, beating her. I never saw it happen, but we heard it.

“Don't you dare tell me how to treat them! I'll do what I like and how I like, you hear me woman?” He'd go on and on at her.

We'd lie there listening, and the next morning we'd see the bruises. So in time we began to feel she was one of us, just as much Piggy Bacon's slave as we all were. I've often wondered why she endured it, why she stayed with him. There's really only one answer that makes any sense at all: for the love of God, for Jesus' sake. I never knew a more devout woman than Piggy Bacon's wife. She was married to him in the eyes of the Lord, so she could never leave him. As we were to discover, she was a woman who didn't just believe, she really *lived* her faith, and she suffered for it too.

I only once caught a glimpse of the depth of her suffering. Marty and Wes and I had been told by Piggy to go and dig over their vegetable patch behind the farmhouse. It was a hot and humid afternoon. The flies were out and at us, and the soil was dried hard and unyielding. We'd been at it for hours, and we'd had enough. It was Marty's idea to have a rest and get ourselves a drink. Marty's ideas were often dangerous. But by now we were beyond caring, and anyway Piggy Bacon had just been round on one of his random patrols. We thought Mrs Piggy was out working on the farm somewhere. We dropped our forks and ran to the water pump outside the backdoor of the farmhouse. We pumped out the water for each other, all of us taking our turns to lie on the ground underneath, letting it splash all over our faces, drinking our fill. I was just having my turn, revelling in the coolness of it, when Marty and Wes stopped pumping. When I protested they shushed me, and then crept off, doubled up, along the side of the

farmhouse. I could hear Mrs Piggy now, she was crying her heart out. I followed them. When they stood up to peek in at the window I did too. Standing on tip-toe I could only just see.

She was sitting there, rocking back and forth in her chair by the stove, her dog on her lap. On the table near us by the window were all the Sunday cakes she'd made. She was trying to stop herself sobbing by singing. It was very soft, but we could hear it well enough to recognise it: *What a friend we have in Jesus*. Verse after verse she sang, but punctuated always by fits of sobbing that wracked her whole body. There was one moment when she lifted her eyes and cried out loud: "Why, sweet Jesus? Why? Please take this cup from me, Jesus. Please take it." That was when I saw the purple bruise on her chin, the livid marks on her neck and some blood on her lip too. She was clasping her hands and praying. I remember thinking then that I wanted Piggy Bacon dead, that one day I would kill him. I never made actual plans to do it of course, but I felt like doing it, and so did Marty, and Wes too.

What he did next could so easily have made a murderer of me, if I'd had the means, if I'd had the courage, if circumstance hadn't intervened.

Mrs Piggy to Ida

It was Christmas time – our second Christmas on the farm – about eighteen months or so after we arrived at Cooper’s Station. For lunch on Christmas Day, Piggy Bacon and Mrs Piggy sat at opposite ends of our long trestle table and ate with us. We’d had the day off – in all we were given three days off in the year: Piggy Bacon’s birthday, Easter Sunday and Christmas Day. The morning had been all carols and prayers, and of course sermons too, just like a normal Sunday, except that I liked the carols a lot better than some of the dreary hymns we usually sang. We had sausages and mashed potatoes and gravy, and then jam roly-poly and custard afterwards, and all the lemonade we wanted. The best feast of my childhood; I’ve never forgotten it. With Piggy and Mrs Piggy there we none of us said a word, of course, none of us dared. But I don’t think any one of us wanted to talk much anyway – we were all far too busy eating our fantastic feast to have any time at all for conversation. We were savouring every mouthful. Ever since that Christmas Day I’ve always loved sausages.

It happened after the meal. As usual one of us had to stand up and say grace, not just before but after each meal as well. It happened to be my turn that day, and Piggy Bacon made me say it all over again because I’d mumbled it. “Say it loud to the Lord,” he told me, “and he will hear you.” So I did. Then he stood up himself, cleared his throat and announced that they had decided to give us each a Christmas present, “A gift from the Lord,” he said, a gift that we could keep with us and treasure all our lives. Then he showed us what it was. Dangling there from his forefinger on a piece of cord was a small wooden cross. “From now on every one of you will wear this every day.

This is the badge of Jesus and you will wear it with pride,” he said.

One by one we were summoned up to receive our present. He hung a cross around each of our necks. We said thank you, shook his hand and went to sit down again. Except for the thank yous the whole ceremony was conducted in an awkward silence. Mrs Piggy, who was standing meekly at his side with a bunch of crosses hanging from her wrist, handed a cross to him as each of us came up. I noticed she kissed each one before she gave it to him. Then I was called up. I

was standing there waiting for my cross, looking up into Piggy Bacon's face, when suddenly his whole expression altered. "What's this?" he roared, and lunging forward he grabbed my key from around my neck and with one violent pull jerked it off.

"That's mine," I cried, reaching out to grab it back. He held it out of my reach, examining it, puzzling over it.

"A key? What for? A key to what?"

"It's my lucky key," I told him. "Kitty gave it to me, my sister in England."

"Luck!" Piggy Bacon thundered. "Luck is magic, and all magic is the devil's work. There is no such thing as luck. It is God who makes all things happen, in this life and afterwards too." I kept trying to jump up and snatch it from him, but he was still holding it too high. "It's a lucky charm, which is devil's magic, witchcraft, mumbo jumbo. You will wear a cross or nothing at all."

"Then," I said, surprised at my own sudden courage, "then I won't wear anything at all." And I turned and walked away. He strapped me that evening of course, and afterwards I had to bend my head in front of him as he put the cross around my neck. He said that if he ever saw me not wearing it, he'd strap me again. "What about my key?" I asked him.

"I've thrown it out," he said. "It's where all witchcraft belongs, in the rubbish."

That night I cried myself to sleep. Neither Wes nor Marty could comfort me. My precious key was gone, gone for ever, and I felt utterly alone in the world without it, like my last roots had been ripped out. As I lay there that night in the darkness I had murder in my heart. And I don't just mean I hated Piggy Bacon. I mean I really wanted to kill him. I might well have done it too. I had found the courage now – revenge and fury gives you powerful courage – but I just couldn't think how to do it. I had no idea how I could murder him, not yet, but I was determined to find some way to do it and do it soon. Luckily for him, luckily for me too, it didn't come to that. Luck intervened, or fate, or circumstance, call it what you like, and when it came, it came from a most welcome and unexpected source.

When I'd first come to Cooper's Station I'd been terrified of snakes, and of spiders in particular. Every day we'd see all manner of strange and wonderful creatures out on the farm, from wallabies to wombats. But it was spiders and snakes I looked out for. We'd see them everywhere, snakes curled up under the dormitory block or slithering along between the boulders down by the creek.

Spiders, we discovered, loved the toilet, which was a shed with a corrugated iron roof built on to the side of the dormitory block. It was baking hot in there and stank to high heaven, but it was the spiders I hated, the spiders I feared. I feared them so much that I tried not to go to the toilet. Whenever I could I would try to go outside to do my business. Sometimes though, I was in a hurry and the toilet was nearby and I'd risk it. But I'd do it quickly, as quickly as I could, trying not to breathe in, and trying not to look for spiders.

They say you never see the bullet that gets you. It's the same with spiders. I was told later it was a redback spider. I was sitting there on the toilet. It happened when I stood up. I was pulling up my shorts and I felt it bite my foot, felt the stabbing surging pain of it, saw it scurrying away. I screamed then and ran out. I remember stumbling to my knees and Mrs Piggy running towards me.

I've no idea how long I lay in bed. Marty told me later that they all thought I was going to die. I do remember realising I wasn't in my own bed, that there were curtains and pictures on the wall, and a big cupboard. I remember too Mrs Piggy coming in and sitting with me, and I felt hot and heavy all over as if I was weighted down somehow. And once when she came she wasn't alone. She had an Aboriginal man with her, a bushman with white hair, and he looked into my eyes and felt my face and gave me a medicine to take and laid some kind of a poultice on my foot. The medicine tasted so bitter I could barely swallow it. But whatever it was that he put on my foot cooled it wonderfully.

As I got better Mrs Piggy would sit beside me playing her squeeze box and I loved that. All these memories may well not be memories at all. It was Mrs Piggy who told me afterwards when I was better, when I thanked her for looking after me, that it wasn't her that had cured me at all, but a "black fellow" she'd called in. He'd saved my life, she said, not her. "And don't say a word to Mr Bacon," she said. "He wouldn't like it. He doesn't believe in their magic. But I do. There's room for all sorts of magic and miracles in this world – that's what I think."

I'd spent the best part of a month in my sick bed in the farmhouse, so Marty told me later. He said that both Wes and he had agreed it would be almost worth a spider bite or a snake bite if it got you a month's holiday in the farmhouse. I told them everything, about how well I'd been fed and looked after, about Mrs Piggy nursing me and how kind she'd been, and all about the bushman who'd saved my life with his magical medicine. And I told them too about the last thing Mrs Piggy had done the morning I was to leave the farmhouse. She came up to my room. I was sitting on the bed buttoning my shirt.

“Here,” she said. “This is yours, I think.” And she handed me a tiny box, like a pill box. I opened it, and there was my key lying in a bed of cotton wool. “Hide it,” she told me. “And hide it well.” She said nothing more, and was gone out of the room before I could even thank her.

I never referred to her after that as Mrs Piggy, nor did anyone else because very soon everyone knew how good a person she really was, how she’d found my key, looked after it, and given it back to me. She was Ida after that, Ida to all of us. We all knew from then on that we had in her a true friend, but we didn’t know just how good a friend, just how important a friend she was to be to us. We had many more gruelling months to endure before we were to find that out. And now I had my key back I forgot all about killing Piggy Bacon. So I suppose you could say Ida didn’t just save my life, she saved his. Much good did it do her.

As for my key, I did as Ida had told me, I hid it well. But I kept it close too. Right above my bed there was a window, and above it a wooden lintel with a narrow split at one end, but it was just wide enough. I pushed my key in deep, so it couldn’t be seen, making quite sure Piggy could never find it, and left it there. But it never left my thoughts. Every night before I got into bed I’d look up at my secret place. I told Marty – no one else.

“Only One Way Out”

We could see it happening right in front of our eyes, every day, every night. And we didn't do nearly enough to prevent it. There's a lot in my life I regret, a lot to feel guilty about – too much. But I don't think anything troubles me more than what happened to Wes Snarkey at Cooper's Station. I still have dreams about it, and about him, all these years later. I should have seen it coming. I should have had the courage to stand beside him, but I didn't. Nor did Marty, and nor did any of us, except Ida. At least Ida tried.

It all went back, I'm sure, to that glorious day when Wes knocked Piggy Bacon down in the yard, then sat on him and clobbered him. Wes became our hero that day, but he also replaced Marty as Piggy's favourite victim. He would bawl him out all the time, pick on him at every opportunity. Wes found himself chosen for the worst jobs, the ones we all dreaded, the dirtiest, the heaviest, the smelliest: cleaning out the latrine, digging ditches, carting stones. And Piggy was as clever about it as he was vicious. He knew how Wes loved to work near Big Black Jack in the stables. Everyone knew it. Wes had made no secret of his love for the horse, so Piggy deliberately saw to it that he was never anywhere near his paddock or the stable. And he made sure as well that Wes worked mainly on his own. He deliberately set out to isolate him from the rest of us.

Hardly a day went by when Wes wasn't hauled out in front of all of us at evening punishment parade. Sometimes Piggy would just bellow at him. Sometimes he would take the strap to him and give him a hiding. He'd always find some excuse, any excuse to punish him. We could all see Wes was getting it a lot harder than the rest of us. And Piggy was enjoying it too – I saw it in his face. When he whacked Wes it was always done with more venom, more violence. Thinking back, I'm ashamed to say there was even a sense in which I felt a little relieved because while Wes was on the receiving end, then at least I wasn't.

Wes grew in stature in our eyes with every whack of Piggy's belt. He never once flinched, never once complained, and so far as we knew he never even cried. For long weeks and months, it was his resistance and his defiance in the

face of our hated enemy that kept us going and gave us all hope. I longed for the day that he'd have a go at Piggy again. I was sure he would. I thought, and Marty did too, that Wes was just biding his time, picking the right moment.

Then I began to notice that Wes was becoming more and more silent, more withdrawn, even with Marty and me, and we were his best friends. It happened slowly, so slowly that it was difficult at first to believe it was really happening. To start with I thought it was just because he was never allowed to be in the same working party as Marty and me, so we were simply seeing less of him. He often wasn't with us during playtime either – Piggy regularly made him work on longer than the rest of us. And even when we were together, in the dormitory, Wes seemed to be shutting himself off from us. We'd been a threesome, all pals together, but now however much Marty and I tried to include him – and we did – we could both feel him slipping away from us and turning in on himself.

In time he became almost a stranger to us, a loner, just as he'd been before during those first months at Cooper's Station. We wanted him to be one of us again because we liked him, and also because we admired him for how he was facing down the loathsome Piggy Bacon, and humiliating him every day on our behalf. I thought maybe he was dealing with it in his own way, bearing it stoically and in silence. I thought he could take it. I was wrong.

One morning Wes wouldn't get up for roll call. He lay in his bed and wouldn't move. Marty and I tried to persuade him, but he ignored us. He just turned his face away from us. We knew what would happen. Later after roll call, we were all standing out there in the cold of dawn, listening to Piggy inside the dormitory doing his worst. We heard him whacking Wes, yelling at him. "You asked for it, you little devil! I'll teach you. If it's the last thing I do, I'll teach you. No work, no food. See how you like that!" Every phrase was punctuated by the swish and whack of his stick. He was giving Wes a real pasting, and to our shame we just stood there and let it happen.

Then we heard Wes talking back, a steely calm in his voice. "I won't work for you, not ever again. And I won't eat your rotten food either. You can keep it." Moments later Piggy came storming out of the dormitory hut on to the verandah. He stood there surveying us all breathlessly, his face a beacon of rage.

For days Wes lay there refusing to get up, and every morning Piggy would go in and beat him, and every day he stopped his food too. To begin with Marty and I tried to squirrel away something for him, bread crusts perhaps. But Wes just shook his head. He wouldn't touch anything. He told us we shouldn't do it because we'd only get into trouble ourselves. And anyway, he said, there was no

point, because he meant what he'd said: he wouldn't touch Piggy's food, even if it came secretly from us. He would stay on hunger strike, he said, until Piggy Bacon treated us properly and stopped beating us. He would drink water though. So we'd bring him that as often as we could. We kept bringing food too but it was no use. He'd made up his mind, he said, and nothing would change it. He would sometimes smile at us, but weakly now as if we were kind strangers.

He would say very little, and as he weakened he said less and less. But he did say something one evening when we were all three there together, Marty and I sitting on his bed. He said, and I've never forgotten his words: "You know what I think. I think there's only one way out of this place, and I've found it." Marty asked him what he meant, but he wouldn't say. We both of us tried again and again to talk him out of his hunger strike, but he was dead set on it. He wouldn't listen. I know now we should have tried harder. We should have tried much harder.

“Did We Have the Children Here for This?”

In the end we went to the only person we thought might help. We went to the farmhouse to see Ida. We told her everything: how Wes was beaten each morning, how he was on hunger strike, how he could die if something wasn't done soon. Even while she was listening to us, she was looking around nervously. I could tell she just wanted us gone. And I could tell too that she already knew everything we'd been telling her. “You shouldn't be here,” she said when we'd finished. “Go now, go quickly, before someone sees you. I'll see what I can do.” And she closed the door and went back inside, leaving us standing there. I told Marty that I was sure she'd find a way to help Wes somehow.

“She'd better,” he said, “or else he'll be a gonner, that's for sure.”

That same night after lock-up, Ida came to the dormitory. It was the first time she'd ever come inside at night. We heard the door unlock, saw the dancing light of her torch. All of us expected it to be Piggy Bacon on one of his occasional late-night patrols so we lay doggo, feigning sleep. “I've come to see Wes,” she whispered. “Which bed?”

When we heard who it was we all sat up. I took her there and showed her. She sat down on his bed and tried to talk to him. Wes didn't respond at all, not at first. He wouldn't even turn over and look at her. Everyone was there by now, gathered round his bed.

Ida put a hand on his shoulder. “I've brought you some cakes, Wes, and some milk,” she said. “Please, you must eat.” And she opened up the cake tin on her lap. “I've put a cherry on each one for you. You'll like them.” Wes turned over then and looked up at her.

“I can't,” he said. “If I eat, he'll make me work. And I won't work for him. Never again. Not ever.”

She tried. For an hour or more she did all she could to tempt him, to persuade him. She told him that God helped those who helped themselves, how she understood his suffering. “And I know that God does too,” she said, “because he has told me so. I prayed. I asked him what to do, and he said I must come to you

and feed you. God loves us all, Wes. In our suffering, we must always remember that.”

But no amount of gentle persuasion would change his mind. Even her tears didn’t seem to move him. We could hear the tears in her voice as she pleaded with him, smoothing his hair all the while. Nothing she said or did made any difference. In the end she simply had to give up, just as we had before her.

We had often heard the sound of fury from the farmhouse late at night, but until now it had always been a one-sided battle, with only Piggy Bacon’s voice raging and roaring, then afterwards the sound of Ida sobbing and the dog whining. This time there were two voices raised, hers as loud and as angry as his. For the first time, Ida was giving as good as she got. We could hear her every word. “The boy will die!” she cried. “Do you want that? Did we have these children here for this?” I wasn’t the only one who felt like cheering her on.

“All children are sinful, born sinful,” Piggy railed back, “and these are more sinful than most. My task is to cleanse them of sin, to prepare them for heaven. I won’t spare the rod, because it is the only way they will learn. And the boy has to learn who is master here.”

“I thought Jesus was master here,” she argued. “Or did you forget that? You punish the boy only out of pride, and you know it.” And so it went on. Sadly though, it ended as it so often ended, with the sound of smashing crockery, of blows, and Ida’s sharp cries of pain and the dog yelping and whining. We knew Piggy was kicking him. Then silence, and sobbing.

Marty began the chorus, and raised to sudden courage we all joined in: “For she’s a jolly good fellow, for she’s a jolly good fellow, for she’s a jolly good fellow, and so say all of us.” We sang it out loud, again and again, at the top of our voices to be sure that Piggy could hear us. He heard all right. He came out of the farmhouse and bellowed at us to stop or he’d come over and whip the lot of us. So, cowed once more, we stopped. I felt even then that our silence was a betrayal. The shame of betrayal is something that never leaves you.

All of us knew that Ida had done battle for Wes and for all of us that night. None of us knew that although she may have lost the battle, she had not yet given up the fight. Wes didn’t know it either, of course, which is why, I suspect, he decided to do what he did.

He disappeared the next morning, but he didn’t go alone. We came back from work for our soup and bread at lunchtime as usual, and found his bed was empty. I immediately supposed that maybe Ida had come over and taken him back to the

farmhouse to nurse him and look after him. So I ran over and found her at the back, digging in her vegetable garden. She hadn't seen him, she said. She left her digging and joined in the search. Everyone was looking for him now, including Piggy Bacon, who was stomping about the farm, shouting at us to look here and look there, and ranting on about how, if Wes had run off, he was going to find him and thrash the living daylights out of him. Then he discovered, or someone did, that Big Black Jack was missing too. Now he went really berserk, volcanic. I've never seen anger like it. This man of God let out a seemingly inexhaustible explosion of expletives, spat and spewed them out, all the swear words he must have been bottling up inside himself all his life.

It was quite a show, and we loved it, every moment of it. We kept our distance, of course, each of us secretly savouring the futility of his fury, celebrating his impotence. Wes had done it. He'd escaped. This was what he had been talking about to Marty and me that night on his bed, this was his "only way out". Wes had gone walkabout with Big Black Jack, and he wasn't coming back. We were all willing him to make it. I think that maybe I even prayed for it.

Piggy went after him of course. He rode out on one of the other horses, and we scanned the horizon all day hoping he wouldn't come back with Wes, but fearing the worst all the time. That evening we looked out of the windows of the dormitory hut and saw Piggy come riding in, slumped in his saddle, his face covered in dust, his lips cracked – and he was alone. He hadn't found him. Wes was still on the run. We all jumped up and down in the dormitory, clapping one another on the back, ecstatic in our triumph, not just because Wes had succeeded yet again in humbling Piggy Bacon, but also because we all of us suddenly believed that where Wes could go, we could go too. One day, somehow, we could do the same.

There was another raging row that night in the farmhouse, with Piggy calling Wes "a stinking, ungrateful little horse thief". And we heard Ida standing up to him again.

"What did you expect, treating him like you did?"

It cheered our hearts to hear her fighting back, and our response was quite spontaneous. We burst into another chorus of *For She's a Jolly Good Fellow*, and this time Piggy didn't come out to silence us. We had silenced him. Our triumph was complete, we thought. But then we heard the dingo dogs calling. We'd heard them often enough before at Cooper's Station, seen them loping about in the distance, seen one or two lying dead out in the paddock, shot by Piggy Bacon, and left there he told us as a warning to the others. We were used

enough to dingoes by now. But on this night their cries struck a terrible fear in my heart. It was an omen of something, I was sure of it.

Next morning we'd had roll call and breakfast, and were just about to go out to work when we saw Big Black Jack. He was a long way off, but it was definitely him. He wasn't alone. There were a dozen or more bushmen alongside him.

With sinking hearts we looked for Wes. It wasn't until they came close that we saw him. One of the bushmen was carrying him in his arms. But Wes wasn't clinging on round his neck. His arms were hanging down. He was limp, and I knew at once he was lifeless.

“Just Watch Me”

I’ve seen several dead people in my lifetime, but Wes Snarkey was the first. You don’t forget the first. I thought I’d be frightened to look at him, but when it came to it, I wasn’t. He was laid out on the long trestle table in the middle of our dormitory, and we stood all around in silence gazing down at him. When I first saw him I was too angry to be sad, and I was angry for all the wrong reasons. I was angry because Wes hadn’t made it, angry that he’d ended our dream this way, taken away all the hope we’d vested in him. I wasn’t angry at Piggy Bacon, not yet.

Someone began to whimper then, a stifled sobbing that soon spread among us all. Tears seemed to fill my entire head. One by one, unable to bear it any longer, they turned away and went outside, until Marty and I were left alone with Wes. Death, I discovered that day, is not frightening, because it is utterly still. And it is still because death, when it comes, is always over. There’s only terror in it if you fear it, and ever since my first death, Wes’ death, I have never feared it. It is simply the end of a story, and if you’ve loved the story then it is sad. And sometimes, as it was with Wes, it is an agony of sadness.

Wes did not look as if he was asleep. He did not look at peace. He was too still for that, and too pale. He was somehow smaller too, I remember that. He was cold when I touched his hand. There was a bruise on the side of his face, and cuts too. My thoughts turned then to Piggy Bacon, who we all knew had killed Wes as surely as if he had put a bullet in him. Beside me Marty echoed the hatred now burning in my heart. “Bastard!” he said, almost whispering it at first. Then he was shouting it out loud: “Bastard! Bastard!” And that was the moment we saw Piggy Bacon standing at the door of the hut. Marty looked him straight in the eye and said it again, as good as spat it at him. “Bastard!”

Piggy seemed too stunned to hear him. He was staring down at Wes.

“Happy now?” said Marty.

This time Piggy Bacon did take in what Marty had said. I saw vengeance in his eyes, and I knew then Marty would be his next target. Ida came hurrying in then, and saw Wes lying there. For a few moments she stood there motionless,

her whole face frozen. Then she walked towards the table, bent over, and kissed Wes on the forehead. She picked up his hands and arranged them, one on top of the other, and touched his bruised cheek tenderly with the back of her hand. She straightened up then, looked long and hard at Piggy Bacon, then pushed past him and went out of the door.

A doctor came, the police came. More cars up and down the farm track that day than I'd seen in all my time at Cooper's Station. They carried Wes out on a stretcher, a blanket covering him, and put him in the back of an ambulance. We stood there watching the ambulance until it disappeared in a cloud of its own dust. That was the last we ever saw of Wes Snarkey. To this day I don't know where they buried him. The bushmen stayed all that day until dusk, gathered down by the creek, crouching there unmoving, their own kind of vigil.

Ida told us later how the doctors thought Wes had died. He'd broken his neck. She thought he must have been too weak to sit on the horse through the heat of the day, that he'd probably lost consciousness and fallen off. He wouldn't have suffered, she said. It would all have been very quick. Questions were asked afterwards. Lots of official-looking people in suits and dog collars and hats came and went, in and out of the farmhouse. One or two even came over to inspect our dormitory block, and to watch us at work out on the farm. Not one of them ever talked to us. They just looked at us and made notes.

For us Wes' death changed absolutely nothing, except that we had lost our hero, and without him felt more vulnerable than ever. Piggy Bacon strutted about the place as usual, as if nothing had happened. He mentioned Wes' death only once, used it during one of his Sunday sermons. It was a favourite sermon of his, about the Ten Commandments. One Sunday he added this, to make his point: "I want you all to remember," he said, "that the last thing that boy ever did was to steal a horse, *my* horse. And look what happened to him. It was his fault, no one else's. He's only got himself to blame. 'Thou shalt not steal.' Disobey the Ten Commandments, and that's what happens to you. Let it be a lesson to you, a lesson you'll never forget."

In the days and weeks after Wes died, we saw almost nothing of Ida. She'd bring us our food, but she'd never say anything, not a word. She'd never once look at us. We never saw her out on the farm either. She didn't even appear at Piggy's side any more at Sunday services. So we had to sing our hymns unaccompanied – no squeezey box to lead us, just Piggy Bacon's trumpeting, tuneless voice. We did see her occasionally hanging out her washing on the line, and sometimes in the evening sitting alone out on the verandah of the farmhouse,

her dog at her feet. But even then she seemed not to be noticing what was going on around her any more. If ever I spoke to her, she wouldn't answer me. She'd simply stare straight ahead of her as if she hadn't heard me at all. It was almost as if she was in a kind of trance. She must have been like it inside the house, too, because there were no more rows, and she played no more music on her squeeze box.

*

Ida chose a Sunday to do it. We were all standing out in the heat in front of the dormitory, Piggy up there in the shade of the verandah in his preacher's black suit, clutching his Bible. We were singing *What a friend we have in Jesus* again.

We noticed her before he did. She was telling her dog to stay where he was. He sat down, then lay down, his head on his paws. She came down the steps of the farmhouse in her apron, striding purposefully towards us – not at all how she usually walked. And she was carrying a shotgun. Suddenly no one was singing any more. Ida was standing right beside me now, and she was pointing the shotgun, levelling it at Piggy Bacon's chest.

"Children, go inside and collect your things," she said, and she said it without once taking her eyes off Piggy Bacon's face. "Quickly now, children. Quickly now." We were rooted to the spot. Not one of us moved. But Piggy did. He made to come towards her, to step down off the verandah. Ida's voice was ice-cold. "Don't think I won't use this if I have to," she said. And then to us, "Hurry children. Bring everything you need. You won't be coming back."

"Have you gone mad, Ida?" Piggy was trying to bellow at her, but it came out more like a squeal of fury. "What are you doing?"

"I'm setting them free," she told him, "that's what I'm doing. And it's true, I *have* been mad. All this, this building we put up, this orphanage, everything we've done, and done in the name of the Lord, too, has been a great madness. But I'm not mad any more. You don't show God's love to little children by hurting them, by working them till they drop, and certainly not by killing them. It's over. I'm letting them go."

We didn't wait any more. We rushed up the steps past Piggy Bacon and into the dormitory. Jubilant at the completely unexpected turn of events, we threw all the clothes and belongings we had into our suitcases, and ran out again, eager not to miss the drama unfolding out there. I was leaping off the verandah steps, suitcase in hand, when I remembered my lucky key. There was no way I was

going to leave it behind. I rushed back in again and climbed up on to my bed. I could just spot it deep inside the crack in the lintel, but I couldn't get at it to hook it out – my nails just weren't long enough. I don't think I could have managed to retrieve it at all if Marty hadn't come back to find me. He lent me his penknife and out it came, easily. I had my lucky key.

Back outside, Piggy Bacon was standing there, hovering between bewilderment and fury. Ida still had the shotgun aimed at him, her finger on the trigger. "Now children," she said, "I want you all to stand way back, right back. Go on now." We did as she told us. When I looked at her again she was holding the shotgun on Piggy with one hand, and with the other was taking something out of the pocket of her apron – it looked to me like a wet rag, nothing more. Piggy seemed to realise at once what she was doing, long before we did. He kept begging and begging her not to do it, but by now she was walking up the steps of the dormitory, sideways, keeping the gun pointing at him all the time.

"Stay where you are," she warned him.

"Don't do it, Ida," he cried. "Please, you can't."

"Just watch me," she replied coolly. That was when I caught a whiff of it. Diesel oil. And suddenly we all knew what she was going to do. "I'm going to burn this place to the ground," she said, "so there'll be nowhere for them to stay. Then you'll have to let them go, won't you?" And with that she disappeared into the dormitory. We saw her moments later through the window, lighting the rag with a match, saw the curtains catch fire. Then she was coming out, and there was smoke billowing out of the door behind her. She came down the steps and threw the shotgun down at Piggy's feet.

"There," she said. "It's done."

“For She’s a Jolly Good Fellow”

There was a frozen moment before Piggy Bacon moved. Then he bent and snatched up the shotgun. “It’s not loaded,” Ida said quietly. Piggy broke open the gun and looked. I’ve never ever seen a man snarl like Piggy did then. You could see the beast in his eyes as he charged up the steps into the dormitory. He tried first to beat the flames out with a blanket. We could hear him choking and spluttering inside. There was more smoke now, but already fewer flames. My heart sank. The curtains were on fire, but nothing else seemed to have caught. Piggy Bacon yanked off the curtains, cursing loudly.

Moments later he came rushing out, and ran to the line of wash buckets on the verandah. At this point Ida tried to stop him, but he pushed her aside angrily and sent her sprawling. With a bucket in each hand, the water spilling out over, he disappeared inside again. There were no more flames to be seen after that. The next time we saw him he came staggering out bent double and coughing his lungs out. But when he stood up he was smiling. Ida was lying there crying on the verandah, sobbing as if her heart would break.

Suddenly Marty began singing, quite softly at first, but very deliberately: *For She’s a Jolly Good Fellow*. Soon we were all singing, and singing it out loud. It had become in that moment our song of defiance. We sang it right at him to show him just what we thought of him, and just as much we sang it for Ida to make her feel better, to thank her for what she’d tried to do for us, to show solidarity. Piggy screamed at us to stop, but we didn’t. We kept on and on, all of us fired with new courage, and new fury too. Then I did perhaps the bravest thing I ever did in all my life, before or since, I went up those steps and helped Ida to her feet. I got the strap for it, ten strokes, but then we all got the strap that day. Marty got fifteen, because Piggy said he was the ringleader.

That night in the dormitory was the worst I can remember. The whole hut still reeked of smoke, a constant reminder to us of how Ida had so nearly succeeded in her brave attempt to set us free. We felt completely deflated and defeated. Hopes had been lifted so high that the disappointment, when it came as suddenly as it had, was all the more cruel. I cried into my pillow. Outside the cry of the

dingoes echoed my sadness. Very few of us didn't cry ourselves to sleep that night.

It was still night-time when I was woken. Marty was shaking me awake, his hand over my mouth. "Get up," he whispered. "Get up. Get dressed. We're getting out of here."

I was still half-asleep, still half-dressed, trying to gather my thoughts. "But the door's locked," I said. "Piggy always locks the door, you know he does." Marty shushed me, took me by the arm and we tiptoed towards the door of the hut, carrying our boots.

Only one of the others stirred as we passed, he just sat up, and looked blankly at us. "You woke me," he moaned. Then he lay down, and went straight back to sleep again.

Marty turned the handle, and miraculously the door opened. Marty took great care as he shut it behind us. We crept out on to the verandah, sat on the top step and put our boots on. He answered my question before I could ask it. "Ida did it," he whispered. "I told her we were going to make a break for it tonight, but we needed the door unlocked. I thought she'd do it, but I wasn't sure. But she did, didn't she? Come on."

We ran then, but not out into the bush as I'd thought we would. Instead, Marty was leading me in the direction of the farmhouse. I was wondering what he was up to, where he was going, when I realised we weren't heading for the farmhouse at all, but rather for the stables. Big Black Jack jumped a bit in his skin when he first saw us. But he seemed happy enough when Marty put his halter on him and led him out. Ida's dog barked then from the farmhouse, which sent shivers up the back of my neck. "Shut up, dog," Marty hissed, and shut up he did, just like that. I knew then that Ida had done that for us too.

We climbed up on to the back of one of the farm carts and mounted Jack from there – he was a big horse, it was the only way up for us. Marty rode in front, me behind, hanging on. Then we just walked him away into the night. We didn't go up the farm track, because we knew that way must lead to a settlement or a town of some kind, and we wanted to keep well clear of people. If anyone saw us, they'd be bound to take us back. So we deliberately went the other way, down a gully and out into the bush. We didn't look back. I didn't ever want to set eyes on that place ever again. But I did say a silent goodbye to those we were leaving behind in the dormitory, and to Ida who had risked so much to give us our freedom.

Neither Marty nor I spoke, not for a long time, not until we'd put at least half

an hour between ourselves and Piggy Bacon. By then we were trotting, and we couldn't talk because we were laughing so much. We had done it; we had escaped! And Big Black Jack was huffing and puffing underneath us, laughing along with us, I thought, revelling in his new-found freedom every bit as much as we were. But after a while I got to thinking about all the others we'd left behind at Cooper's Station, that maybe we should have taken them all with us. (All these years later I still feel bad about that. Why is it you never forget what you feel bad about?)

Marty started singing *London Bridge is Falling Down* then, softly at first, then I joined in, and soon we were bellowing it out over the bush.

I kept asking Marty questions, the most important first. "Where are we going? Which direction?"

"Away," he said. "Anywhere just so long as it's away."

"You been planning this? You never said anything."

"That's because I didn't think of it until punishment parade yesterday evening," he said. "It was while he was hitting me. I knew I'd be next, that he'd go after me just like he did with Wes. If I'd stayed he'd have killed me. Sooner or later, he'd have killed me. I know he would. Then I just got lucky. I saw Ida by the stables just before lock-up, told her what I needed. She didn't even have to think about it. She did say one thing though: I had to remind you about your lucky key, to be sure you took it with you. Hope you have, because I'm not going back, not for all the tea in China."

My heart was in my mouth. I hadn't given it a second thought. But I felt in my pocket, and there it still was. "Got it," I told him.

"That's good," Marty said, "because we're going to need it. We're going to need all the luck we can get."

It was fear of getting caught, and sheer exhilaration that we were free, that kept us going that night. We knew that we mustn't stop, not for a moment, or even slow down, because Piggy would be sure to be coming after us just as soon as he discovered we were missing, and that would be at roll call at dawn. We had until then to get as far away as possible. Big Black Jack didn't want to trot for long, but he plodded on steadily, never tiring, and we sat up there the two of us, rocking our way towards the grey light of dawn. We were just so happy to be out of Cooper's Station. We talked a lot as we rode, and we laughed, laughed as hard as we could. I remember I felt cocooned by the night, swallowed up in its immensity, protected. At one point we saw some lights on the horizon. It looked like a settlement of some kind, so we kept our distance. We sang to the stars, all

the millions of them up there. We sang *For She's a Jolly Good Fellow* till we were hoarse with it. They seemed so close those stars, close enough to hear us.

It was cold, very cold that night. We had no water. We had no food. But none of that worried us. Not yet. We were too happy to be worried. Not even the cry of the dingoes bothered us. Only when the sun came up, and the bush came alive all about us, only then did we begin to feel alone in this wild and unfamiliar place with nothing but scrub and trees for miles around in every direction. We'd been following a dried-up creek for a while when I felt the first heat of the sun. That was when I first thought I wanted to drink. We had stopped talking to one another now. There was no more laughter. I was beginning to realise just how vast this place was and just how lost we were. I didn't like to say it though. Big Black Jack was walking on, purposeful and surefooted as ever. He seemed to know where he was going, and that made me feel better.

When finally Marty did say something though, it just confirmed my own worst fears. "I don't like this," he said. "We've been here before, when it was darker. We were coming the other way then. And I keep thinking something else too, something Wes told me once, and Wes knew all about horses. He said that a horse will never get itself lost. It'll always know the way home. I think maybe Big Black Jack is taking us back, back to Cooper's Station."

Wide as the Ocean

How easily we fell into despair, the two of us. As we left the shade of the gum trees how quickly the heat of the sun sapped our strength, and our spirits too. The desire for water was fast becoming a craving. The need to find it became obsessive. Within just a few hours all we could talk about, however hard we tried not to, was water. I didn't care any longer if Big Black Jack was walking straight back to Cooper's Station, right up to the farmhouse, nor if Piggy Bacon might be tracking us down and coming after us. Every shimmering watery horizon we saw raised our hopes, but we soon found we could not trust even the evidence of our eyes. Mirages mocked us time and again. We tried our best to ignore them. But a mirage is only a mirage once you've discovered it's a mirage. Until then it's a pool of cold clear water just waiting for you, a pool of hope. More than once this cruel hoax set Marty and me arguing with one another. But in the end we didn't even have the energy for that.

The deep gully we were following was sandy, but up on the banks there were patches of brambles and scrub, and here and there clusters of stringy bark gum trees. Where there were trees, we thought there must be water. Little did we know. So we rode down the dried up gully, hoping all the while to discover a hidden pool in the shadows, but everywhere we found nothing but earth turned to dust. There wasn't a sign of moisture. And all through this futile search the sun rose ever higher, blazed hotter.

Gathering enough thoughts to decide anything was so difficult. But we did manage to concentrate enough to make one decision between us. We invested in it all our last hopes. We could see the ground ahead of us on one side of the gully rising steeply into a granite cliff. From the top of this cliff we thought we must be able to see for miles around, that from up there we'd be bound to spot a river perhaps or a pool. But Big Black Jack refused to be diverted from the gully, and we knew already he was far too strong to argue with. He went where he wanted to go and that was all there was to it. So in the end we had to get off him and lead him up the slope to the highest point of the cliff.

The whole of Australia lay before us, it seemed, as wide as the ocean, and just

as inhospitable too. We could see the gully winding its way through the bush, other gullies joining it to make one great swathe of sand through the scrub, but there was no glint of water anywhere, not a shimmer to be seen. Now I really was beginning to hope that Piggy Bacon would find us, and take us back to Cooper's Station. I didn't care about the beating I knew he'd give us. I thought only of the wash buckets on the verandah, of plunging my head in and then drinking all of them dry one by one.

Marty was not lost in reverie as I was. He had not given up so easily. He was pointing excitedly at what he swore must be a place where there was water, and certainly in the distance there seemed to be a patch of much greener, lusher vegetation around some very tall trees. It was miles away and did not look at all promising to me. I didn't say so though. "If it's green, then there's got to be water somewhere," Marty said. "Got to be. Come on." Even if there had been a convenient rock from which to mount, I don't think either of us would have had the strength to do it. We could only manage to walk now with the greatest effort. So we led Big Black Jack down the hill and into the gully again.

We found Marty's promised oasis, but doing it drained us utterly of the last of our will power. There were trees, and it was green, but we could find no water. By now the sun had worked its worst on us. My head was swimming so much I often thought I would faint. I kept stumbling, and so did Marty. Breathing heavily now and lathered up, Big Black Jack wandered away from us into the deepest shade, put his head against the trunk of a tree and rested on three legs. Like us, he'd had enough. He could do no more. He was telling us in his own way that we should do it too, that we should never have ventured out in the heat of the day in the first place.

We lay down nearby. I curled up against Marty's back for comfort. "We'll be all right," he said to me, but I knew how far we were from all right. Even so it cheered me a little to hear him say it. I tried not to think that if I slept I might never wake up again, but I thought it all the same. Sleep, when it came, was so welcome.

It was evening when I woke and I knew at once we were not alone. They were crouching a few paces away, a dozen of them perhaps, bushmen, men and boys. They were studying us intently, as still as the rocks around them. I shook Marty until he sat up and took notice. "It's the same ones," he whispered, "the same ones that brought Wes back. I recognise them."

"Say something," I said. "You've got to say something."

"Drink," Marty mimed it as he spoke. "Water. We need water. Understand?"

That was when the tallest of them came forward and crouched down close to us. I recognised him then. It was the old bushman who had come to Ida's house that day and treated my spider bite. He smiled at me like a stranger you've met before who is happy you've remembered him. He held out his cupped hands. His hands were full of fruit, red fruit, green fruit, like plums but rounder. We ate them. We drank them. We devoured them. I don't remember the taste, but I remember savouring the juice of each one, sucking out every drop of it. They gave Big Black Jack some too, which he snuffled up eagerly.

Then they motioned to us to stand up, to mount up. We tried, but they soon saw we couldn't do it without their help. I was lifted up effortlessly and sat astride Big Black Jack. So was Marty, who was sitting behind me now and hanging on. One of the bushmen took the reins, and led us along the gully. They were all around us, the children among them smiling up at us now. When I smiled back they laughed out loud, and I knew they were not laughing at me, but out of sheer delight. It touches me even now when I think of it. It was a little moment, and at the same time a great moment, one I have treasured always.

"They're taking us back," Marty whispered in my ear, "like they did with Wes."

"Only we're not dead," I said.

Within an hour or so they brought us through some scrubby trees to a hidden pool, a basin of dark rock. A cool evening breeze rippled the surface of the water. We needed no invitation and nor did Big Black Jack. He trotted to the edge and was drinking even before we managed to tumble off him. We were alongside him then, all three of us, one muzzle and two mouths drinking in all we could. Then Big Black Jack was shaking his dribbles all over us, and the bushmen were laughing. They drank too, but they were in no hurry. They did not gulp greedily as we had. Instead they scooped it up one-handed and sipped. In no time a fire was going. They speared some fish and cooked them. I tried to eat slowly as they did, but it wasn't easy. And there was more fruit afterwards, more berries. Big Black Jack browsed nearby. We could hear his jaws grinding, his teeth crunching. He was eating well too.

I expected we would sleep then because night was coming on fast, but we didn't. Instead they lifted us up again on to Big Black Jack, and together we moved on into the gathering dark. When I looked up I found that the stars were up there again filling the sky from end to end. I thought then of the night before, of how happy we'd been to be free, how we'd sung to the stars. And now we were being taken back to Cooper's Station, and there was nothing whatsoever

we could do about it. I wondered why the bushmen were doing it, whether Piggy was paying them for hunting us down and bringing us back. But I thought that couldn't be right, that after all these were the people I'd seen him driving away from the farm with his horse whip when they strayed too close. I did whisper to Marty that we could try to tell them we didn't want to go back, but he thought it was pointless.

"They wouldn't understand a word we said," he told me. "So what's the point?"

All night long I dreaded the morning and the first sight of Cooper's Station, dreaded the thought of standing there on punishment parade, hand outstretched, trying to hold back the tears. The more I thought about it, the more I feared the coming of morning. That was why I took my lucky key out of my pocket and clutched it tight, so tight that it hurt me. I wanted to squeeze the luck out of it, to have all of it now because I needed it now more than ever before in my life.

But I began to worry that maybe even my lucky key would not be enough. So I prayed as well. I thought of Ida, then of all she had done for us, of the trouble she'd be in if Piggy found out she'd unlocked the door for us. I felt for the little wooden cross I wore around my neck. I touched it, remembering her. And then holding it I prayed for her. But if I'm honest, I think I prayed mostly for myself. Whether it was the key or the cross that did it I shall never know. I've been trying to work that one out ever since. I still am.

“Couple of Raggedy Little Scarecrows”

It wasn't until a few more days had passed that Marty and I could begin to hope that the bushmen weren't taking us back to Cooper's Station after all. Neither of us could believe these people were lost. They seemed to know every root, every tree, every gully in this maze of a wilderness. The fruit they found was never a surprise, nor the roots they dug up, nor the pools they led us to. They knew exactly where they were. They belonged in this place.

They found their way through the bush with such obvious ease that it was quite impossible to think they could ever get lost here. So if they were not lost, and we were not being deliberately led around in circles, and if after all this time we had still not yet reached Cooper's Station, then it stood to reason we weren't going there. So where were they taking us then? Marty and I asked each other that question more than a few times. But we had no answers.

With every hour that passed, the bush around us looked less and less familiar. We were in much greener country. There were hills about us, and more farms and settlements in the valleys – which the bushmen seemed to want to avoid as much as we did. We knew now, for whatever reason, that they were not taking us back. And the longer we were with them the more sure we became that these people were absolutely no threat to us. They might not talk to us. They might keep their distance. They might still stare at us more than we liked, but there was never the slightest hint of hostility towards us. On the contrary they seemed very protective of us, and as fascinated by us as we were by them. And the children found us endlessly funny, particularly when we smiled, so we smiled a lot. But then we felt like smiling. They shared their food with us: berries, roots, fruit and baked wallaby once. We had all the water we needed.

Marty did try once or twice to ask where we were going, but was simply given more fruit or berries as an answer. So he gave up. But up on Big Black Jack, as we rode through the night, or resting in the shade, the two of us speculated at length. Maybe we weren't being taken anywhere. I mean, they never looked as if they were going anywhere in particular. They just looked as if they were quite happy simply going, simply being. Or maybe they were adopting us into their

tribe and we'd wander the bush with them for the rest of our lives. Maybe they were still making up their minds what to do with us. Perhaps we'd just wake up one day and find them gone. We really didn't mind. All we could be sure of was that we were a long, long way from Cooper's Station now, and further every day. Where we were going wasn't important. Sometimes at night we'd see lights in the distance, more settlements probably, but we never once thought of running off. We were safe with them. We had no reason to leave them.

I can't say exactly how many days and nights our journey lasted – it could have been five or six days perhaps. I do know that it lasted long enough for Marty and I to begin to believe it might be permanent, that we had indeed been adopted in some way. I certainly was beginning to feel comfortable among them, not because they became any less reserved – they didn't. Distance seemed to be important to them. The children though were a different story. We very soon got beyond just smiling and laughing. We splashed each other in the pools. We skimmed stones, threw sticks, ambushed one another. One took to riding piggyback on Marty's back, and the smallest of them would often ride up with us on Big Black Jack loving every moment of it. We were finding our place among them, beginning to feel accepted. That's why, when our journey finally ended, we felt all the more abandoned, even rejected.

We had been travelling through hilly country for a day or two now, and Big Black Jack was finding it very hard going, and not just because of the hills either. We knew already that kangaroos made him nervous, but there hadn't been many of them until now. Now they were everywhere, and he was not happy. In the half-dark we could see their shifting shapes, and so could Big Black Jack. We could feel him tensing beneath us. We'd talk to him to try to calm him, smooth his neck, pat him gently, but nothing seemed to work. His ears would be twitching frantically. He'd toss his head and snort at them. Worst of all, he'd just stop without any warning. Falling off was all too easy. It amused the children hugely, but was painful for us. In the end Marty and I decided it would be better altogether, and safer too, to give Big Black Jack a rest, and walk. So during the last couple of nights of our journey we walked with the bushmen, one of us leading Big Black Jack. He seemed happier that way. He puffed less and snorted less. The last night we were with them I felt as if I really was one of them, sharing the silence and the stars.

The next morning at sun-up we were coming to the top of a high hill. It had been a long steep climb. Below us was a wide green valley with a stream running through, and trees, more trees than I'd ever seen in my life. In front of

us on the crest of the hill the bushmen had stopped and were talking among themselves. I thought we'd be resting here for a while, and was only too happy about that because my legs were tired, and I was longing for food and for sleep. I sat down to investigate a thorn in my foot which had been troubling me. Beside me Big Black Jack was cropping the grass contentedly.

Suddenly Marty called out. "They're going! They're leaving us!" Sure enough, the bushmen were walking away from us back the way we'd come, the children looking over their shoulders at us from time to time as they went. We called after them again and again, but they didn't stop. Then they rounded the side of the hill and were gone.

"Why?" Marty said. "Why here? Why did they leave us here?"

We stood there in silence, each of us trying to make some sense of what was happening to us, of why they had treated us this way. We felt utterly bewildered. The parting had been so unexpected, so sudden and strange. No goodbyes, not even the wave of a hand.

That was when Big Black Jack began snorting again. I looked around for kangaroos. There were none, not that I could see anyway. But Big Black Jack had stopped eating in mid-chew. He had his head up now and his ears pricked. He whinnied loud and long, so that the valley rang with it. He was lifting his nose, sniffing the air, and listening. We could hear kookaburras and galahs, all the cackle of the bush at daybreak, but certainly nothing out of the ordinary. But then we heard the sound of whistling, of someone singing, a woman singing, and with it the tread of a horse in among the trees below us, of a saddle creaking. Big Black Jack whinnied again.

A great bay horse was coming out of the trees and up the hills towards us, on its back a rider in a wide-brimmed straw hat. But it wasn't the horse or the rider that we were looking at so much as the cavalcade that was following along behind, a cavalcade of creatures, all of them infants: wombats, wallabies, joeys. And as the rider came closer I could see there was a koala clinging on round her neck, looking at me over her shoulder. She rode right up to us, let the horses touch noses and check each other over. Meanwhile she took off her hat and looked us up and down. I haven't forgotten the first words she spoke to us:

"Strewth," she said. "Look what the cat brought in. But maybe it wasn't the cat, right? How'd you get here?"

"It was the bushmen," Marty told her.

"I thought as much. Are you waifs and strays then? They only bring me waifs and strays. They know I collect them, see. They don't eat the little ones, not

unless they've got to. Good people they are. Just about the best, I'd say. Where are you from?"

"England," I said. There was a wombat rooting around my feet now.

"S'all right. He won't bite," she told me. "You've come fair ways then."

"We were at Cooper's Station," Marty said. "We escaped."

"I know Cooper's Station. Mr Bacon's place, right? Where's he's got all those orphan kids." She looked us up and down.

"He used to be the preacher in town before they moved out there," she continued. "If there's one thing I can't abide it's fanatics of any kind, and religious ones are the worst of all. Running away from that place seems a pretty sensible thing to do. You'll be looking for somewhere to stay then."

Marty and I looked at one another. She was turning her horse now and walking away from us, her little animals following her. "Well, are you coming or aren't you?" she called out. "If you are, then bring the poor old black horse with you. He needs feeding up by the looks of him. Come to that, so do you. Couple of raggedy little scarecrows, that's what you are. I'll soon fatten you up. Come along if you're coming. Don't spend too long thinking about it. Haven't got all day."

Marty and I didn't need to think twice about it. We followed along behind the cavalcade, and like us Big Black Jack had a new spring in his step. "That lucky key of yours," said Marty. "You still got it?"

"Yes," I replied.

"Just don't ever lose it, that's all," he said.

Henry's Horrible Hat Hole

Big Black Jack knew it too, just as we did. We all knew we were coming home. He stepped out with new heart, snorting in his excitement all the while at the procession of creatures in front of him. Clearly size mattered to Big Black Jack when it came to kangaroos – the little joey hopping alongside the lady on the horse wasn't a worry to him at all. Nothing worried him now, nothing worried any of us. If we had been in hell at Cooper's Station before, now we were riding into paradise.

We were looking all the while for a house of some kind. But all we could see were trees and green paddocks, and beyond them the winding river, and in the distance the bluest mountains I ever saw. Suddenly there it was, a long low shack of a place, a chimney at one end and a verandah all around. There was a pond nearby which cackled with geese that came out to greet us as we arrived, followed by a flurry of hens and chicks. This was to turn out to be our home for the next seven years, the first real home I ever had, the home of my childhood. And I've been grateful all my life ever since, to Ida and to those bushmen who brought us there, who must have sensed all along what we needed.

She called it the Ark, and it didn't take much to see why. The place was alive with every conceivable domestic animal: goats, sheep, a couple of pigs, a mournful-looking donkey called Barnaby, three milk cows and their calves, and of course, her entire family of wild creatures. The domestic animals all had names, but I only remember Barnaby and a cow called Poogly – not a name you easily forget.

She didn't give names to the wild ones, she said, because they were just passing through, except for one. Henry was a wombat. Henry, she said, was probably still asleep, and didn't much like strangers. He'd been with her for seven years. He'd come and just stayed. He lived in a hole under the verandah steps, and collected hats. In fact he stole hats, any hat he could find, which was why she kept her hat on all the time. Henry slept on his hoard of hats down there in his hole and was very happy, probably the happiest wombat in the entire world, she said, which wasn't difficult, she added, because wombats generally

are not the happiest of creatures.

“You can have a look later for yourself,” she told us, “just don’t breathe in while you’re doing it. It’s horrible down there. Stinks to high heaven. Not a great one for personal hygiene, our Henry.”

She introduced her entire menagerie of animals before she even introduced herself. She did that over a glorious breakfast of eggs, and toast and jam, and milk, which we wolfed down, still unable to take in our extraordinary turn of luck. She waited until every last crumb was gone, every last drop. We discovered soon that this was always the thing with her. She could sense intuitively the needs and fears of us all, of all her “children,” which is why, from the very first day, we always felt so at ease with her, why we came to love and trust her as we did, whether we were boys or joeys. She’d saved all of us. We didn’t love her because we owed her, but because of the kind of person she was.

She wanted to hear our story. So Marty told her everything – he was always better at words than me. I watched her as she listened, saw the sadness and anger in her face. I could see she was older under her hat than I’d first imagined. When you’re young you can’t work out the age of an adult – they’re just quite old, old, or very old. She was old, and (I’m guessing now because I never asked her of course) about fifty-five. Her hair was long to the shoulders, and grey, going to white around her temples, and this belied the youth in her face. She was quick to smile, and when she did her whole being seemed to light up. She laughed easily too. I’ve forgotten so much about her, so much about everything, but I can hear her laugh still. It warmed me then. It warms me now when I think of it, because there was love in her laughter, never mockery, unless it was self-mockery. And there was a directness about the way she looked at you, and the way she spoke to you.

“Well, you’ve told me your little tale,” she began, “so I’ll tell you mine. Then we’ll know one another better, won’t we?”

And so she told us who she was and what she was doing living there in the Ark with all her creatures around her, and Henry down his hat hole. We listened agog, because she was a wonderful storyteller. She could paint pictures in your head with words, and she could touch the heart of you too.

“Megs Molloy, that’s me – Margaret really – but Auntie Megs will be fine. Just call me that, everyone does. I do a little of everything, a bit of farming, write a bit of poetry – love that – and I make boats too in my shed, because Mick made boats. You’ll see photos of him about the place. He was my husband, but I lost him in the war, which was sad for me, but sadder still for him. His ship was sunk

in some convoy, so he's part of the seabed now. It's as good a place to end up as any, I reckon. He made model boats all his life, sailed them too, all kinds, a destroyer in the end. Boats were his life, boats and me. So now I make boats because he taught me how to do it, and I love it. But I don't get all maudlin about Mick, not often anyway. Life's too short.

"Besides there's too much needs doing round here. Years ago when Mick and me first came here, he discovered a dead wallaby up on the road – knocked down and killed by some stupid truck. He saw a little head sticking out of her pouch, and alive, alive o! So he brought it home. That was near enough twenty years ago now. That little fellow was the first of hundreds, thousands now maybe. From that day on one of us would check the road every morning at dawn, and whenever we found an orphan, a possum, a joey, a wombat, we'd bring him home. And in time the bushmen must have got to hear about it, because they would bring along little fellows they'd found and leave them with us. They don't say much, but they've got their hearts in the right place.

"But we wouldn't ever keep them. We wouldn't cuddle them either. None of that. We'd just feed the little fellows and look after them. Tried never to tame them, never even touch them 'less we had to. Once you tame them they'll never go back to the wild. So we just kept them till they were strong enough. Then we'd all take a hike together up into the hills, and if one or two stayed up there, that was fine with us, that was just what we wanted. They were back where they belonged.

"When the war came along and Mick joined the navy, I went on doing it just the same. And when he didn't come back, I carried on. Seemed the right thing to do. So here I am writing my poetry, making my boats, looking after whoever or whatever I find out there that needs me. Then this morning, I find something I've never found before – a couple of raggedy little scarecrows left behind for me by the bushmen. So I said to myself: *they've done that for a good reason*. And now I know the reason. So I know why you were there, and now you know why I was there. Just like all the little fellows out there, you can stay as long as you need to."

The two of us walked out afterwards to see Big Black Jack in his paddock. He was trying to make friends with Aunty Megs' horse and with Barnaby. But Barnaby wasn't having any of it, and he didn't much like it either when Jack started checking out Aunty Megs' horse. I could hear Aunty Megs singing from inside the house and I felt I was the luckiest person alive. I didn't pinch myself, but I wondered more than once that first day whether Marty and I were living

inside some wonderful shared dream, that maybe we'd wake up and be back at Cooper's Station again.

But when I woke up the next morning, I woke up to see Marty still fast asleep in the bed opposite, and high on a shelf all around the room models of sailing boats, and I knew the dream was not a dream at all. I heard a shuffling under my bed then, peered underneath and saw a wombat looking back up at me. He had one of my socks in his mouth. Aunty Megs was at the door then with a glass of milk for each of us. "I see you've met Henry then," she said. "Forgot to tell you. He steals socks too."

I Must Go Down to the Sea

It turned out that Henry didn't just pinch hats and socks, he'd steal just about anything that he fancied. So we never left our clothes lying around, nor shoes, nor towels. Aunty Megs told us to shoo him out of the house whenever he came in; but somehow, sooner or later, he'd always find a way back in again. And Aunty Megs was right, he did smell. If he was in the house we'd smell him before we saw him, and the stink of him lingered long in the air after we'd put him out. But we loved him all the same, just as Aunty Megs did. I think it was because of the way he looked up at you. His eyes said: "OK, so I stink. OK, so I'm a thief. But nobody's perfect, are they? So give me a break, will you? Deep down you know you love me, everyone does."

Feeding Henry his bottle of milk was the chore that was never a chore. Marty and I would often squabble over which of us should do this last task of the day. Whoever won would sit on the verandah steps right above Henry's hole. He'd climb up on to your lap, roll over on his back and wait for it. Aunty Megs said he'd just never grown up, that she'd tried and tried to break him of the habit, but he'd hang around her feet making her feel so guilty that she couldn't resist him. So Henry still got his milk, and it had to be out of a bottle.

We did have tasks at the Ark. We milked the cows, and the goats – learned to make butter and cheese too. We chopped wood, we fed the hens, got chased by the geese when we tried to shut them up in case the dingoes came in the night. But now it was work we wanted to do, because we wanted to help out, and because both of us loved being with Aunty Megs. Our hands blistered, our backs ached, but we didn't mind. Every morning she'd take us down to the main road a mile or so away, and we'd walk along the verges, one of us on the right, one of us on the left, looking for any casualties. Most days we'd find something but more often than not they'd be dead already. But from time to time we'd get lucky.

I remember the first time I discovered a joey crouched trembling by the side of his dead mother. I couldn't contain my excitement, and yelled for Aunty Megs, who came running over to pick him up. She was very strict about handling them.

She never allowed us to feed them or handle them. If they were very small she'd keep them for a while in a box by the stove in the kitchen. We could crouch over them and look, but not touch. But as soon as they were old enough they'd live outside in the compound with the others. Marty and I would spend hours out there watching through the wire, but Auntie Megs was the only one allowed in. And she never talked to them, never stroked them. She just fed them.

She'd never let us come with her either when she went off for her rides into the bush, the orphan animals, her "little fellows," trailing behind her. If we came, she said, we'd only confuse them. There was no point in saving them at all, she insisted, unless they could be returned back into the wild again successfully. She made it perfectly clear that this wasn't an exercise in sentimentality, wasn't just to make herself feel good. It was to give them a second chance of life, a chance they all deserved. It was a chance everyone deserved, she said, animals and people alike.

Auntie Megs had a station wagon she kept in the farm shed, which was half hen-house and half garage. And because the hens liked sitting on the station wagon it was just about the messiest car I've ever seen in my life. But we loved it. Going into town, ten or so miles away, was a real treat. She often sang when she was driving. She used to sing a lot – it made her feel happy, she said. She'd teach us all her songs, and we'd sing along, all three of us making a dreadful racket, but we loved it. She knew all the words and all the verses of *London Bridge is Falling Down*, which was more than I did before I met her.

We didn't go into town often, just once a week or so. She'd stride down the street in her straw hat, and we'd follow along behind. Everyone knew her and she knew everyone. They were all rather curious about us at first. She didn't explain who we were or where we'd come from. She just said we were her "boys" and that was that. And it was true. We were her children, and she was our mother – the only mother we'd ever known anyway.

It was on the first of those trips into town that she took us into the police station. She'd been thinking, she told us on the drive in, and it was time someone did something about it. She wouldn't say anything else. She led us up to the desk and said we had to tell the sergeant right there and then all about Cooper's Station, everything we'd told her. So we did. The policeman wrote it all down and shook his head a lot while doing it. Auntie Megs told us sometime later that the place had been closed down, that all the children had been found other homes to go to. I was pleased about that, cockahoop that Piggy wouldn't be beating any more children. But most of all I was very sad for Ida. I remember

feeling that I really didn't want to know anything to do with that place, I wanted to forget all about it. Just the name, Cooper's Station, was enough to make me think about it, and I didn't want to have to think about it ever again.

But what you *want* to think about isn't necessarily what you *do* think about. The truth is that the memories of all that happened at Cooper's Station have come back to haunt me all my life, even during those happy, happy years we spent with Aunty Megs. They were happy because I was as close then as I've ever been to carefree. I know when I read what I've just written that it sounds as if I'm wallowing in nostalgia, making an idyll of the Ark. It's difficult not to. After Cooper's Station anything would have seemed like heaven on earth.

Aunty Megs may have been the kindest person in the world, but she could be firm – we soon discovered that. She was appalled when it became clear – as of course it very soon did – that neither Marty nor I had been to school, and so neither of us could read properly nor write. So from then on she'd sit us down every morning at the kitchen table and teach us, regular as clockwork. I won't pretend that either of us were willing pupils – we just wanted to be outside messing around, climbing trees, riding Big Black Jack, making camps, talking to Henry or Poogly or trying to cheer up poor old Barnaby. It took hours sometimes to get an *ee-aw* out of Barnaby. An *ee-aw* we reckoned was as good as a laugh, so we always stayed with him till we got one. And when it rained we'd far prefer to be out with Aunty Megs in her big garden shed where she made her model boats, where we'd make them with her – she taught us that too.

But lessons, she said, had to come first. We didn't argue with her, not because we were ever even remotely frightened of her, but because both of us knew that she always had our best interests at heart. She made no secret of her affection for us, nor her wish to give us the best upbringing she could. "One day," she told us, "you'll have to leave here and go out into the big world out there and earn your living like everyone else. To do that you need to learn. The more you learn now, the more interesting your life will be." So the two of us buckled down to our lessons, often reluctantly perhaps, but without protest.

As part of her teaching Aunty Megs told us stories, tales she'd learned from the bushmen, folk tales from England. She'd read us legends. By the stove in the evenings she'd read us a novel, a chapter a night, *Treasure Island* by Robert Louis Stevenson (we asked for that again and again). There were the *Just So Stories* by Rudyard Kipling, *Little House on the Prairie* and *Heidi*. She loved *Heidi*, and she was going to read it to us, she said, even though she knew it was a girl's book. But our favourites were the *William* books by Richmal Crompton.

Sometimes she'd be laughing so much she couldn't go on. (Later when we could read properly, we read a bit of one of them to Barnaby, but he didn't find it funny at all. Not a single *ee-aw*.)

But most of all Aunty Megs loved poetry. It was Mick, she said, who had given her a love for the sound of words. He'd read to her often, usually poems about the sea. *Sea Fever* and *Cargoes*, and *The Yarn of the Nancy Bell*, which always made us giggle, and Mick's favourite – *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. She'd sit back in her chair and read them to us, and every time her words would take us again down to the sea. Fifty years or more later I still love all of them, and *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* is the one I love best. I know it by heart, start to finish. Every time I read it, and I read it often, I can hear her voice in my head. She wrote her own poems too she told us, but that she did in private, and however much we badgered her to read them to us, she never did. "My poems are like a diary," she said, "and for no one's eyes but mine."

Aunty Megs was an intensely private person. You always knew when you'd asked one question too many, like when Marty was looking at the photo on the mantelpiece of Mick in his sailor's uniform holding the hand of a little boy. When he asked her who he was, she didn't reply. When he asked once more, she said. "No one you know, and no one I know either." And the sudden coldness in her voice made it very clear she was going to say nothing more about it. We always thought it must have been her son of course, but we never dared to ask her ever again.

There really was so much that was wonderful at Aunty Megs', so much that changed my life. For a start we'd found a mother, and maybe as a result Marty and I became like real brothers there. We learned together how to build boats, only model ones maybe, but these model boats were the beginning of our lifetime love affair with the sea. We'd listen to Aunty Megs reading her sea poems, and talk long into the night about how we were both going to go to sea and be sailors like Mick had been. And I learned *The Ancient Mariner* by heart and recited it for Aunty Megs on her birthday. She listened with her eyes closed, and when they opened after I'd finished they were full of tears and full of love. Marty said it wasn't bad, but that I'd made a mistake and left out a verse. So I threw the cushion at him and he threw one at me. We both missed, and then all three of us were laughing. Henry came bustling in then to see what the noise was all about, took one look at us, decided we were mad, picked up the cushion, turned and walked right out again. I was happier in that moment than I'd ever been in all my life, happy as Larry.

Scrambled Eggs and Baked Beans

We'd been living at the Ark for about four or five years when Aunty Megs had her accident. Marty and I had been swimming in the river. We did that most days, when the weather was right, if there was enough water in the river. Swimming was something else Aunty Megs had taught us. "Almost as important as poetry," she'd say. "Best exercise there is. Could save your life one day too!"

We came wandering back up to the house, but when we called for Aunty Megs she wasn't there. A quick look at the empty compound told us what she was doing and where she was. She'd gone off on one of her rides into the bush, hoping to release some of her little fellows, her family of animals. Normally she'd be gone for an hour or two, no more. But after several hours there was still no sign of her. We decided we shouldn't wait any longer, that we had to go out looking for her.

I was leading Big Black Jack out of the paddock when we saw her horse come galloping riderless down the track from the hills. We didn't waste any time then, but rode back up the way her horse had come, calling for Aunty Megs as we went. We knew roughly where it was she usually went to release her animals – the same area she'd found us all those years before. So that's where we headed now, both of us on Big Black Jack, Aunty Megs' horse following along behind. After a while we heard her singing, singing out loud – later she told us the singing helped to take her mind off her pain.

We found her out in the open beyond the trees, sitting with her back up against a rock, her family of animals scattered all around her. She was holding her arm tight to her chest, and had a nasty gash down one side of her face. There was so much blood all over her. Her shirt was soaked with it, both hands and her neck. She smiled up at us. "Am I glad to see you," she said. "Don't worry about the blood. Got plenty more where that came from. Just get me up and take me home, there's good boys."

She was already too weak to walk very far, so we knew that somehow we had to get her on to her horse. It wasn't at all easy. We had to find the right tree stump to use as a mounting block, then help her up into the saddle. I could see

her shoulder was paining her dreadfully. I led the way on Big Black Jack while Marty rode up behind Aunty Megs, holding her steady in the saddle all the way home. Then I rode on into town for the doctor. It turned out she needed a dozen stitches in her face and that she'd broken her collar bone. He put a sling on her, and told her also that she'd lost a lot of blood and had to rest up for a while, a month at least, maybe more. She said, "Phooey."

The doctor stood there then, wagging his finger. "Don't you phooey me, Megs Molloy," he told her. "This is serious. You're to keep that sling on and stay still. These boys of yours'll look after you. You stay put, you hear me? Doctor's orders." And then he turned to us. "And if she tries to get up and go off looking for her little animals, you have my permission to lock her in." I think he was only partly joking.

Marty and I took him at his word. Now we were looking after Aunty Megs, which made a change. We made a deal with her. You tell us what to do and we'll do it, we said. But she had to stay put, stay still, rest as the doctor had told her. She agreed, reluctantly. So that's what happened. She only had to tell us what to do for a few days until we got into some kind of routine. After that we just got on with it. We took turns at everything we didn't much like doing – which was mostly the cooking and the washing up and the laundry.

Aunty Megs taught me from her sofa how to make scrambled egg on toast. She was very detailed and specific in her instructions. She allowed no deviation. Beat the eggs, bit of salt, bit of pepper, some milk. You had to spread the butter on the toast, keep it warm. Then you cooked the eggs, and the eggs had to be cooked just right, not for too long or they'd go all lumpy and tasteless. I did it better than Marty who always forgot the toast and burnt it. I still cook the meanest scrambled eggs in the world all these years later. It's still my favourite meal. During Aunty Megs' convalescence scrambled eggs alternated regularly with baked beans, or bubble and squeak, or corned beef hash. And we could fry bacon too. Poor Aunty Megs. Thinking back, it wasn't the best of diets for a patient, any patient. But she never grumbled. She laughed about it instead and told us in the nicest possible way that neither of us should ever take up a career in catering.

Outside though Marty and I really came into our own. We did everything that Aunty Megs had done. There was no time any more for swimming or fishing or climbing trees. Most mornings we'd go off, as she had done, up to the main road, searching for any surviving orphans. We fed those we had in the compound, and every so often we rode off into the bush, the animal cavalcade

following behind, hoping one or two might stay up there. We milked the cows and the goats, fed the hens, took pot-shots with Auntie Megs' gun at any dingoes that came too close. We even learned to be brave with the geese, and to keep Henry out of the house – we were only partially successful in that. We learned to cope. And, to be honest, we liked it, every moment of it, even the laundry and the shopping.

We'd ride off once a week into town, one of us on Big Black Jack, the other on Auntie Megs' horse. We took it in turns to ride Big Black Jack because neither of us much liked Auntie Megs' horse. He was easily spooked, a bit nervous too, and not only by kangaroos either, but by just about everything. Whenever I rode him into town I felt the same as he did, always on edge, always twitchy. I could never forget that it was his fault Auntie Megs was lying there with a broken collar bone. He'd heard something rustling in the trees, she told us, and he'd reared up in sudden terror – that's how it had happened. I could never forget that, so I could never trust him.

Then there were the visitors who came to call, usually for tea. Auntie Megs didn't like these visits any more than we did. She swore she'd never fall off a horse again, nor ever get ill. It wasn't that she didn't like people. She did. But the trouble was they clearly liked her more than she liked them. Now she was incapacitated, they came visiting all too often and there was nothing much she could do about it.

When the vicar turned up, she didn't like it one bit, and didn't trouble to hide her feelings either. I was there when he came. She was pretty blunt with him. "I'm not at death's door yet," she told him. "Just broken a collar bone, that's all. No need for the last rites." He wasn't amused and went off quite quickly after that. And Marty and I didn't like the intrusion of these visitors much either. We felt that some of them were checking up on us to see if we were looking after her properly. They'd bring baskets of food, and all of them, without exception, would ask if there was anything they could do to help. We loved it when Auntie Megs told them that her boys were looking after her wonderfully, that everything was just fine.

It was about this time though that I first began to notice a change in Marty. He'd grown up a lot recently. He'd always been a lot taller than me, but now he seemed much older too. Until now I'd hardly noticed the four-year difference between us. But I did now. He was becoming the man of the house. Marty would sit with Auntie Megs for hours on end, listening to the stories of how her family and Mick's had come over to Australia from Ireland a century before, driven out

by the potato famine, she said. They had found this valley and settled here. Marty loved looking through Aunty Megs' photograph albums with her too. He wanted to hear about Mick in particular, and she loved to talk about him too.

I remember sitting there watching them, and feeling a little jealous of Marty for the first time. Marty seemed to be able to talk to her in a way I couldn't. He wasn't just one of her "boys," he was becoming more of a friend. And she still treated me more like a boy, like a child. Up to now that had been fine, but suddenly it wasn't. Sometimes I couldn't bear to sit there and watch them, and I'd go off to bed early. It made me feel very alone again. I'd sulk about it from time to time, but with Marty I could never sulk for long. He wouldn't let you. One way or another he'd talk me round, get me smiling again.

Once we were alone in our room at night he would be the same old Marty again. We'd share our deepest secrets in the dark. We'd talk into the early morning sometimes. It was during one of those long nights that Marty told me his worst fear, which then became my worst fear too.

"D'you know what I think, Arthur?" he said. "Sometimes I think this is our real home, that we really are her children, that we'll be able to stay here for ever. Then I think: but we're not her children, are we? We're like her family of animals out there, her little fellows, her orphans. We're orphans too, aren't we? She hasn't said anything, but sometimes I think she wants us to go, just like she wants them to go. That boy in the photo with Mick. He's her real son. She won't say anything about him. But he must have gone, and when he went he didn't come back, did he? But I don't want to go, not ever. I feel like I'm a part of her proper family, that you're my brother, that Mick's my real father too. I'm going to be just like him one day. I am."

Then he added, "You've still got that lucky key of yours?" I had, though I didn't wear it any more – maybe because I thought I didn't need to. For some time I'd been keeping it in the drawer in my bedside table. I'd look at it from time to time, but it no longer seemed quite so important to me as it had been at Cooper's Station. I must have thought that I couldn't get any luckier anyway, so I just didn't need it any more. As for the cross Piggy Bacon had made us wear, I must have lost it. But I can't remember how or where. Marty chucked his in the river one day and I wondered then if he was throwing away his luck, our luck.

From that night on I couldn't get out of my head what Marty had said about Aunty Megs wanting us to leave one day. When we were alone, the two of us talked about nothing else. We decided to wait until Aunty Megs was up and about again, and then we'd ask her. But even after her shoulder was better and

things were back to normal again, and she was doing the cooking and we were eating something else besides scrambled eggs and baked beans, we still kept putting it off. In the end we put it off for good. The truth is, I think, that neither of us really wanted to know the answer because we feared too much what it might be. It was to be another couple of years before we found out, and then we didn't have to ask her. Aunty Megs wasn't one to beat about the bush. When she told us, she told us straight.

“You’re my Boys, Aren’t You?”

Aunty Megs had been quiet for a few days. She was like that. There’d be times when she seemed very preoccupied. She wouldn’t sing. She’d sit alone on the verandah and read her poetry. She’d go for long rides. Marty said it was because she was missing Mick. And it was true that when his birthday came round or the anniversary of his death, that’s when she went most noticeably quiet. But this time there was a difference. There was a nervousness about her we’d never seen before. It was almost as if she was avoiding us.

In retrospect, of course, we should have guessed what was coming, but we didn’t. I put it down to Henry. Henry had gone missing a couple of days before. We weren’t that worried, because Henry was always going off on walkabout into the bush, sometimes for a few hours, sometimes for a few days. He always came back. I’d just been outside to see if he was down his hole. I came in for supper and was washing my hands in the sink. “He’s not back, Aunty,” I said.

“Well, maybe he’s gone for good this time,” Aunty Megs was serving up as she talked. “Maybe Henry’s finally decided it’s the right time for him to go. ‘Bout time too, I’d say.” She took a deep breath before she spoke again. “Well, I reckon this is as good a time as any to tell you boys.”

“Tell us what?” I asked, sitting down at the table. My plate was piled high in front of me with tatty pie – Aunty Megs’ meat and potato pie with crusty pastry. I was longing to get at it, but we always had to wait till everyone was served. Aunty Megs was very strict about such things. “I’ve been writing letters,” she went on, “to a friend of mine in Sydney – an old friend of Mick’s from the navy, Freddie Dodds. It’s taken a while, but now it’s all set up.” Up until now she hadn’t been looking at us, but now she was. “I decided to wait till you were both old enough, till you were both ready, and now I reckon you are. Freddie says you can start work in a couple of weeks’ time.”

My appetite for tatty pie had suddenly gone. Now we knew. Our worst fears were about to be realised.

“Freddie Dodds runs a boatyard, makes boats just like we do in the shed, only bigger of course, the real thing. He wants to take you on as apprentices. It’s all

fixed up. A proper paid job in the yard and a place for you to live.”

While she was talking Henry nudged the door open, and came wandering in. None of us paid him any attention. “I’m not going to ask you what you think,” Auntie Megs said. “But I am going to tell you why I’m doing this. If I’ve learned anything in this life, I’ve learned that you can’t cling on. After Mick died, after I did my crying, I had to let him go. With all those animals out there in the compound, I mustn’t hang on to them. They’re not mine. They have a life to live out there. And you’re not mine either. I have to let you go. You have a life to live.”

Marty was on his feet, upset like I’d never seen him before. “But we’re not dead. And we’re not a couple of bloody joeys either. This place, it’s our home. I don’t want to go to Sydney. I don’t want to go at all.”

Auntie Megs went to him then, and put her arms round him and held him. “Do you think I want you to go?” she said. “Do you think I want to be here on my own? You’re my boys, aren’t you? The Ark is your home, always will be. It’ll be here for you whenever you want to come back, and I’ll be here too. I’m your mother, aren’t I?” She turned to me then. “Don’t just sit there, come and give your old mother a hug too.” The hugging helped stem the tears after a while, but then the numbing reality set in. We were going. In a couple of weeks we’d be leaving home, leaving Auntie Megs.

We lived out those weeks as if every day was our last. They passed in a blur of riding and fishing and swimming. We groomed Big Black Jack every day till his coat glistened as never before. Henry was fed his bottle several times a day, spoiled rotten even more than usual. And all the while Auntie Megs was growing quieter and quieter. We so hoped she would weaken and let us stay, but she remained resolute. Every night she was darning or mending something. She couldn’t have her boys going to Sydney looking like a couple of raggedy scarecrows, she said. And, while she was doing it, and because we knew she loved us to do it, we recited poems for her. Marty did *The Yarn of the Nancy Bell*, always his favourite because it had a rollicking rhythm and a gruesome twist to it at the end which we all loved. And I’d do my party piece, *The Ancient Mariner*.

The last time I did it, she looked up at me and said: “Thank you, Arthur dear, I shan’t forget it.” I haven’t forgotten it either. She came into our room on the last evening, and put a book in each of our suitcases – mine was *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, Marty’s, *The Yarn of the Nancy Bell*. I have them by me now, as I am writing this. They are still my most treasured books.

Out of a leather shoelace I made a new tie for my lucky key that night, and hung it around my neck. I wasn't at all sure I really believed in that kind of thing any more. At fifteen it seemed to me it might be a bit of a childish superstition, but I wasn't sure enough of myself to abandon it. Besides, the key was my last link to my sister, to the Kitty I remembered, or imagined. Memory or imagination? Already I couldn't be at all sure that Kitty had ever existed. Only the key told me she had. And the key had been lucky for us. Hadn't it brought us to Aunty Megs all those years before? So I kept my key. And I'm glad I did, very glad indeed.

The last I saw of Aunty Megs she was holding her straw hat on her head and standing there, disappearing into the cloud of dust left behind by the bus. For Marty and me this was the first time we'd been on a bus since the day we first arrived in Australia ten years before. Then we were leaving Sydney. Now we were going back. As I remember Marty said just about the same thing to me that he'd said then. "We'll be all right."

We sat silent the whole way, neither of us believing this was happening. Both of us knew we were leaving our childhood behind us for ever. It felt just like we were heading off into the bush again, into the unknown.

Together we might have been, but each of us felt very alone on that journey. When I felt the tears welling inside me, I tried to cheer myself up by thinking of Henry's horrible hat hole, or trying to get an *ee-aw* out of Barnaby. But sooner or later I'd think of Aunty Megs, and the moment that happened I'd be overwhelmed by a sadness I'd never felt before, a sadness so painful it gnawed at my stomach. I've only got to think about her even now, and I can feel the same pang, faint perhaps now like a distant echo, but still there. That's how much I loved her, loved our glowing time with her.

Freddie Dodds

Memory is a great and powerful magician. It plays tricks on you that you simply can't understand, no matter how hard you try to work them out. In my case it obliterated my early beginnings almost entirely, the lucky key around my neck being the only clue that I'd even had a beginning at all. And of my sister Kitty, the memory magician left me nothing but a shadowy phantom, which became more shadowy with every passing year. Yet I can remember the nightmare years of Cooper's Station and Piggy Bacon as if they all happened yesterday. But fortunately for my sanity, those healing, life-affirming years with Aunty Megs and Marty at the Ark are even more vivid to me than the nightmare time that preceded them.

I'm guessing now of course, but for me I think maybe it's partly at least a question of intensity. During those periods of my early life, maybe before I built up my protective wall around me as most of us do as we get older, I felt everything so strongly, so deeply. Good, bad or ugly, it stays with me. But that still doesn't explain why so much that has happened since those early years has been lost in a haze, that I seem to have forgotten as much as I've remembered. It's as if time itself had taken its time during my childhood, but once I got off that bus in Sydney it picked up speed, and from then on it was a roller coaster of a ride, and a bumpy one too, that brought me from then to now, leaving me with only fleeting moments of clarity, the highs and the lows, with so much in between, but lost to me for ever.

Freddie Dodds was there to meet us off the bus in Sydney. He drove us to the boatyard down at Newcastle. Mr Dodds – I never heard anyone call him Freddie except Aunty Megs – was the most silent person I ever knew. He wasn't unfriendly. On the contrary, he smiled a great deal, and he wasn't ever off-hand or cold. He just didn't say much, not to us, not to anyone. But he was a kind man through and through, and he ran his boatyard like a kindly ship's captain. He was the sort of captain that led by example, not by shouting at people. Everyone knew what they had to do and how to do it, and that included Marty and me.

We started out as general dogsbodies, sweeping up, fetching and carrying,

making tea – we made an awful lot of tea. And we were nightwatchmen too. That was mostly because of where we lived. It paid our rent.

Marty and I lived on a boat just down the creek from the boatyard, a stone's throw, no more. It wasn't much of a place, a bit of an old wreck really, a forty-five foot yacht built in the 1940s that had seen better days, and was falling apart and beyond repair. But we didn't mind. It was home. We had a place of our own and we loved it.

No Worries she was called, and the name was perfect for her. And she was perfect for us too. We'd sit up there on deck in the evenings, the two of us, a cooling breeze coming in off the water, and up above us a sky full of stars. I've loved stars ever since. Down below we were as snug as a couple of bugs in a rug. Seventh heaven. What's more we were earning money. Not much, but it made us feel good, made us feel suddenly grown up. But however grown up we may have felt, we both missed Auntie Megs and the Ark, and Barnaby and Big Black Jack and Poogly and Henry. How we laughed about Henry.

The other blokes in the yard didn't treat us like that of course. To them we were just a couple of kids, particularly me, because I still looked like a kid. One or two of them would try to give me a hard time to begin with, but Marty was a good six feet tall now and big with it. He kept an eye out for me, they could see that. So they'd rib me a little from time to time, but that's all it ever was. We soon settled in and became part of the place. I became a bit of a mascot, I think.

We'd hardly ever see Mr Dodds. He'd be up in his office designing the boats. The place was full of his model boats, mostly yachts, and we'd only ever go up there to collect our money at the end of the week, or to pick up a letter from Auntie Megs perhaps. She didn't write often, but when she did her letters were full of news about Henry and Barnaby. It seemed now like news from another world.

It was while we were up there one day that he saw us looking at the models of the yachts he'd made. "Megs tells me you can make models too," he said. And he showed us a design he was working on. "Do you think you can make this up for me?"

"Course," said Marty at once. I thought he was mad. We hadn't got a clue how to work from a design. We'd always had Auntie Megs alongside us in the shed back home. Now we were on our own. I didn't think we could do it. But we did. We learned fast because we had to. After work we'd sit down together at the map table in *No Worries*, and make the model of Mr Dodds' latest design. Eighth heaven now!

One way or another I've lived on boats more or less ever since, with a few prolonged and mostly unpleasant interruptions. I don't know what it is, why I love living on boats so much. Perhaps I just feel safe, like I am a part of the boat and she's a part of me. And I love the sound of the sea, the lapping of water above me, the movement below me, the clapping of the mast in the wind, and the birds. I love the birds. Ever since *No Worries*, I've woken up to the sound of seabirds. I could do without gulls mind. Dirty beggars. They always chose to park themselves on *No Worries*. There were dozens of boats all around to choose from and they always chose ours. And they didn't just leave *little messages*. Oh no! Marty didn't like cleaning up after them, so I had to do it. I didn't much like Marty while I was doing that, and I've hated gulls ever since.

But if I think about it, and I often have, my love of the sea must go back to Aunty Megs, and to Mick, her husband. He'd been a sailor. He'd built model boats. Then she did it because he had. Then we did it because she did it. She taught us all that poetry of the sea too, gave us our books, *The Yarn of the Nancy Bell*, and *The Ancient Mariner*, which we both knew by heart. So it's hardly surprising, I suppose, that Marty and I took to the sea like ducks to water.

Luckily Mr Dodds liked that first model we made. So we did the next one for him after that, and very soon we found ourselves working alongside all the other blokes in the boat-building shed, not dogsbodies any more, but like them, boat-builders proper.

Each of Mr Dodds' boats was a real marvel to me. They were mostly yachts, thirty-to-forty footers. You'd see her first as a sketch on his desk, then developed on the drawing board. Marty and I would make the model, and the next thing you knew – it took months, but it never felt like it – the next thing you knew, there she was in the water. A miracle every time it happened, a man-made miracle, that's what it was. For me it was like giving birth – as close as I ever got anyway! And Marty and I, and all the blokes in the yard, we were all so proud of them, like they were our children.

But their real father was Mr Dodds of course. I learned more about boats from Mr Dodds than I ever did from anyone else in all my life. There was never anything flash or fancy about his boats. They weren't built for speed or looks. They were built to sail. And that's the other thing I learned from Freddie Dodds. He didn't just teach us how to build boats, he told us how to sail them too. And that was to change my life for ever, and Marty's too.

One January Night

I suppose there were about a dozen of us working in Mr Dodds' boatyard, including Marty and me, and by and large we were a pretty close-knit team. One or two came and went, but for the most part, people liked it and stayed. And that was largely because Mr Dodds treated everyone right. The money wasn't great – you could certainly earn more elsewhere in the fancier boatyards – but with Mr Dodds you got to build the whole boat, and best of all you got to sail it too. We had *job satisfaction* – that's what they call it these days.

Once a boat was finished, Mr Dodds would ask two or three of us to take her out on sea-trials. He would often come along too. Everyone got his chance, but not everyone wanted to do it. Marty and I did though. Any opportunity to go out on sea-trials, and we'd take it. We were seasick of course, but after a while we'd find our sea legs and our sea stomachs, and once we'd settled into it, it was raw excitement – hard work we discovered – but always a pure pleasure.

So, thanks to Mr Dodds, both of us got to know boats from the keel up, from the inside out. We built them and we sailed them too. And when we sailed we learned from Mr Dodds how to sail in harmony with the wind and the sea. He told us once that it was living at sea, surviving at sea, that taught him all he knew about boat-building. You have to understand the sea, he said, to listen to her, to look out for her moods, to get to know her and respect her and love her. Only then can you build boats that feel at home on the sea.

Every time we went out on a new boat with Mr Dodds, I learned that each boat we built was different, had a personality of her own. Once she's in the water she becomes a living creature, a unique creature. You ride her like you ride a horse. You have to know all her little quirks and fancies and fears, how she likes to ride the waves, how she likes to dance with the sea. That's what sailing is, a dance, and your partner is the sea. And with the sea you never take liberties. You ask her, you don't tell her. You have to remember always that she's the leader, not you. You and your boat are dancing to her tune.

I'm not sure how much Mr Dodds ever actually told us of all this. He was just about as monosyllabic out at sea as he was back in the boatyard. But one way or

another we picked up his sailing philosophy and his boat-building philosophy, and it's stayed with me ever since. Everything I learned from him about the sea, about boats, has proved right. He was my sailing mentor, my tutor of the sea, a fine man and a fine seaman. The best.

He must have thought well of Marty and me too, because after about two or three years – Marty would have been about twenty-one by now, and I was seventeen – he called us up into his office and told us he thought we were ready to do one or two longer trips now, and on our own, just the two of us. We were young, he said, but he'd taught us well, he'd prepared us. A lot of the others didn't want to do the long trips – most of them had families to go home to. From now on he didn't just want us to trial his boats, he wanted us to deliver his boats to their new owners. As a result, Marty and I went all over – across to Hobart, up to the Whit Sunday Islands, and three times over to New Zealand.

It was on one of those New Zealand trips, to Auckland, that Marty first put an idea into my head, an idea that's been there ever since. We were sailing just off Dunedin. "You know what?" he said. "If we wanted we could keep going all the way to England. We could go and find your sister. You could find Kitty."

We never did, of course. But the idea stayed with me. Meanwhile, I was being paid for what I loved doing best, and I was doing it with my best friend on earth. Ninth heaven now. The two of us were becoming sailors through and through. And about that time, and partly because of the sailing I think, I stopped thinking of Marty as my elder brother, my bigger brother. The age difference between us that had meant so much at one time, and even set us apart a little for a while when we were younger, all but disappeared. On board the boats there was no skipper. We worked alongside each other, with each other, not younger and older brothers any more, but more like twins. We seemed to know instinctively what the other was thinking, what he was about to do. Our world had been the sea world for so long now. We'd shared so much. We'd been shaped by the same teacher.

Once a year for a couple of weeks' holiday we'd go back home to Auntie Megs, usually at Christmas. Sadly Henry wasn't around any more, but Barnaby was. Donkeys live longer than wombats. Barnaby still wouldn't *ee-aw* however much we tried to make him. We'd sit on the verandah the three of us together, and watch the sun go down, and we'd tell her all about the places we'd been and the boats we'd sailed. And on our last night we would all three of us recite *The Ancient Mariner*, for a few verses each until we finished it. When we had to leave at the end of the holidays, we never wanted it to end. We never wanted to

come away.

Then one January night just after we'd come back from staying with Auntie Megs, our world turned upside down. We'd have both been in our early twenties by then. One way or another, it's been upside down most of my life ever since.

Thinking back, we should have read the signs. Just before Christmas, Mr Dodds had laid off a couple of the blokes, and he hadn't been himself for some time. He'd been hiding away in his office, hardly showing himself. I thought he was probably just preoccupied with some new design – we all did. But there was no Christmas bonus that year, and no Christmas party in the boatshed either. We knew the boat business everywhere was going through a hard time, but we didn't realise just how hard until that January night.

I was asleep on *No Worries* when it happened. Marty had gone out for his last nightwatchman's check around the boatyard. It must have been about midnight, I guess. The two of us always took it in turns, and Marty was on duty that night. All you did was walk around the yard with a torch for half an hour. It was a routine neither of us liked much, but for doing it we were living on *No Worries* almost rent free, so we couldn't complain.

The first I knew of it, Marty was shaking me awake. I could see the flames straightaway through the skylight. I thought at first it was the boat that was on fire. When we got up on deck of *No Worries* you could see the whole boatyard was on fire from end to end. By the time we got down there, the fire fighters were already there. There was nothing they could do, nothing anyone could do. Luckily there were no boats inside. They were all out on the apron or in the water. Marty kept saying over and over that he'd only been down there an hour before and checked the place. He couldn't understand it. I saw Mr Dodds standing there still in his pyjama tops watching his whole world going up in flames before his eyes.

The police took Marty and me in and questioned us separately. I told them what I knew, which was nothing of course, except that each of us would go out last thing on alternate nights to check the boatyard, that we'd shared the nightwatchman duties for years and years. When they asked me whose turn it had been that night I told them that it had been Marty's. It was only after I'd said it that I realised what they might be thinking. I regretted it at once. But it was too late.

They arrested Marty that night on suspicion of arson. They wouldn't let me see him either. When I told Mr Dodds what the police had done, he just looked at me, then turned away without saying a word. It wasn't at all the reaction I had

been expecting. I'd never known him to be heartless before. I couldn't understand it.

It turned out they were dead right about the arson, just wrong about Marty. I was wrong about Mr Dodds too, couldn't have been more wrong. He walked into the police station the next morning, and confessed to it all. Brilliant designer and boat builder that he was, good and kind man that he was too, it seemed he had got himself into a serious financial mess. It was an insurance scam. The poor man was trying to save his shirt. But once he'd heard they'd arrested Marty, he couldn't go through with it. Like I said, he was a good man. But they sent him to prison for seven years. Marty and I went to visit him, but they told us he didn't want to see anyone. We never saw him again. We tried again and again but he refused to see us every time.

So that was the end of the boatyard, the end of the good times, the happy times. One night was all it took for our whole world to fall apart. That one night in a prison cell for Marty was a night he never got over. I never got over it either. I felt I had betrayed Marty, that I'd locked him in that police cell as sure as if I'd turned the key myself. I told him how bad I felt but he never blamed me. "Forget it," he said. I couldn't. Marty was never quite the same after that night. Nothing was.

An Orphan Just the Same

They let Marty and me live on for a while on *No Worries*. By day we'd be out looking for work in other boatyards. But times were hard. There was just no work to be had in any of the boatyards in Newcastle or Sydney, nor anywhere else so far as we could discover, and boat-building was all we could do. Letters came from Auntie Megs saying we could always come home for a while if we wanted to, that there was always a place for us there, and plenty of work too. I can't believe how stupid we were not to have taken her up on her offer. I remember reading her letters over and over again, trying to decide whether to go. But for all sorts of reasons, Marty and I decided against it. He said, and at the time I thought he was right about it too, that you should never go back, that it'd be like giving up. And we both loved the sea, loved boats. We were determined to find work that kept us near the sea, or even on it preferably.

Those months we trudged the harbours and boatyards of Sydney looking for work took their toll on us both, but on Marty in particular. He was always the one who had kept me going through our most difficult times, ever since we were little. Now he just about gave up. I was the one who had to get him up in the morning when he wanted to just lie there. With every fruitless day, with every rejection, I watched him sinking deeper into the silence of despair. I tried to pull him out of it, to joke him out of it, tried to keep him positive. But it was no good.

Every night now he'd want to stay out drinking late. Time and again I had to drag him out of bars, and more than once he got into fights, usually over some girl. Drink did that to him. It didn't make him happy; it made him angry. Money, the little we had saved, was fast running out. Worse, I could feel that the two of us were beginning to drift apart. Before we'd always done everything together. But now he'd go out in the evenings on his own. I could tell he didn't want me around. We never fell out, not as such. He was just going his own way and there was nothing I could do about it.

There was one morning when I couldn't get him out of bed no matter what I did. So I left him there and went off job hunting on my own. As usual I didn't find anything, but I was gone all day. When I came back home to *No Worries* in

the evening, Marty had gone. I thought he'd gone out drinking, that he'd be back later. Even when a couple of policemen came the next morning, early, and woke me up, I wasn't that worried. I just thought he'd picked another fight and ended up in a police station for the night. I recognised one of the policemen – he'd interviewed me on the night of the fire.

I was half-asleep when they told me, so I didn't really understand, not at first. It was about Marty, they told me, and I had to come with them. I still couldn't understand. "We've got a witness who saw it happen," said the policeman I had met before, "someone who knew him. But all the same, we need you to come and take a look."

Then they told it to me straight. Marty had been drunk. He'd been doing the dinghy dance, leaping from boat to boat in the harbour, messing around. He'd fallen in, and just never came up again. They'd tried to find him, but it was dark. Then this morning a body had been found. I'm still trying to believe it happened. Even now, all these years later, the shock of it and the pain of it goes through me every time I think of it.

They took me to see him in the hospital. It wasn't Marty. It was just his body. I felt nothing then. I tried to feel something; I stayed there with him for hours. But you can't feel emptiness. They brought me back to *No Worries*, and I found Aunty Megs sitting on her suitcase waiting for me. It was the strangest thing. She'd woken up a couple of nights before and had known at once that we needed her. When I told her, all she said was, "I'm too late then."

There were just the two of us there for Marty's funeral. We buried his ashes up on the hill where the bushmen had left us that day, where Aunty Megs had first found us. I recited a few verses from *The Ancient Mariner*, ending with the line I knew he loved most of all: "Alone on a wide, wide sea". I'm glad I did that, because that poem is not just about a sea voyage, it's about the journey through life, and about the loneliness of that journey. It was the right thing to read.

Aunty Megs took me in again. She took care of me all she could. But now there were two spirits in that house with us, Mick and Marty. She had photos of them on the mantelpiece, side by side. But they were omnipresent, particularly, I remember, when we were sitting in silence together as we often did of an evening.

So much was the same. But so much wasn't. Henry's hole was still there under the verandah steps, still full of his beloved hats. Barnaby wandered the paddock shadowing Big Black Jack. The two had clearly become quite inseparable. But Aunty Megs' old horse had gone.

Aunty Megs and I still did everything the three of us had always done together. She didn't have the cows any more, just one nanny goat for her milk. But we still went up to the main road to rescue the orphan marsupials, her little fellows. We still kept them in the compound, and from time to time we'd make the long journey up to Marty's hill, as we called it now, to see if one or two of them would go back to the wild.

I had never been quite sure of Aunty Megs' age, but she must have been about seventy-five or eighty by now, and I'd have been in my late twenties. As the years passed she stayed just as active in her mind, just as spirited. But as she said, her "poor old body doesn't work like it should". She didn't go out walking much these days. Her legs pained her. She never said anything much about it, but I could see it. She moved more slowly, more stiffly.

But she could ride all day though, and it wouldn't bother her a bit. On the contrary, she was happier up on a horse than anywhere else. She told me once that God had given her four legs to gallop with and a tail to whack the flies with, that he'd just made a big mistake with the rest of the human race, that's all. And gallop she did too. Nothing she liked better. She said it made her feel alive. And I knew what she meant, because that's exactly how I'd felt out sailing with Marty on Mr Dodds' boats, with the wind in my face, and the sails straining above me and the salt spray on my lips. My longing for the sea never left me.

Aunty Megs had a good quick end, the best you can have, the doctor said when he came. She'd gone out with her torch to check her family of animals in the compound as she always did in the late evening. I was sitting, stargazing on the verandah when she came back. She sat down beside me, and said she thought she smelt rain in the air. Then she fell silent. I thought she'd gone to sleep – she'd often do that out on the verandah on warm evenings. And in fact that's just what she had done. She'd gone to sleep, but it was the long sleep, the final sleep.

The whole town came up to Marty's hill the day she was buried, and there were dozens of bushmen there too. I don't think I quite realised until then just how much she was loved. I put her ashes next to Marty's, a photo of Mick with them. When everyone left I stayed up there and recited the whole of *The Ancient Mariner* for them both. As I walked away I felt like an orphan all over again, a grown-up one maybe, but an orphan just the same.

Things Fall Apart

If there's one part of my life I'd like to forget entirely it was the next fifteen years or so. I suppose you could call them my years in the wilderness. I shan't enjoy writing about them, but I've got to do it. Like it or not, I can't just miss it out. Luckily for me, quite a lot of it is lost in a fog of forgetfulness. Perhaps that's what happens sometimes. Perhaps it's an automatic survival system that helps you muddle through. Maybe the memory just says: that's enough. I'm overloading with pain here and I can't cope, so I'm switching off. But it doesn't switch off entirely. So you remember, but thankfully only dimly, through the fog. Sometimes, though, the fog does clear, and you see the icebergs all around. You can hear them groaning and grinding and you just want to sail through the field of icebergs and out the other side, or you just long for the fog again. I'll tell you about the icebergs now. And like most icebergs are, they were unexpected and very unwelcome.

After Aunty Megs died I stayed on living at the Ark, doing what she'd done, living as we'd always lived. I didn't need much in the way of money. I had milk and eggs and vegetables. I lived a bit like a hermit. I rarely went into town and no one came to see me. I wasn't unhappy, not even lonely.

But then of course I wasn't alone. I had the animals, and like Dr Doolittle I talked to them. I think I talked to Big Black Jack more than I ever talked to anyone else all my life. He was probably over thirty years old by now, so I didn't ride him much any more. We'd go out for walks, the three of us – Barnaby, Big Black Jack and me. He'd walk beside me, his whiskery old face close to mine and we'd talk. Well, I'd talk. And I talked to the family of animals in the compound as well. Aunty Megs wouldn't have approved of it of course. You talk to them, you only gentle them she'd said. Gentle them and they won't survive in the wild. But they seemed to like me talking to them, and they went off when I released them just the same, and most of them didn't come back. So it was fine. Everything was fine, for a short while at least.

Then the strangest, saddest thing happened. I went out into Big Black Jack's paddock one summer morning, early, carrying a bucket of water to fill up their

trough. I did it every morning, and usually Big Black Jack and Barnaby would come wandering over for a pat and a few words, and a drink of course. This particular morning they didn't come. So I went looking for them. I found Big Black Jack lying stretched out dead on the ground, with Barnaby standing over him, his head hanging. It took me all morning to bury Big Black Jack, Barnaby watching me all the time. He never drank a drop after that, never ate a thing, just stood by where I'd buried Big Black Jack and pined away. He was dead within a couple of weeks.

I was out there burying him in the paddock when I heard a car coming down the farm track. The man in the suit said he was a solicitor from Sydney. He was perfectly polite and proper. He simply told me that I'd have to move out. There wasn't any great hurry, he said. I could stay a couple more months. Then he told me something that shouldn't have surprised me, but it did nonetheless. Auntie Megs had had a son (the boy in the photo I'd seen all those years before, the boy she wouldn't ever talk about). There'd been a falling out years and years ago, the solicitor said, and they hadn't spoken since. Auntie Megs hadn't left a will, so everything she owned, the house and the farm and the furniture, it all went to her son. That was the law. The son it seemed wanted nothing to do with the property. He just wanted to sell it. Of course I could stay if I bought it. I told him I didn't have the money for that. Then I asked him what would happen about all the animals. He said they belonged to the son as well, everything did.

I didn't stay two months. I didn't stay two weeks. I stayed just a few days. That's all it took. I gave the nanny goat to the next-door farmer, and walked out into the bush every day with an ever-decreasing cavalcade of little animals following me. The last one to go was a joey. I've always wondered if I rushed him, whether he was quite ready. He was very small, but very independent minded. When he hopped off behind a bush, I turned and walked away quickly. I looked around once only, and he was gone. I hope he was all right.

I left the next morning, passed by the hill, Marty's hill, Auntie Megs' hill, to say my last goodbyes. I promised Marty I would go looking for Kitty one day, and I told Auntie Megs that all her family of animals were back in the wild now, where they belonged. Then I went on my way. I had a small suitcase, with a few clothes in it and one photo of us all together. And I had my lucky key round my neck. I did not look back.

I went to Sydney again because I had only one thought in my mind now: to go to sea. I got lucky – or so it seemed at the time anyway. I found a job straightaway on a fishing trawler. I didn't think twice. I just signed on. We'd be

fishing the Southern Ocean, for tuna mostly. I didn't care what it was for. I was just so happy to be out there again, to feel the heaving seas about me, to watch the birds sailing the wind above me, to see the stars. You can see them better at sea than anywhere.

Then we began fishing. Most people have never seen a tuna that wasn't in a tin. I certainly hadn't, not before I went fishing for them. If they had, if they'd seen what I saw during the months and years that followed, they could never take the tin off the supermarket shelf, let alone eat the fish inside. A tuna is a beautiful shining creature, for me the most magnificent of all fish, and huge too. Day after day out on that trawler, I'd watch them lying there on the deck, suffocating to death, bleeding to death, thrashing about in their pain. And they weren't alone in their suffering: albatross, turtles, dolphins, sharks – they were all dragged up out of the ocean, and caught up in the slaughter.

No one seemed to mind what we were doing, just so long as we brought enough tuna back to port. And I didn't just stand by and watch. I was as guilty as everyone else. Massacre, murder, call it what you will, I was part of it. I played my part. But it paid well, and I was at sea where I wanted to be. I took the money. I stayed at sea. But I wasn't proud of myself, and the longer I stayed the more troubled I became by what I was doing. None of the others seemed bothered about it. On the contrary, the more we caught, the happier they were. They weren't bad blokes. They were just trying to earn a living like me.

We all got on well enough. When we weren't fishing or sleeping or eating, we were gambling. I liked gambling. I liked it a lot. I liked it too much. It made me feel like I was one of them. I was good at it too. And besides, it was totally absorbing. It took my mind off everything else. But each game was only a brief respite. Soon enough I was back up on that deck doing my killing.

I stuck it out as long as I could, but after a few years I'd had enough. Just the sight of another dying tuna made me feel physically sick. One night, on the way back to port, I was lying in my bunk unable to sleep. Every time I closed my eyes I could see a tuna thrashing about on the deck in its death agony. I knew I couldn't do another trip. I clutched my lucky key and swore to myself that as soon as I got back to Sydney, I'd do what I should have done years before, what I'd promised Marty I'd do. I'd go to England and look for my sister, Kitty. I had every intention of doing it too, but the others wanted a night out on the town, and I went along. By the time I left the casino in the early hours of the morning, every dollar I had earned was gone. There was no way I could pay the plane fare to England.

I find it difficult to explain to myself all these years later why I did what I did next. I think I must have had just three things on my mind – I needed money, and I still wanted more than anything to be at sea. And I didn't ever want to go fishing again. I remember walking down a street in Sydney, my suitcase in my hand. I happened to look up and saw a face smiling down at me from a poster. The man was in uniform, a naval uniform, and he looked just like Mick in that photo of him back at the Ark. He wore the same uniform too, the same peaked cap, the same Royal Australian Navy badge. The sailor inside the recruiting office – that's what it was – beckoned me in. It was as simple as that. And as usual, I thought my lucky key had done it again. I'd join the navy, I'd have regular money in my pocket, I'd be at sea. Perfect. I signed on the dotted line, and within a couple of months I was back on board ship, a very different kind of ship, a destroyer.

I never read newspapers much, hardly ever watched television either. I didn't pay much attention to the world outside, not in those days. If I had, maybe I would have seen it coming. A couple of years later and we were sailing off to war – the Vietnam war. Another kind of murder, but people this time, not fish.

The Centre Will Not Hold

Most of the world is now too young to remember the war in Vietnam. Wars become history all too soon and are forgotten all too soon as well, before the lessons can be learned. Which is why we have more wars, and always more wars. But they are not forgotten by those who fought in them. I don't forget the anger of our guns, the shudder that went through the ship when she was hit, the silence that followed and the cries of wounded men. They called it "friendly fire" afterwards. We were bombarded by our own side, an "unfortunate" mistake they told us. It felt a little more than unfortunate at the time. Good men died for nothing that day, and I was lucky not to be one of them.

These were times I do remember, only too well, but don't want to have to think about. I don't want to write about them either, but I can't pass by Vietnam as if it never happened, as if I'd never been there, been part of it. Not because I'm proud of it. On the contrary.

There were long months of boredom at sea, long nights sweating below deck. I can still remember how excitement turned to fear in my stomach when the guns first fired. I can still see Dickie Donnelly from Adelaide – we only just celebrated his eighteenth birthday – lying there on the deck, his eyes looking up at the sky above him and not seeing. There wasn't a mark on him. It must have been the blast that killed him. I was holding his hand when I felt the last breath of life go out of him.

But, apart from Dickie Donnelly, most of the dying in that war was done far away, on the shore. I discovered it's a whole lot easier to do your killing when you're miles away from your target. You're in your ship, way out at sea, and you just fire the guns. You don't see where the shells land.

So you don't think about it, because you don't have to, at least not to start with, not until you come face to face with it. After Dickie Donnelly, I couldn't put it out of my mind. This was what our shells were doing to the enemy, to the Vietcong, to the North Vietnamese. They'd be young lads, just like Dickie, with mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers, an enemy I'd never even seen. And I was firing the guns that did it. All I'd ever done while I'd been at sea, it seemed

to me, was killing.

I couldn't wait for the war to end, to get out of the navy. Sickened and sad I turned my back on the sea, for ever I hoped. I had come to hate the sea, the place I'd always loved, where I'd always longed to be. For me the sea had become a place of blood.

I went inland after the navy, bummed my way around, picking up any work I could find. I went gold mining in Western Australia, worked on a cattle station in the Northern Territories, spent most of my time branding cattle. I did seasonal work picking grapes in vineyards outside Adelaide, in the Clare Valley it was. And after that, I was a jackaroo for a while on a sheep station near Armidale in New South Wales. After that I never wanted to look at another sheep in my life. Back-breaking work, smelly work. At times I felt like I was back on Cooper's Station.

I couldn't settle anywhere, not for long. I kept moving on, moving on. I wasn't leaving anywhere. I wasn't going anywhere. I was just drifting. I still wore Kitty's key around my neck, never took it off, not once. But I'd long since stopped believing it was lucky. I wore it, mostly out of habit, and maybe because I still thought that I might one day be able to go back to England and find Kitty, find out if she'd ever existed even, find out what the key was for.

But I never did it, and I know why. I was frightened, frightened of discovering the worst – that she never had existed, that I'd made her up so as not to feel entirely alone in this world. I still thought about the key, though, when I caught sight of it in the mirror as I was shaving. I thought about it every time I touched it. But any real hope I had harboured of actually ever doing anything about it was fast fading, along with my sanity. My centre would not hold.

I don't know why it happened when it did. None of it really makes much sense to me even now. If there was a physical cause that triggered my troubles – and when it comes to health, I don't think body and mind can be separated – then it might well have been lack of sleep. No matter how exhausted I was after a day's work, I couldn't get to sleep. I'd lie there, not tossing and turning, just thinking. And no matter how hard I tried, my mind kept coming back to it. It was always the killing. It was the shining tuna lying on the deck bleeding, fighting for life, Dickie Donnelly's last breath warm on my hand.

But there was another picture there that haunted me, that would not go away every time I closed my eyes. I'd seen it first as a black and white photo in a magazine, I think, then in a film on the television. It was an image of a young girl in Vietnam, running down the road away from her village. She had been

burned by napalm bombing, dreadfully burned. She needed help. She was coming towards me. She was naked and she was crying. And she kept coming towards me, holding out her arms to me, and suddenly her face would be Kitty's face. I knew I'd been part of the war that had done that to her, to a girl just like Kitty and to thousands and thousands of others too. Every night she was there, and every night I couldn't sleep.

I'd be late for work in the morning, or I'd fall asleep on the job. I'd get the sack. Time and again I got the sack. Any money I did earn I'd gamble away the same day I got it. I'd hitch a ride anywhere and had no idea where I was when I arrived nor why I'd gone there. I felt myself slipping into a deep dark hole of despair. I couldn't find any way of stopping myself, and in the end I didn't even want to stop myself. It seemed a lot easier just to give up and let go. So I did.

I woke up in hospital. They told me I'd drunk a bottle of whisky, and taken a lot of pills. The doctor said I was lucky. Someone had found me in time. I didn't think I was lucky at all. He wanted to keep me in hospital, for my own safety, he told me. I'd had a breakdown, he said. It was an illness like any other, and I'd have to be hospitalised until the treatment was over. I gathered pretty soon that it was the kind of hospital you could leave only when the doctor said you could. I looked out of the hospital window and saw the sea. I asked where I was. "Hobart, Tasmania," he said. When he went out he locked the door behind him, just as Mr Piggy had at Cooper's Station. I was a prisoner again.

So there I was, over forty-five years old by now, rock bottom, suicidal and losing my mind in some hospital in Hobart, and I don't remember to this day even how I got to Hobart. But I still had Kitty's key around my neck. The doctor asked me a lot about my childhood. I showed him my key, and told him about Kitty too. He asked if I hadn't made Kitty up entirely. Hadn't I invented her because I so much wanted her to exist, wanted to have a family?

He was a strange man, my doctor. He never smiled, not once. But to be fair to him he didn't get angry either. And I gave him enough cause to get angry. Thinking back, I treated the poor man a bit like a punch bag. He didn't seem to mind, just let me rant on. Nothing rattled his professional calm. I had the strong impression he didn't believe a word I told him. And I don't think he cared much either. So after a while, I didn't tell him anything more. We'd sit there having long silences together, and I'd gaze out of the window at the sea and watch the boats.

It was during one of those silent sessions that I felt the stirrings of a new

longing. I wanted to build boats again, and to sail them. I'd sit in my room and recite *The Ancient Mariner* aloud over and over again. It made me feel I was out there at sea, and it reminded me of Marty and Aunty Megs. And I remember too that I'd sing *London Bridge is Falling Down* very loudly in the shower. I loved my showers, and singing made them even better. I was sad and alone, very alone, grieving for everyone I had loved, everyone I had lost.

Then one morning there was this new nurse on the ward who smiled at me, not because she was trying to be kind but because she was kind. She treated me like a person not a patient. My whole world lit up every time I saw her. I was mesmerised, and not just by her gentle beauty and her shining black hair. It was the sound of her laughter, her sheer exuberance that lifted my spirits and made me feel lonely without her. When I told her about Kitty's key, about Cooper's Station and Marty, and Aunty Megs and Vietnam, she listened, and she wanted to know more. When I recited *The Ancient Mariner* to her, she listened. Bit by bit, every time I saw her, I felt myself coming together again. I made a model boat for her, a liner with three red funnels. I was beginning to see a way out of my darkness. And once I could see the light, then I knew I could climb up towards it.

So that's what I did, and when I walked out of that hospital a couple of months later, my nurse was waiting for me. Zita, she was called. And I knew as she drove me away that morning that she was all I'd been looking for all these years. I found more than happiness with Zita. I found myself again, then a home too, and an entire family. Best of all, I now had a reason for living.

Oh Lucky Man!

What Zita had done was to restore my faith, and not just my faith in myself, but in the wider world around me too. When you're down and out you get to thinking only how bleak and brutal the world is. The more you believe it, the more you expect things to be like that, and the more they prove to be like that. It's a self-fulfilling prophecy. That's the spiral I was in. What Zita has shown me since the day I first met her is that the world is not like that, most people are not like that, I'm not like that. She didn't do it by telling me, by preaching to me, but just by being who she is. Genuinely good people are like that. The sun shines out of them. They warm you right through. Zita's like that. As the song goes – and songs do get it right sometimes – when she smiles, the whole world smiles too. She was half my age and she chose me to love. If she hadn't told me first, I'd never have dared to tell her back. Oh lucky man!

She came from a family of smiling people. That's where she took me the day we drove away from the hospital, to her family home down by the seashore in Hobart. There was a whole tribe of them, the most extended family I'd ever met, Greeks all of them, Cretans, dozens of them and loud with laughter – when they weren't crying that is. They are people of extremes, wonderful people. They welcomed me at once as one of their own, and that meant everything to me. I was Zita's man, so I was part of the family, no questions asked. They were all open-hearted and whole-hearted. The children climbed on my knees that first lunchtime. They tugged me by my fingers towards the sandpit or the swing or the beach. They'd found a new great big puppy to play with. I laughed with them in the sunshine, just as I'd laughed with Marty at the Ark all those years before.

From that day on I knew I had a proper home and a proper family of my own. And I danced, for the first time in my life I danced. Cretan dancing. Zita taught me, tutored me through the awkward stage where my feet simply refused to step to the music, told me to feel the music, to let the music do it. It worked. But I'll never dance like a Cretan, like Zita. You can see the music floating through her. She's a wonder to watch.

But there was more. Zita hadn't mentioned it before. Maybe she left her father

to tell me himself. “Zita she say you likes boats, Arthur,” the old man said after lunch as we walked together by the seashore. He had a truly wonderful white moustache which he stroked often, not out of affectation but rather out of affection, I think. There was a glint in his eye that demanded and expected an answer. You didn’t have conversations with Zita’s father. He talked, you listened.

“Me too,” he went on. “I likes boats. I grow up with boats when I was little boy on Crete. Now I have my own boatyard. Stavros Boats. Now I build my own boats – big ones, little ones, fat ones, thin ones, anything that sell. And I build good boats too, the best boats. We all build boats, the whole family. You can help us, yes?” He didn’t wait for a reply. “That’s good, that’s good.” He stopped then and turned to me. “I want Zita to marry a good Cretan boy, young and strong. But she say she want to marry you. Zita, she like her mother – you don’t argue with her. So you’re not Cretan boy – that’s not your fault. And you’re not young – that not your fault either. She like you and you likes boats – that’s good enough for me.”

I was like the cat that got the cream and fell on his feet all at once and the same time. And it got better too. Within a month or two I was married to Zita, and I was designing all the old man’s boats for him, and making models for the children too. We lived all together in the huge family home adjoining the boatyard, where everyone had their own chair on the verandah – even me, my wedding gift from Zita’s father.

Then came the icing on the cake. I know you’re not supposed to mix metaphors, that cats that get the cream and icing on the cake hardly seem compatible. But to describe this supreme moment of my life, I need all the metaphors I can lay my hands on – there’s another one! Before I knew it, Zita and I had a little girl of our own, Allie – Alexis really, but I’ve never called her that. Everyone else does, but to me she was always Allie.

“She’s got your nose,” Zita told me. Luckily for me that’s all she’s got of me. The rest is perfect. I have to say that because it’s Allie who’s writing my story down at this moment, typing this all out for me on her word processor. But it happens to be true. She types as fast as I can speak, which is amazing. But then she’s always been amazing to me, ever since she was born nearly eighteen years ago. It seems like yesterday.

Down in the old man’s boatyard, I was adapting Mr Dodds’ designs for ocean-going yachts, for dinghies, for motor boats too. For the first time now I had the opportunity to imagine a boat, to dream it up first in my head like a story, then

sketch it and design it and build it. But all the while I kept Mr Dodds' principles in mind: that a boat should be built to dance with the sea, not just to go fast or look sleek. I had one or two arguments with my new father-in-law about this, but as soon as he found my designs were selling well, he was more than happy to let me do what I wanted.

One boat I conceived, designed *and* built all with my own hands. I never let anyone else go near it or even see it till I'd finished it, and then the first person to see it was Allie. I called her *Kitty*. It came into my head – it just seemed a good idea at the time. And Allie liked saying it over and over. So the name stuck. *Kitty* was bright yellow, and built to sail the roughest waves in Allie's bath, to survive close encounters with all her plastic ducks and loofahs. Based as usual on one of Mr Dodds' designs, *Kitty* was sturdy and sound, the most bath-worthy boat ever built. Allie couldn't turn that boat upside down even if she wanted to – and she tried often enough. Turn *Kitty* over and she'd just pop right back up again.

When she grew bigger, I built her a bigger boat, *Kitty Two*, I called this one, to sail on the pond, yellow again and fully rigged. Mr Dodds' designs, I discovered, worked every bit as well in the sea or the pond or the bath. And just as soon as she could walk, I made her first real sailing boat, a dinghy, *Kitty Three*. This one was big enough for the three of us to go sailing together in her. Once, on Christmas Day, Allie insisted on taking the tiller so I let her. As she took us out to sea that day, she began singing her favourite song *London Bridge is Falling Down!* Can't think who taught her that!

Allie was a natural sailor – it came I'm sure from starting so young. I hardly had to teach her at all. She took to it instinctively, and loved every minute of it. She won her first race when she was six. She just lived for her time on the water. Every day after school she'd be down at the boatyard, not only watching either, but building. For her, the boatyard was the next best thing to the sea, and she often had a canny way of making the one thing lead to another.

She learned boats the proper way, Mr Dodds' way, my way: from the keel up, from the inside out. And she learned the sea, because she was always out there. I'd go with her when I could of course, but if I couldn't then she'd pester someone else in the yard. She wasn't at all easy to say no to, not for me, not for anyone. Even the old man, her grandfather, who was no one's soft touch, was putty in her hands. Zita used to say Allie had us all round her little finger, and that was just about right. But she was clever with it too. She knew she had to put in the hours down at the boatyard. Whatever needed doing she'd do it. She was

the same kind of dogsbody Marty and I had once been in Mr Dodds' yard. She was a hard worker, and the blokes saw that and liked it, which was why one way or another she'd usually manage to get one of them to take her out sailing.

It was seeing her so at one with her boat, so happy, that inspired me to take it up seriously again myself. Watching the joy on her face, the sheer exhilaration, was infectious. I discovered I didn't just enjoy sailing because she was with me, I began to love it again for itself, the way I had before. I was loving it because it made me feel alive again like nothing else. True, the sight of a passing fishing trawler, the unmistakeable lines of a warship on the horizon could still trouble me. But it was the heady, happy days with Marty I remembered most. And now I was out there again alone or with my own daughter. Zita came out with us only rarely on what she called picnic days, when the sea was listless, when there was so little wind the sails hung there limp above us. She liked it best like that, but Allie and I were bored out of our minds.

It was on one of those picnic days that it happened – Allie would have been about ten by then I think. The three of us were lazing there in the sun after lunch. I had my eyes closed when I felt Allie fiddling with my lucky key. She loved doing that. "Tell me about the key again, Dad," she said, "and your sister Kitty." I'd told her the story hundreds of times before, trying to make it a little bit more interesting each time, as you do. This time when I'd finished, she took it off me and put it round her neck. "You know what we should do when I'm a bit older, Dad? We should sail to England and find her. Could we do that, Dad?"

That was exactly what Marty had said I should do all those years ago as we were sailing past Dunedin off New Zealand.

"Could we, Dad?" Allie asked again.

"It's a long old way to England," I told her. "Half way round the world. And what if we can't find Kitty when we get there? I've no idea at all where she'd be."

"We could find her," Allie said. "Course we can, and we'll find out what the key's for. I think it's a box. Got to be, hasn't it? S'only a little key. And we'll open it up. What's inside, d'you think?"

And then I said it. I said it quite deliberately. I'd thought about it, and I meant it. "I don't know what's inside," I replied. "But we're going to find out, Allie. I'll have to build a bigger boat of course, but I can and I will. We'll sail to England and we'll find Kitty. If she's there we'll find her. It's something I should've done a long time ago."

"Do you promise me, Dad?" she said, looking up at me wide-eyed with

excitement.

“I promise you, Allie,” I replied. And it was a promise I was determined to keep.

I looked across at Zita then, and she knew I meant it too.

I could see she was suddenly fearful. But I couldn't backtrack now. I'd promised. Everything had been decided in those few moments. When Allie was older, we'd do it. We'd sail to England together and find my sister, Kitty, and discover what my lucky key was really for. On the way back home that evening, I was already designing the boat in my head – *Kitty Four*, she'd be called.

Kitty Four

It could have been just a pipedream. It would have been if Allie hadn't kept me up to the mark. She didn't pester me – not exactly. But she did prod me, and every prod was a reminder, and all the reminders served to crank me up, to get me going, make me feel guilty if ever I was thinking of backsliding – she knew me too well, she still does. She knew the dream of the boat, the dream of her great ocean adventure, would never come to anything unless she made it happen, unless she made me do it. I had my own reasons for delaying the commitment, and they weren't just backslides. I had good sound reasons too.

Both she and I needed far more experience of ocean sailing before we could embark on such a voyage – Zita was adamant about that. There was no way she'd let us go, she said, unless she was quite sure we were both ready for it. The old man said the same.

"Yous not going till I say yous ready," he said. And he always meant what he said.

Zita also made it absolutely clear that Allie couldn't go until she was eighteen – and that was years ahead. But years have an uncanny knack of passing. The boat I was building in my head was a thirty-three footer – the ideal size for ocean sailing, Mr Dodds used to say, because it's compact. "Size," he once told me, "is not all it's cracked up to be. Look at what happened to the Titanic." And while I was busy dreaming up my compact thirty-three footer, I was out there practising hard – encouraged by Allie, who was herself entering and winning every race she could.

I knew what she was about. With every new silver cup on the mantelpiece she was proving to us all just how good a sailor she was. Zita was proud of her and her grandfather was too, too proud I sometimes felt, but then grandfathers are entitled. But neither was happy about the prospect of the two of us going off around the world. They made that very clear. And already Allie was talking of not just going to England and stopping off there to find Kitty, but of doing the whole thing, the entire circumnavigation.

As for me, I won no silverware, but I was in training. Four times I went

crewing on the Sydney-Hobart race, and of course, everyone at home was there to see me off, follow my progress on the television, and was there to welcome me when I came home. I had some hairy moments – the Sydney-Hobart race specialises in providing those. No boat I sailed in ever won. But for me that wasn't the point. I was learning again everything I'd learned with Mr Dodds and Marty, and more besides. I could feel my confidence and strength growing with every race. Best of all though, and thanks to Allie's persistence and dogged determination, the old man himself was coming round. He was still cautious, but he was beginning to encourage us now in our great endeavour. Allie had it in her blood, he said. Cretans were the greatest and bravest sailors in the world.

When I told him I needed some time off work to do some longer sails on my own he arranged, just as Mr Dodds had done before, for me to deliver Stavros boats far and wide. I sailed again to New Zealand, solo this time. I took a boat to Bali once, with Allie, and another to Hong Kong, solo again this time. On each trip I was testing my endurance, learning how to deal with minor and major catastrophes alike, and all the time I was learning the sea again, learning the winds and the tides. I was ready. I was as ready as I was ever going to be.

By now Allie was sixteen. The two of us had done lots of sailing together, ocean-going, long trips. I knew how good a sailor she was – far better than me already, that's for sure. She only had to feel the wind and to look at the waves to understand what dance they wanted to do, what sails were right; she had already mastered all the new gizmos of modern sailing. That side of it seemed to come as naturally to her as the sailing itself. When she was on board I spent most of my time cooking or watching albatross or dolphins, or stargazing. I just wasn't needed. But she was still only sixteen. Still Zita wasn't at all happy about it. And still we didn't have a boat.

We had a design though by now, and just as importantly, we had the means to build it. The old man had done a deal with me. He'd sponsor the whole thing, he said, pay for everything down to the last can of baked beans. But he wanted the Stavros Boats' name and the logo up there on the sails, and along the sides. And he insisted we had to get as much publicity as possible.

"We can sell many many boats on the backs of this," he said.

"Just so long as we can call the boat *Kitty Four*" I told him.

"You calls it what you like," he said. "Just make it the safest boat you ever built in your life. And you brings my little Allie back to me safe and sound, you hear me?"

By now of course everyone down at the boatyard was part of the great project.

We all built the keel together. Everyone rallied around and helped, all of us fired by Allie's energy and enthusiasm. They all knew her well – after all she'd been hanging around the boatyard ever since she was knee-high. They'd watched her grow up and now they wanted to be part of her dream, wanted to help make it come true. They all knew the story about the key I wore around my neck, and about my sister, Kitty. Everyone in the boatyard felt they were part of the same story. Better than that, they were making it happen. Never was a boat built with so much care and affection as *Kitty Four*. We all wanted to build the safest boat that ever sailed the ocean. Knock her down and she'd come back up. Turn her over and she'd right herself again. She had to be unsinkable; we'd make her unsinkable.

Allie worked alongside the rest of us in the shed, late into the night for months on end. Zita allowed her to do it only if she kept up with her school work. She was very strict about it. So Allie did both. Keeping Zita on side was the most difficult part of the whole thing. As the skeleton of the keel began to look like the beginnings of a real boat, as Allie's eighteenth birthday came ever closer, as plans for the trip began to crystallise, she worried more and more. Both Allie and I did all we could to allay her fears, to convince her that we'd be fine. But night after night, she'd lie awake beside me. I tried to reassure her about how safe the boat would be, how we'd make sure everything was just as it should be, about how good at sea Allie and I were together. We'd been in big seas, we'd managed, we'd coped, we'd be fine. Telling her though wasn't enough.

It was Allie who came up with the idea that at last enabled Zita to feel a little happier about it. She gave her a part in it all, a vital part. She told her we were going to need someone to run the whole communications side for us back home, all the emails, Satphone, the website. Allie said she would teach her everything she needed to know. That seemed to make all the difference. As we finished the keel down in the boatyard, Allie and her mother worked together at home. They converted the box-room to a communications room, fitted it all out, bought all the computers and gizmos they needed.

We were all there together to see *Kitty Four* go into the water for the first time. Zita launched it for us. "I name this boat *Kitty Four*. May she take you both to England. May you find Kitty, Arthur, and all you're looking for. And most of all, may she bring you back home safely." I saw a lot of grown men cry that morning, and I was one of them. So was the old man. Allie held my hand tight as we watched.

"Thank you, Dad," she whispered. "She's going to be the best boat, the best

boat in the world. I know she is.”

That evening as we celebrated I knew something wasn't quite right. I felt dizzy first, then there was a pain in my head that wouldn't go away. I'd always felt fit as a fiddle before, so when I fainted the next morning, Zita called the doctor. So the saga began – the tests, the waiting, more tests, more waiting, then the results, the verdict. The doctor gave it to me straight, because I asked him to. I had a brain tumour – malignant, advanced, aggressive. There was nothing they could do. Surgery wouldn't help.

Radiotherapy wouldn't help. Chemotherapy wouldn't help. Nothing would help. When I asked how long I'd got, he said, “Months.”

“How many?”

“Five or six, difficult to be precise about it. I'm sorry.”

“So am I,” I said.

Since that day I've had so much to think about, so much to get sorted. I told Zita that I didn't want to talk about it, didn't want anyone to know outside the family, that I just wanted everything to go on as normal as possible, for as long as possible. Without Zita, without Allie, and without *Kitty Four* I would have fallen apart. I know that.

We finished her together, fitted her out just as Allie wanted her. I wanted to see her in all her yellow glory – yellow she had to be, Allie said, because all the other *Kittys* had been yellow, and they'd been yellow because all the foods she most loved as a little girl were yellow – custard and butter and bananas. I was there on the quayside to see Allie take her out for the first time, saw her dancing through the waves, and I knew I'd never built a finer boat.

There was something else I had to do as well before I went. I had to talk it all out, write it all down, everything I could remember right up until now. To start with I could manage to write well enough on my own, but as things got worse, as my sight gave up on me, I've had to dictate it. I prefer it that way anyway. Telling a story is so much easier for me than writing it. Some of it I've dictated to Zita, but sometimes I can tell she finds it hard to endure. That's why Allie and I are finishing it together.

So in the end we didn't sail around the world together, but we have sailed around my life together. Allie told me yesterday that she's talked it over with her mother and the old man and they've given their permission. She says she's going to sail to England on *Kitty Four* on her own now, that when she gets there she's going to do all she can to find my sister Kitty and tell her all about me and find out about my key, Kitty's key. And then she's going to sail back all the way

home again. Zita and her grandfather are still a bit sticky about it, she says, but they'll come round. They will too. She's quite a girl, my Allie, quite a girl.

There's times I think she only told me that to make me happy. But when Allie says something she always means it – she's very like her mother that way, very like the old man. So I think maybe she really will do it. The thought that Kitty and Allie might one day meet up makes me very happy – my real world meeting my dream world. It's just a pity I won't be there to see it, that's all. Or maybe I will be. Who knows.

As I said at the beginning, I knew the ending of my story before I began telling it. But maybe it isn't quite the ending, not yet. I'll live on for a while in Zita's memory and in Allie's memory. I'll be part of their lives for as long as they live, just as Marty and Aunty Megs have always been part of mine. This story of mine will help me live on a little longer. And I want that. I want that very badly. Living a little longer is suddenly the most important thing in the world for me.

But this is the end of the story, the story of me. What will happen to me soon is the end of everyone's story. Not a happy ending, not a sad ending. Just an ending. Time to say goodbye.

By Arthur Hobhouse,
(brother of Kitty, and Marty, son of Aunty Megs, husband
of Zita, father of Allie.)

PS This story is dedicated to Zita. Kittys key and my copy
of The Ancient Mariner are for Allie to keep.

Part Two

The Voyage of the Kitty Four

What Goes Around, Comes Around

I always liked messing about with boats, and *in* boats too. As Dad said, I'd been doing that just about all my life, from the bath to the Southern Ocean. I think I was born to sail, and I mean that. So when I set out on my great sailing adventure, it was because I wanted to do it. I'd been dreaming of doing it for almost as long as I could remember. I didn't do it just because I promised Dad I would. That was only part of it. Yes, Dad had built the boat for us to sail to England together, to find Kitty together. And yes, it's true that I try very hard to do what I say I'm going to do, to keep my promises. So of course I went in memory of Dad, but mostly I went because I wanted to go.

He was just a bloke I met on a train, the night train from Penzance to London, and we got talking, as you do. To be honest, I didn't pay much attention to him at first. I had my laptop out, and I was busy writing emails to Mum and Grandpa. Besides, I didn't want to talk. I was tired. I wanted to get my emails done and then have a good night's sleep. But we just got chatting. No, that's not quite true. He started chatting, and I listened. I think I listened because he was funny, and because he was Australian, the first Australian boy I'd talked to face-to-face in months. He rattled off his entire life history in about a minute, before the train even left the station.

He was called Michael McLuskie. Born in Sydney, went to school in Parramatta. Hated it. Spent all the time he could on the beach, surfing. Left school. Decided he'd go round the world searching out all the best surfing beaches he could find. Came to England, to Cornwall, to Newquay and St Ives. Big mistake. No one told him they didn't do proper waves in England. You could find bigger waves in a teacup, he said. He'd spent the last couple of months sitting on drizzly grey beaches waiting for waves, and now he'd run out of money. He was going home, to sunshine, to Australian surf, the real kind, the rolling kind, the thundering curling kind, the riding kind.

"You surf?" he asks me.

“No,” I tell him. “I sail.”

“Same thing.”

“No, it’s not.”

“Have a Mars bar,” he says.

And that’s how it all began, with an argument and a Mars bar. Six years on and we still argue from time to time, not that often. But when we do, we often patch it up by sharing a Mars bar. It helps us remember that train journey, the time we first met. It makes us smile, and it’s really hard to argue if you’re smiling. I know because I’ve tried.

“So what about you?” Michael says.

“What about me?”

“Well, I’ve told you the story of my life, so now you’ve got to tell me yours.”

“You’re just chatting me up,” I tell him.

“Yes, I am,” he replies, “but tell me all the same. It’s a long journey.”

He was right about that. It was going to be about eight hours through the night, and the seats were uncomfortable, so sleeping wouldn’t be easy. And besides, he was very persuasive.

“What happened to your arm?” he says.

I’d almost forgotten I had my arm in a sling. I’d already got used to it like that. “It’s a long story,” I tell him.

“I’m listening,” he replies, flashing me his wide white surfer’s smile. “And you can tell me your name too if you like.”

I told Michael my story (and my name) that night because I liked him. There, I’ve said it, and that’s the honest truth of it. To begin with I thought, *I’ll do what he did, just rattle through my whole life history, get it all over with as quickly as possible*. But once I’d started it didn’t work out like that, and that was because he kept trying to draw more out of me.

I began my story just as the train jerked into motion, and began to groan and grind its way out of the station. As it turned out, I didn’t finish until the next morning. And I think I know why I confided in him as much as I did. It was because he listened so intently, seemed so riveted by every word I said. It was like I was telling my story to a little kid at bedtime. He just didn’t want me to stop, and he kept asking questions, kept wanting me to explain things more. So it wasn’t just me talking, it became more of a conversation between us than solo storytelling. And I had so much I wanted to show him, so much evidence: all the emails on the laptop, a typescript of Dad’s story (rather battered by now) and Dad’s copy of *The Ancient Mariner*, both of which I’d had with me on Kitty

Four all the way from Australia. He loved the emails particularly, and he told me why too. It all became so real when he read them, he said, as if he was there on the boat with me.

So that's how I'll try to tell you my story then, just as I told it to Michael that first time, but without his interruptions.

Two Send-offs, and an Albatross

Dad died just two weeks after I'd finally finished typing out his story. So he had his copy of it on his bedside table. He couldn't read it by this time, but he knew what it was all right, and he was very proud of it. The last time he was conscious I sang him his song over and over again, till I was sure he'd heard it. "London Bridge is falling down, falling down, falling down, London Bridge is falling down, my fair Lady."

He didn't open his eyes. But he squeezed my hand. He'd heard it.

We gave him a good Cretan send off, the kind he'd have liked, all of us there, the whole family, and we sang our songs and danced our dances. Then we went out in a flotilla of boats, Mum and me in *Kitty Four*, and we sprinkled his ashes far out at sea, just as he'd wanted us to do. I read a few verses from *The Ancient Mariner*. I knew his favourite lines, so I ended with them.

*He prayeth well, who loveth well
Both man and bird and beast.*

*He prayeth best, who loveth best
All things both great and small;
For the dear God who loveth us,
He made and loveth all.*

Just as I was finishing that last line an albatross came winging over us and floated above us on the air. Dad's spirit was in that bird. I knew it and so did Mum—we didn't have to say anything to know what the other was thinking.

As we watched it fly away I told her about the promise I'd made to Dad: that once he was gone, I'd do the voyage we were going to do together on my own. I'd sail to England, do all I could to find Kitty, and then sail home again. I expected an argument from her—I knew how nervous and upset she'd been about the whole project, and that was with two of us doing it. But she just said

very quietly: “I know all about your promise, Allie. He told me, and besides I know his story, don’t I? He was so proud of you. You go. You do it. It’s what he would have wanted. But when it’s done, you come back home, you hear?”

Fitting up *Kitty Four*, and planning the whole trip, and all the sea trials needed to test out the equipment, took several months. Mum wasn’t going to let me go until she was quite sure everything on board was just as it should be. Grandpa was the same. He checked and double-checked everything. And all this time Mum was beginning the search for Kitty. She surfed the net, but that got her nowhere. She sent off emails to public record offices in London and all over England. Nothing. She wrote to one or two friends who lived there asking for their help. Everyone did what they could, but no one could find a trace of a Kitty Hobhouse born in London, probably in Bermondsey, at about the same time as Dad—though, like him, we could never be quite sure of when exactly that had been.

We set up a *Kitty Four* website so people could chart my progress at sea, and follow me all the way to England. And there was a link to the whole story of the search for Dad’s missing sister asking anyone who might have any information about Kitty Hobhouse to get in touch. Maybe someone would read it. Hopefully someone would know something. We had hundreds of hits, huge interest, lots of good luck messages; but no one, it seems, had ever heard of a Kitty Hobhouse of Bermondsey, London.

Mum didn’t give up. She and Grandpa used the press too. There were front-page articles in the newspapers, national as well as local. “Allie’s Epic Voyage.” “Allie Searches for Long Lost Auntie.” I did radio interviews, TV interviews. Grandpa liked the TV coverage best of course because the boatyard’s name was up there behind me: “Stavros Boats” in huge blue letters—bow to stern, the whole length of the boat, on my cap, on my wet weather gear, on just about everything. Grandpa was always there to stage the interview—he never missed a trick.

Mum thought the press coverage might be our best chance of tracking Kitty down. But no one phoned, no one got in touch, no one emailed. I got to thinking about what Dad had told me when he was a bit down once: that it had all been so long ago, that sometimes he wondered if Kitty had existed at all, that she could be just a figment of his imagination, that someone else could just as easily have given him his lucky key. So we could be looking for a figment.

As usual Mum stayed positive. Kitty was real, she was sure of it. Kitty was as real as her key, she said. She would keep looking while I was gone. Sooner or

later, something had to turn up. All through Dad's illness she had been the same. Everyone around her only kept hoping because she did. Whatever made Dad feel better she made sure we did. Most of all he loved to see us dancing, all of us together, the whole family. "Let's do it like we always do it," she'd tell us, "so that he feels the joy in it." Even when he died, she was the strongest of us all. It was Mum's strength and determination that was to keep me going over the next five months. I could never have done it without her.

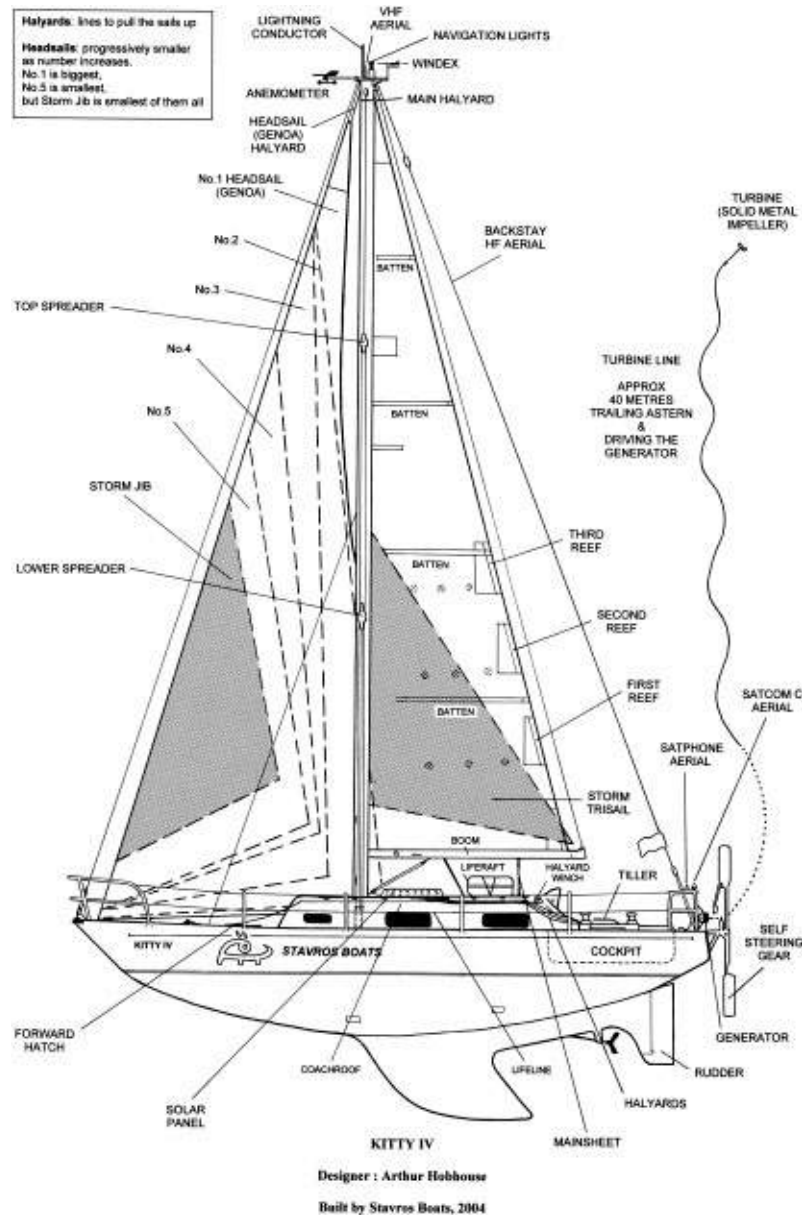
Mum was my coordinator back at home on shore through email, and through Satphone in an emergency. We would keep in touch every day. Any technical problems, I'd let her know. She'd talk to the blokes in the boatyard, and they'd do what they could to talk me through repairs and maintenance. Any injuries and health problems, she'd ask the doctor. We'd thought of everything, we hoped. We were as ready as we could be. All set to go. But I wasn't happy. There was a side to all this I was really beginning to dislike. Over the last weeks before I left I'd become a bit of a local celebrity, and I was finding the constant intrusion getting on my nerves. I just wanted to be gone. But I knew they'd be there, and lots of them, on the day I left. I wanted to slip away without anyone noticing, but Grandpa wasn't having any of it. He wanted me to have a proper send-off, a Cretan send off. The press was important, he said. He was proud of his little girl, proud of Stavros Boats, and he wanted the world to know it. And what Grandpa said, went. So that's how it happened.

I'd never seen so many cameras flashing in all my life. "This way, Allie." "Smile, Allie." I showed my teeth – it was all I could manage. But that apart, it was a send-off I'll never forget. The whole family turned out. Bouzoukis played on the jetty. They danced, they waved, they cried. Everyone from the boatyard was there, along with half of Hobart it seemed to me. All I wanted now was to be gone. I wanted the hugging and the tears to be over with. I just wanted to get on with it.

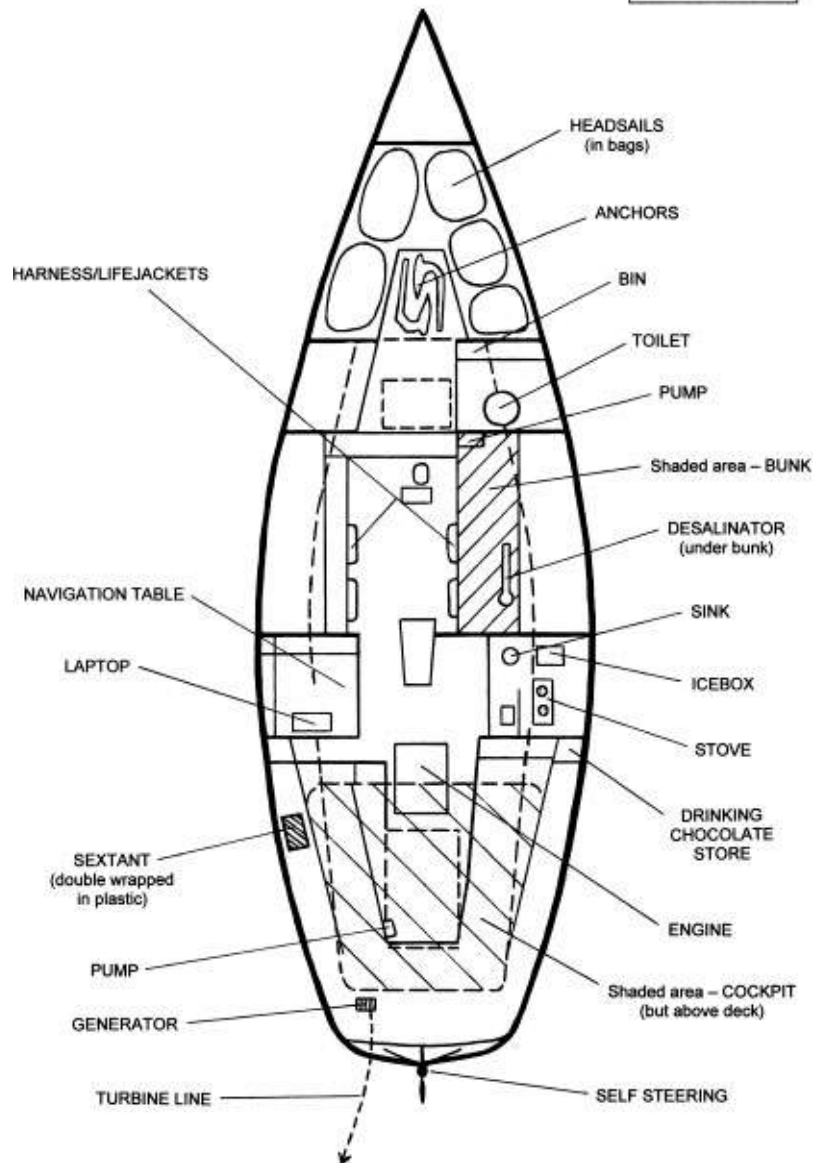
My first big worry was the dozens and dozens of motor boats and speedboats and jetskis and yachts that were escorting me down the Derwent River and out to the open sea. They were all around me, some of them very close, too close. Eyes in the back of my head would have been useful. I tried to wave them away, but they seemed to think I was waving goodbye to them and just waved back even more enthusiastically. But once we were past the Iron Pot and out in Storm Bay they all turned back, and I was on my own at last. We had a good breeze behind us and *Kitty Four* was sailing like a dream. I'd always loved *Kitty Four*—she'd been a dream for so long – but I never loved her more than I loved her now. She

was going to be my home for five months. We'd be doing this together, just her and me, and Dad, who'd built her to sail the way she did, and made me the person I was, and the sailor I was too.

I sat there in the cockpit, the sun and the spray on my face, in seventh heaven—Dad was always counting heavens in his story, so I can too—singing *London Bridge is Falling Down* and drinking my first hot chocolate of the voyage. I was on my way.



KITTY IV
Below deck



Jelly Blobbers and Red Hot Chili Peppers

1600 hrs Mon 10 Jan 043' 23"S 148' 02"E

out past Tasman Island. great start. lumpy bumpy sea. lumpy bumpy boat. nice of everyone to see me off, except for that bloke in his jet ski who nearly took my bow off he came so close. Anyways, he missed, so still in one piece. Kept crying when I looked back and saw you all waving, so that's why I stopped waving after a while. wasn't being unfriendly Grandpa. Every time I look up at the sails and see Stavros Boats I'll think of you. And Mum every time I use the laptop I'll be thinking of you. See you all in my dreams too from time to time, that's if I get any sleep which isn't likely.

Like I said to Mum I'll be writing emails whenever I can – you do the same, pleeeze – to let you know where I am, how I'm doing, how the boat's behaving, what the weather's doing.

I'm really loving this already, the emailing I mean. I talk a lot to myself anyway when I'm sailing because it's good to hear the sound of a voice, any voice, reassuring somehow, makes you feel there's someone else around – silly I know. So these'll be like talking emails. I sing a lot too, but I'll keep my singing to myself. You'll just have to imagine me up on deck belting out my Whitney Houston special in a force 8 or 9 – and ieeeeiiiiiii will always love you. I found myself humming London Bridge is Falling Down in the cockpit just now, like Dad did. I've got Dad's cds – louis armstrong, bob dylan, the beatles, buddy holly. I've got "What a Wonderful World" on right now, one of Dad's favourites when we were at sea together. Got my own stuff too – Coldplay, Red Hot Chili Peppers, few others. Couldn't take much, not enough room. piled high with junk down here, hardly any room for little old me. feel like a really big sardine in a really small can. Still it's home for a few months so I'd better get used to it. just hope the pc keeps going. lot depends on that. And that's down to the generator.

Towing the turbine at 6 knots at present, so lots of amps. Amps = happy pc = happy me.

Just want to thank all of you for everything you did to get me this far. Kitty 4 is where she loves to be and so am I, and don't worry bout me too much. Got Dad's lucky key around my neck so I'll be fine.

Wind gusting 30 knots. Lots of jelly blobbers all around come to say goodbye too I spect. Saw my first albatross. Now I know Dad's out here with me, going all the way with me. See you.

2000hrs Tues 11 jan 44' 13"S 151' 12"E

Hi y'all. G'day. Settling in or trying to. Forgot how uncomfortable Kitty 4 really is. Didn't dear old Dad realise you've got to live in a boat as well as sail her?

Not enough room to swing a mouse down here. Sea kept me awake most of the night. Never shuts up, not for one moment. Banging and crashing all night, and if I got up never stopped chucking me about either. No consideration. I think she was just reminding me who's in charge out here. Gave up after a while and went up on deck, had some hot chocolate, yummy, and looked at the stars, zillions of them. Can't be any more beautiful place in the whole world than the sea at night when someone's switched on the stars. Hope heaven really is up there. Thought of Dad. Think of him often. Miss him, and when I miss him badly I talk to him. Tried to get some sleep again but I couldn't. Too keyed up. I still can't really believe I'm doing this, after all the years of building and planning, after everything that's happened. I lay there listening out for problems, for any strange creaks or groans. Kitty 4 talked to me all night, telling me she was fine, that I wasn't to worry. But once I start worrying I can't stop. S'not really worrying, it's just that my brain keeps churning things round and round and won't let me sleep.

Forecast was spot on. Wind from the north 50 knots. Funny how you forget things so quickly. You forget how busy you have to be. So much to be thinking about, so much to be doing and when it's done there's always something else. Which is why I've got to stop this and get some sail off.....

Back again. Read a bit of Dad's story again in the night, the beginning bit with him being sea-sick. I'm lucky. Don't do sea-sickness. Love reading his story because I can hear his voice in every word.

Kitty 4 sailing beautifully. Big rolling beam seas don't make it an easy ride, not for her, not for me. Still finding sea legs. Not hanging on hard enough, always banging my head. Big lump above my right ear. I'll hang on tighter next time. Huge tanker out there. Ugly great monster. Saw an albatross again, think it may be the same one. I tried to take a photo of him, but discovered the digital camera doesn't work. It did when I tried it out back home. I wanted to send pics on email, but now I can't. Very fed up. Sorreeeee. Thanks for all the emails. Yes, Grandpa I am taking the vitamins. Hope I sleep better tonight. See soon. A.

1600 hrs Thurs 13 jan 45' 41"S 156' 19"E 5 knots

Love your emails. I love y'all. Miss y'all. I read them over and over. Yes Mum head's fine, no concussion. Yes Grandpa course I'll keep the Greek flag flying all the way, right up there with the Aussie one. Kitty 4 is a real beaut. Got y'all to thank for that, and Dad and Mr Dodds. She's a real marvel. Nothing I can teach her. She's teaching me. Got to be honest, it's a whole lot easier living alone on this boat. Dad was the best sailor in the world, but the untidiest. And he always hated me tidying up after him. He liked his own mess he said, knew where everything was. So I'd have to wait till he went up on deck then just tidy everything away quickly while he wasn't there. When he came back he'd never even notice I'd done it. Sound familiar Mum? He just loved living in a tip, that's all and I didn't. But give Dad his due, he was a brilliant cook (never washed up but he cooked like a dream).

He'd do all the cooking and let me sail the boat. All right so it was baked beans with everything. But he made the best bread, learned it off you Mum, the tastiest bread I ever tasted. Can't be bothered much with cooking at the moment. Just open a tin of something, anything, wolf it down then have my hot chocolate. That's what I live for, hot chocolate. I sit there all cold and wet and drink it down. It shivers the cold right out of me, warms me up from the inside up, reaches toeses and noses, all my freezing cold bits and pieces.

Decided this morning to learn The Ancient Mariner all the way through before I get to England. Think Dad would like that. Know the first verse already. Here it is. Not cheating, promise:

It is an ancient mariner
And he stoppeth one of three.
By thy long beard and glittering eye,
Now wherefore stopp'st thou me?

Up on deck earlier going along nice and easy, brilliant sunshine. Saw the albatross again. It's the same one, sure of it now. He brought some of his friends with him to check me out. Seems to like me cos he stayed around for a while, they all did. He came so close I could see right into his eye and he could see into mine. I can't get it out of my head that maybe it's Dad keeping an eye out for me, doing this with me just as he always wanted to. When he flew off a few minutes ago I missed him, and the whole ocean seemed so empty and hostile too. I felt alone for the first time since I left.

Waves 10 metres and higher. Winds 30-40 knots all the time. Set the storm jib, not easy with the whole world pitching and rolling around me. Been up on deck doing too many sail changes, fifth today. Got to think ahead more. Got to limit the sail changes. Each one takes a lot out of me. When I get tired I make mistakes. Took the skin off my knuckles the last time I did it. Stupid. Little wounds don't heal out here easily. I've got two ginormous blisters already. Must look after them else they'll fester and festering isn't good, leads to all sort of nasties.

Wind patterns all over the place down here. Got to learn to predict the unpredictable, Allie – I can hear Dad saying it now. Doing my best, Dad. Halfway to Stewart Island, halfway to N.Z. Hot chocolate to celebrate. Listened to Coldplay. One or the other cheered me up – don't know which. Any news about Kitty, Mum? Be so so good if we could find her. Love you. A

And Now the Storm Blast Came

1700hrs Sat 15 Jan 46' 50"S 162' 49"E

Biggest storm last night, worst I've had. Gusts over 80 knots, waves 10 metres plus but the self-steering brought us through, easy as pie as Dad used to say. Can't say I enjoyed it much but Kitty 4 took it all in her stride. Made for it she is. Sat down below, wind howling all around and learnt another verse of the Ancient Mariner – can do the first eleven verses now without looking:

And now the STORM-BLAST came, and he
Was Tyrannous and strong:
He struck with his o'er taking wings
And chased us south along

Little strange and little funny to be sitting down here saying that over and over. I had to shout it out loud so I could hear myself. But it passed the time, kept me happy, made me think about something else besides the next towering wave out there. It was "Tyrannous and strong" all right. that Coleridge bloke knew what he was talking about.

Better now, heavy seas still but not anything like it was last night.

Averaging 5-8 knots, so that means we've done about 700 miles so far. Yippee! Hee hee!!! Well done Kitty 4 well done me! Good to know just how well Kitty 4 handles herself, feel she could cope with anything. I've always had confidence in her, but last night she really proved she could take it. She's so brave, so clever and I'm so lucky to be doing this with her. Lucky, lucky, lucky.

Lots of birds about today and best of all my albatross is here too. Just making sure we're all right after the storm, that's what I think. He really is the king of

birds. He's got to have a wing span of 3 metres, massive, magnificent, MASSIFICENT, better word, my word. invented words are better words, mean more, say more. maybe that's the first time anyone has ever written that word. I like that, doing something for the first time, like going places no one's been before. At sea you do that all the time. I mean you sail up a wave and every one of them is unique, a new discovery, never seen before. You see clouds no one's seen before, and birds too. Course other sailors have seen albatross but not here not now not exactly the way I'm seeing mine. Difficult to put feelings into words but just want to say that's what's so great about being here cos it's like no one's ever been here before, that I've discovered it all for the first time. That's what it feels like anyway. Going on a bit. Sorry but I do love it, makes me feel so good, so lucky to be alive.

You should see my albatross. he doesn't fly, he doesn't need to. he just finds an airwave and floats – and you don't see his feet at all. They're tucked up neatly underneath him. There's hundreds of little birds all around him, recognised some storm petrels I think – Dad was better on birds than me, knew them all, knew so much. They dash about showing off, wing tips just not skimming the sea. And they're so fast, here, gone, swirling away. Wonderful.

Drying out after the storm, both of us, Kitty 4 and me. Soaked through, sodden. nowhere's dry, down in the cabin or up on deck. Not complaining, just dripping.

Reported sightings of icebergs little way south. got to be careful, really careful. icebergs worry me silly. So lots of cold sleepless nights ahead up there on watch. Wish the self-steering could do lookout as well. That's what I'll do one day, invent a self-steering system that does lookout as well. Easy. No problem. Make my fortune. Cool or what? Call it Stavros self-steering, all right Grandpa?

1641hrs Sun 16 Jan 2005

Sorry to hear about your cold Grandpa. You're always going on about me taking my vitamins and you go and get a *cold*. Stay in the warm. look after yourself. promise?

Fog now and rain, so got our lights on all the time. Icebergs don't see lights but

other ships might. All you can do is listen and hope. Not too worried I tell myself cos there's a lot of water out here and very few ships. Still you think about it. It niggles at you all the time. Did a bit of fishing, but no luck. 82 miles now to the Snares south of Stewart Island. Cooked myself a great feast cos it's so miserable up there. No fish, so baked beans (of course) sausages and eggs and...and...and...wait for it two mugs of hot chocolate. Feel a lot better. Fog lifted a little so I could listen to Dad's Beatles CD, played his favourite song – here comes the sun – thought it might make the sun come out. Great song, but still no sign of sun up there. Read some of Dad's story. I love the parts when he was at his happiest, when Marty and Dad were living with Aunty Megs. Love the bit about that wombat "Henry's horrible hat hole," always makes me laugh.

No albatross today. Probably can't find us in the fog. Thought I saw a dolphin though v close to the boat. Can't be sure. Sea goes very quiet in fog. Even the waves seem to whisper. Can't spend too much time down below. Too risky. Got to keep an eye out. Got to keep listening. v. tiring. want to sleep. mustn't. got to go. Miss y'all. Think of you. Love you. A. P.S. Any news about Kitty?

1015hrs 17 Jan 41' 57"S 167' 31"E

Fog's lifted but feeling a bit low. Not enough sleep. All last night on watch and got to thinking about Dad again, I mean about him being here with me. Maybe it was reading his story that upset me, remembering all the sad things that happened to him. I shouldn't be sad because I know that he had good times too, specially during the best parts of his life, and with you and me Mum. But I just couldn't stop thinking about how much he wanted to be here doing this with me, that he made so much of this boat with his own hands. Maybe it's because I've always been so used to being on Kitty Four with him.

Maybe I was just imagining things, but I don't think so. I just felt he was there with me all night. I even thought I heard him humming London Bridge. I thought maybe telling you about it might help me make some sense of it. But it hasn't. Mum, I'm really beginning to believe he's still here with me on Kitty 4, like we really are doing this trip together just as we'd always planned we would. But there's something more. I need to believe it. I think the only way I'm going to get to England is to believe he's with me. at the same time I know I've got to

stop feeling so sad about him, stop missing him so much. So I mustn't read his story again. I won't think of the past. Just focus on the here and now, it's the only way. Not going crazy, Mum, promise. We'll make it. Dad and me and Kitty 4. We'll make it. No worries. xxx A

1250hrs Tues 18 Jan 47' 31"S 170' 36"E

Hi Mum hi Grandpa. Feeling a whole lot better. Not sad any more. Slept really well. Didn't want to get up at all. Always the same. Tell you why.

1. You *don't* want to get up there and get wet again soon as you stick your nose out up top.

2. Socks. You can always smell where they are and you don't want to go near them ever again.

3. Boots always waiting for you where you left them. Step right in, they say, and it'll be lovely and wet and cold, hee hee.

But once you're in your boots, in your wet weather gear which is always still wet, it doesn't seem to matter any more. It's done. I make a nice hot chocolate to warm myself through. Then suddenly I'm up there in the cockpit out of the stench of socks and diesel and damp, and the ocean is heaving all around, and it's the best place in the whole world to be. And this morning, guess what, my albatross was back. He was there waiting for me. And...And...And...he's brought dolphins with him, dozens of them dancing all around me. Never been so happy in my life. What was it you called me once, Mum? Moody? Moi? OK you were right. Waves go up and down – why shouldn't I?? Even my blisters are all better. Love you lots. Allie

Just Staying Alive

1830hrs Sat 22 Jan

DUNEDIN NZ!

Hi Mum, hi Grandpa. Sorree. Sorree, sorry you haven't heard much from me for a while. Been a bit busy just staying alive. Can't say I wasn't warned. Grib weather forecasts were the worst ever, so I knew it was coming. Trouble was I couldn't get out of the way of it. Ellen MacArthur would have been able to go round it, dodge it, or race ahead of it. She can do fast, I can't. Kitty 4 doesn't do fast. But she does do brave. And it wasn't just grib that warned me, my albatross did too. Not kidding. For two whole days before the storm he never left us. He was telling us, I'm sure he was. He just hung there above us looking down on us. He'd never stayed so close before nor for so long.

The storm came suddenly, 50-60 in squalls and huge blue waves so high you didn't want to look but you had to. And blue so deep you could see right into it. Just before it happened I was doing a sail change and clipped on, thank goodness. You know how you can feel thunder is about before you hear it, like the sky is taking a deep breath before it lets rip. It was like that. There was a strange silence and a stillness all around. Like the sea was waiting for it to happen. Then I looked up and saw this wall of water 15 metres high at least and it was breaking right over me, and my albatross was skimming along the crest of it like he was telling me to hang on. So I hung on. Kitty 4 was knocked down, rolled through 140 degrees. The mast was under the water. I thought that was it, that she'd just go on rolling and turn turtle and that would be that. End of story, I thought. But it wasn't the end of the story. She lay there on her side for a few moments like she was having a bit of a rest and then she just flipped right back up again, a bit like Kitty in my bath back home when I was little. Everything was crashing about. I was chucked about like a wet rag doll. Not a single bit of me

that wasn't bruised. But no broken bones, and what's a bruise or two when you're still alive.

And that was just the beginning. Went on for nearly thirty hours. By the time it was over Kitty 4 had taken a real battering – she was in a much worse state than me which is why Mum, Grandpa, I'm here in Dunedin. Had to put in for repairs. The light fitting on the mast head needs draining for a start. Needed a new set of steering lines cos they had chafed badly. Can't do without my self-steering gizmo. It's my magic pathfinder through the waves, like my best friend. Got to look after him. And there's a mainsail that's torn, so that needed fixing too. In a way I'm glad I got knocked down, glad I had to come into Dunedin. Taught me a lesson. Been a chance to reorganise, tie everything down properly that flew around. thought I'd done that already but the storm *found* me out. Won't be my last knockdown on this trip. Be better set up next time.

And anyway I needed to do some shopping too, more plasters and antiseptic cream. baked beans and hot chocolate supplies were low. Everyone v. kind here in Dunedin, v. helpful. Lots of press people came to see me so lots of posing by Kitty 4. Maybe you saw some of it. Don't worry Grandpa I made sure I had my Stavros Boats cap on. you're going to be selling loads of boats in Dunedin after this, all over NZ. And guess what I've got free bed and breakfast for all the time I'm here – gift from the town. Isn't that the best?

2015hrs same day

Just spoken to you on the phone. So good to hear your voices. Made me cry though. And like I said Mum don't worry, I promise I wouldn't be going on with this if I thought the boat wasn't up to it. She's fine. She won't get there in a hurry, but she'll get there, bobbing all the way. Best bobbing boat in the world. I'm fine. Like I told you the bruises don't hurt like they did. pretty dramatic to look at though. got one all the colours of the rainbow right across my ribs. spectacular. Been having lots of sleep in my nice warm bed and I've had lots of long hot baths. I'm taking on all the warmth I can. Like a camel taking on water before a journey across the desert, I'm going to need it, I know that. Told you most of my news on the phone, but must tell you about my albatross.

Saw him last night, but only in my dreams. Dreamt of Dad too. Can't remember all that much of it, never can remember my dreams properly, but I think I remember Dad and the albatross seemed to be one and the same somehow. One or the other of them, and I don't know which, was singing London Bridge is Falling Down. Weird or what?

All being well should be on our way again soon. Weather pattern looking better, so that's good. Bout time. I want some nice easy sailing. Oh yes, and I can do up to verse 20 of the Ancient Mariner by heart now. v pleased with myself! Been learning a couple of verses a day in the bath since I've been here. Don't think I understood till now why Dad loved it so much. I just lie there soaking in my bath saying the lines over and over:

God save thee ancient Mariner!
From the fiends that plague thee thus!
Why look'st thou so? – with my crossbow
I shot the ALBATROSS

That's verse 20. Sad but so beautiful. I'll know it all word perfect by the time I get to England. Promise. A

P.S. Still no news of Kitty? Keep thinking and hoping no news will soon be good news.

1002hrs Sat 29 Jan 48' 12"S 173' 45"E

6 knots. heading south in brilliant sunshine, reef in the mainsail. The mend is holding well which is good news. It's all good news because my albatross is back. It's like he's been waiting for me out here all the time I was in Dunedin. Seen plenty of them about, but they just fly by on their way to somewhere else. He's the only one who hangs about. He's like my guardian angel. So I've got Dad's lucky key and I've got a guardian angel too. I'm well looked after Mum. I keep throwing him some scraps because I really want him to stay. The trouble is that as soon as I throw him food his friends come back and bully him off it. I've decided to do some more fishing from now on – never did it with Dad, he didn't like it. It's too easy just to open a tin. Besides I love fish, full of protein and

good for me. Keeps me strong. Don't like the idea of killing them, but do like eating them. So I'm going to keep a line out and baited whenever I can. I'll get lucky sooner or later.

1122hrs Sun 30 Jan 49' 02"S 175' 38"E

More fog. Can't see a thing, except a bit of sea around us and my albatross. flies in and out of the fog like a ghost, a welcome ghost though. Doing less than 2 knots, not even enough to charge the battery with the turbine and there's not enough sun for the solar panel to be much use either. need a minimum of 4 knots to keep going and that's with everything off except the laptop and the instruments. Can't afford to use diesel to motor out of it. Can't afford to use laptop any more either. So I'm turning you off. Byeee Mum. Bye Grandpa. A

0735hrs Wed 2 Feb 49' 52"S 173' 54"E

756 miles since Dunedin. Antipodes islands behind us. The Horn ahead of us. Long way to go still. Not worrying about it, Mum, just thinking about it, getting myself ready. Desalinator not working as well as it should. Water tastes a bit salty. But otherwise no worries. Clothes a bit smelly. Glad it's only me on Kitty 4. Must have a big wash soon, me and my clothes. Been putting it off.

Doing 7 knots sometimes, averaging 4.5. So I'm doing well. I thought my albatross had deserted me yesterday but he hasn't. He's up there now, helping us along putting wind in our sails with his great wide wings. He just comes and goes as he pleases. I feel adopted. Out of all the ships and boats in the Southern Ocean I feel he's chosen us. He likes me to sing to him too, always seems to come closer when I do. So I've done him my Whitney Houston, all the Beatles songs I know – Dad taught me most of them – and when I run out I whistle him "London Bridge is Falling Down". He seems to like that best. Still no fish, but I'll keep trying. There's got to be millions of fish down there, all of them deliberately ignoring my line. Why is that? What have they got against me? My smelly clothes? My singing? Thought I saw the back of a whale yesterday. Too big for a dolphin. Got all excited, but if he was one he didn't show himself again. Hope he doesn't have a nibble at my bait. Not really the kind of fish I'm after. Bit big. This is how sailing should be. We're dancing our way towards the

Horn.

I'm having big doubts about Kitty, like Dad had. Maybe he did make her up after all. I really want to believe he *didn't*. I've been trying to keep my hopes up, but it's difficult. To go all the way to England and find out there's no Kitty after all would be so sad, for Dad and for me. Think positive. Must believe the best. When I do that I get to thinking about what I'm going to say to Kitty when we meet. I can't wait to see the look on her face when I tell her who I am. And to have a relation on Dad's side too would be really something. Got so many on your side – no offence Grandpa. But we need some balance here. I'm only half Greek y'know. And I know you don't want to hear this but I've always liked cheddar cheese beta than feta! Now you know and you'll hate me forever. S'agapo, I love you, Grandpa. xxx A

“Hey Ho Little Fish Don’t Cry, Don’t Cry”

Dad used to love old black and white Spencer Tracey movies, any Spencer Tracey movie. If it was on we watched it. And one film in particular he loved. It was called *Captains Courageous*. Tracey plays this old fisherman on a whaling ship. He looks after a young boy who’s very spoilt and teaches him what’s what, right from wrong, fair from unfair. He sings him an old fishing song, and I loved this song. It was one of those songs that just stayed in my head. I used to sing it all the time, out on the boat with Dad, in the bath at home, wherever I was happy. And now here I was in the Southern Ocean on my way to the Horn on *Kitty Four* catching and killing my first fish (I’ve never liked that part of it), tears pouring down my cheeks and singing out Spencer Tracey’s fishing song:

“Hey ho little Fish, don’t cry, don’t cry. Hey ho little Fish don’t cry.”

That first one I couldn’t bring myself to eat, so I tossed it overboard for my albatross who had been watching me, probably hoping I’d do just that. He didn’t have to be asked twice. He was in the sea in a flash and swallowed it down. He didn’t actually lick his lips, but he looked pretty pleased as he sat there in the sea waiting for more. When I caught my next fish, I ate it myself, despite lots of hurt looks from my albatross. But I did chuck him the head, which he gobbled down more than happily.

Whenever I caught a fish after that my albatross seemed to be waiting, so I always threw him the head. I got less squeamish about boning and gutting them too, and I learned how to cook them better each time. The truth is that I began to enjoy the whole process, from the excitement of seeing the line go taut to the eating itself. So now unless it was really stormy I’d have a line out astern of me most of the time.

Routine was all important to living on *Kitty Four*. It kept my spirits up. Routine checks of everything up on deck—regular adjustments to the halyards and the steering lines. Regular meals and hot meals too, if the weather allowed. The weather rules everything at sea, so sailing the boat came first. But I tried to live as normal a life as possible, tried not to allow the sea to dictate how I spent every moment of my day. So I learned my *Ancient Mariner*. I wrote my emails. I

tidied the cabin. I played my CDs. I mended what had to be mended—there was always something. I fitted the spare membrane to my troublesome desalinator, superglued what had to be superglued. I washed clothes, not as often as I should, and hung them out to dry. I liked to keep myself clean too—to begin with I hadn't cared about it, but the longer I was at sea the more important it became. So I washed whenever I could—I always felt so much better for having made the effort. And on fine nights, however hard it was blowing, I'd always do the same thing. I'd go up into the cockpit if possible with my cup of hot chocolate and I'd watch the stars. I'd do a lot of my singing up there too—everything from *London Bridge* to *Hey ho Little Fish* to *Yellow Submarine*.

It was on just such a night that I first saw it. I was sitting there gazing up at the zillions of stars, wondering if Grandpa back home was also sitting there with his telescope doing the very same thing at the very same moment, remembering how he loved to tell me what each of them was called, how he'd help me to hold his telescope myself. I was remembering all this when I saw a shooting star pass overhead, much lower and brighter and slower than shooting stars usually were. I watched in amazement as this light arced across the sky, knowing already it couldn't be a shooting star. It had to be a satellite of some kind. I went down below at once and emailed home to see if Grandpa knew what it could be. Until now I'd never had an email direct from Grandpa—they had always come through Mum. But the next day he emailed me back himself. "I checked. Got to be the ISS. International Space Station."

I saw it up there again a few nights later even brighter this time, even closer, and I got to thinking: those astronauts up there are closer to me at this moment than any other human being on earth. I'm sailing the seas down here. They're sailing through space up there. I wondered then if with all their high-tech gizmos they could see me. I felt like waving. So I stood there in the cockpit and waved and shouted till my arms ached, till my throat was sore. I was just so excited, so so happy to see them up there. That was when the idea first came to me to try to make contact with them, proper contact. Wouldn't it be wonderful, I thought, to meet up by email or even by phone, so we could actually talk to one another as they passed over? I sent an email to Grandpa. It was just a crazy idea to start with, just a lovely dream. Grandpa emailed back. "No worries. I'll fix it." I thought he was joking. Meanwhile I had a boat to sail.

I was still about 1000 miles from the Horn. I was down to 57°S. There was ice about in the south, lots of it. It was cold you couldn't forget, the kind that got into your bones, deep into your kidneys. Feet and hands went numb, so when I

cut myself, and I often did, I couldn't feel it. My ears and my nose ached with it. I used to warm my socks and gloves on the kettle, but the trouble was that my toes and fingers were always colder than my socks and gloves were warm. So the bliss never lasted for long. I'd never known cold like it. I'd do all I could to stay down below in the warm fug I'd created for myself. But sooner or later I'd always have to go back up there again, and the snugger I'd make myself, the colder the blast that hit me when I got up into the cockpit.

It was too rough for fishing now, and far too cold anyway, but my albatross was usually still there. He'd go off for a day or two, but I knew he'd always come back, and he did. I had such faith in him, that he'd stay with me and see me safely round the Horn. And I knew why too, knew it for sure, though I'd stopped writing about it in my emails because I thought it might upset Mum, and because I know it sounded at best a bit crazy. But I knew I wasn't hallucinating, that I wasn't mad. I now knew for sure that it was Dad's spirit soaring up above *Kitty Four*. He was an albatross, of course he was, but he was Dad too.

It was a different world I was sailing in down there, the wildest place I'd ever been. I could see and feel the swell building all the time. South of 60° between Cape Horn and the Antarctic peninsula there's no land to break up the ocean swells, so the waves travel uninterrupted for hundreds of miles and they're just massive—I kept using the word “awesome” in my emails, and that was about right. I knew *Kitty Four* could handle them, but I also knew I couldn't leave it all to her. I had to be out there avoiding the breaking waves, especially the hollow ones, the ones that look as if they're going to swallow you up. Sleep was almost impossible in seas like this, in weather like this. The wind screamed all the time. It was a constant pounding. I was on edge, listening to the boat, trying to work out if she was just complaining, or whether she was telling me something was really wrong. Like me, she was finding this very hard. We were both being tested as never before.

Below in the cabin was my whole world for hours on end. It was cramped, but down there I felt warm and safe. My bunk was a tight fit—it had to be because falling out was very painful and dangerous too. But it wasn't comfortable. I'd lie there surrounded by all the stuff that was keeping me alive—the medical box, generator, stove, charts, almanacs, sextant, pc, spares for everything, harnesses, life vests and sails—and kept telling myself that *Kitty Four* and all this equipment would get me through. And when I went up on deck there was my albatross telling me exactly the same thing. It was scary, it was heartthumpingly scary at times, but I never for one moment thought we wouldn't make it. And

whenever I felt like human company, I'd sing to myself or listen to a CD, or email home. In my emails I tried to hide just how scary it really was sometimes. There was no point in upsetting Mum and Grandpa unnecessarily. Tell them some of it, I thought, but there's no need to tell them everything.

I was finding the keyboard slow to use now because my fingers were becoming very swollen. I couldn't feel them, and they looked like a bunch of white bananas. I was doing all I could to look after them, smothering them with lanolin, but still the cracks came, still my cuticles split around my nails—what nails I had left. My hands were not a pretty sight, but I didn't mind. I just wanted them to work, to be able to do what I told them to do—cook, tie knots, pull ropes, email.

I've never forgotten the morning I saw Cape Horn up there on the laptop screen at last. Sometime before I left home I'd seen the movie *Master and Commander*, seen the frigate battling its way through ferocious seas off the Horn. It was terrifying enough sitting in a comfy seat next to Dad in the cinema in Hobart. Soon now I'd be going round the Horn myself, doing it for real, but Dad was still beside me. He was there in the boat he'd made for us, in the albatross that guarded us, and in my heart too. I took out *The Ancient Mariner* which by now had become like a Bible to me. It gave me new determination, a new courage every time I read it out loud.

*The ice was here,
the ice was there, The ice was all around:
It cracked and growled, and roared and howled,
Like noises in a swound!*

*At length did come an Albatross,
Thorough the fog it came;
As if it had been a Christian soul,
We hailed it in God's name.*

Every time I spoke those words now, I felt that somehow I was living inside the poem, that it had been written just for Dad and me, just for this moment as we approached the Horn on the 9th March.

Around the Horn, and with Dolphins Too!

2005hrs 9 Mar 55' 47"S 74' 06"W

Dear Mum, dear Grandpa, dear everyone. Feels like this really is the bottom of the earth down here. The sky up there is black with rain squalls and the wind's screaming like I've never heard it before. this is not a funny place to be. don't think I'll hang about. Kitty 4 doesn't seem to care though. she just bounces along, two storm jibs up twin poled, 6 knots, riding each wave like it was just a ripple. If this was a talking boat – bout the only thing she can't do! -she'd be shouting at the waves – bring it on baby, gimme more, see if I care, you think you can beat me? no way hosay! And you should see the waves she'd be shouting at. Bout 15 metres from bottom to top, so when you're down in a trough and look up they look as if they're about 50 metres. And they're long, that's what makes them different. They've travelled all around the world just to meet us here – aren't they nice? aren't they kind? – building all the time. Up to 200 metres long, I promise you. Awesome, magnificent, majestic, amazing, exhilarating, overwhelming (running out of adjectives so I'll stop). They're wave monsters that's what they are, and when one decides to break it's like an avalanche that goes on and on, and Kitty 4 does snowboarding then surfing through the middle of it, raging white water all around, the air snowing foam. So beautiful, so wonderful. Should be scary but it's not. Too excited to be frightened, too much to think about, too much to do. And maybe I'm too Cretan to be scared, Grandpa!

And besides, I keep thinking that every wave brings us nearer to the Horn. The Horn is dead ahead by my reckoning, only 230 miles to go – can you believe that? We should be going around it on Friday if all goes well. It's strange, I'm not worried at all. Maybe that's because my albatross is still up there, still with us. He hovers over the bow, like he's leading us, like he's showing us the way. Wind doesn't seem to bother him at all. I mean why isn't he just blown away?

How does he do it? He looks like he's playing with the wind, like he's having fun with it, teasing it. He's not just the king of the birds, he's the master of the wind too. Against the black of the clouds he looks whiter than he's ever been, white as an angel, a guardian angel. I keep saying it I know, but that's what he looks like to me. Had the last of my sausages and baked beans for my supper. Got to go easy on the hot chocolate. run out if I'm not careful. One little problem, caught my little finger in a rope, think it's broken so I've strapped it up. can't feel it most of the time so that's good. I can hear what you're saying Mum. Yes, I'll be careful. Got 9 more fingers. So no worries. Loving this. Love you. Allie.

1825hrs 11 Mar 56' 00"S 67' 15"W

Done it done it done it! Woweee! We're going around the Horn and with dolphins too, and my albatross of course. I'm going to tell you how it was. I knew the Horn was there, but I couldn't see her. Every time we climbed a wave in the last four hours I was looking for her, but she was never there. So from time to time, I'd go down to check the screen. The Horn was always on the screen but never where she should be when I went back up into the cockpit again. It was so so frustrating. Kitty 4 didn't seem to want to stay on the top of a wave long enough for me to catch my first glimpse of land. Then I did. I whooped and yelled and sang and danced, well sort of, not a lot of room for dancing in the cockpit. And my albatross swooped down low over the boat almost touching me as he flew by. Then he soared up high and went off towards the Horn, to have a look I guess. He'll be back.

I've been dreaming about this moment, Mum, Grandpa, ever since I first read about it, or did Dad talk about it first, can't remember. And now I'm doing it. I'm here. Kitty 4 is poled out, full main. No squalls about. West wind 15-20 knots. Got to change the flags soon, Chilean to Argentinian. Aussie and Greek one still up there Grandpa, looking a bit battered and torn, like me. But they're still flapping away up there, like they're really happy, really proud we've made it. Me too, me too. I'm flapping with happiness.

The rocks of the Horn do not look at all inviting – wouldn't want to be any closer, black and jagged when you can see them through the sea mist. grey and

grim and dismal. been so lucky with the weather. Not hard to imagine what this place can be like in a Force 10 when it's really angry. Underneath us, the seabed must be littered with all those ships who didn't make it, those who didn't get so lucky. I thought a lot about that when I was sitting there half an hour or so ago, drinking a celebratory hot chocolate – who needs champagne when you've got hot chocolate?

I think I just had a moment I'll never forget. I so wished you were with me, and Dad most of all. I was just sitting there looking at the Horn and sipping the last of my hot chocolate when a shaft of evening sunlight broke through the mist and lit the Horn. It set her on fire and all the sea around her too. Never in my life saw anything so beautiful. Don't mind telling you, I had a little weep. It was the joy of just being here at this moment, of being alive, grateful to y'all, to the Horn for letting us sail by, to my albatross for sticking with us, to dear old Dad who's made it all happen and who's been with me all through this and is here with me now.

I love this place so much I almost don't want to leave it, don't want the moment to pass. But moments always pass, don't they? It's passed even as I was writing this. Gone. I'd better be gone too.

I'll be going up north towards the Lion Islands, just south of the Falklands, a little over 300 miles away. Stop in the Falklands for a few days, have lots of long hot baths – been dreaming of those – and lots of big breakfasts and a warm dry bed for a few nights. Been a bit lax on my washing lately – blame it on the weather – whole plastic bags of it waiting. one whiff would kill, promise. So I'll get all my washing done. Be so good not to be rocking and rolling every hour of every day, not to be banging my head all the time. Be good to see people again. Be good to be dry. And yes Mum I'll do what you say and get my little finger checked out.

Went up into the cockpit a few minutes ago and my albatross is back from the Horn, done his explorations. He's sitting in the sea, and by the look in his eye he'd like another fish. Soon as we turn north I'll put the line out again, and hope to catch a fish or two. That should keep him happy. It should be flatter that side, so better for fishing. Then up to the Falklands for a bit of a rest. I need it. Kitty 4 needs it. she needs a good clean – covered in barnacles and slime. Slimy she

may be but she's done Hobart to the Horn in 60 days. Not another boat like her in the whole world. Just gave her a smacking great kiss to tell her I loved her. Put Louis Armstrong on the CD. "What a Wonderful World". It is too.

2115 same day

Just got all your congrats, thank you, thank you, and and and your grate grate news Mum about Kitty, you said something would turn up and it has, but only because you never gave up. Love you so much. It's incredible, brilliant, wonderful, grate! So I've got a whole new family I never knew about! And Kitty is real, really real, not a figment of Dad's imagination. Tell that bloke who emailed you that he's the best vicar in the entire world. When I get to England I'm going to go to St James in Bermondsey to see the baptism records for myself, see the place where they were baptised. I keep looking at the family tree you sent me, Mum, I can't believe it! New grandparents! Ellen and Sidney Hobhouse. And the marriage certificate too – Ellen Barker (spinster) Sidney Hobhouse (cobbler). Now I know for sure that Dad was a baby once! He was a happening, wasn't he?!! And so was Kitty. Like you say Mum we mustn't get our hopes up too much. We still have to find Kitty, and when we do it may be too late, she could be dead, but at least we know she is or was a true person, a happening, just like Dad, real just like *Dad*. Will you thank the vicar bloke from me too for helping us like this and tell him I want to meet him when I come to London. So Dad was right about Bermondsey too. Is that far from London Bridge? He had a better memory than he thought he had, dear old Dad, didn't he? Best day of my life, I've rounded the Horn and I've found a new family. This calls for another hot chocolate, maybe two. Know I shouldn't, know I'll run out. But who cares? A

xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx – zillions of them.

Dr Marc Topolski

Thinking back I should have stayed longer in the Falkland Islands. I didn't, mostly because the hopeful news I'd just had about Kitty made me impatient to be on my way again. The Falklands is a bleak and barren place, that's for sure, and the people are tough—they have to be. But they were kindness itself. My arrival caused quite a stir. Lots of people were following my trip now on the website, so they knew I was coming. I had lots of helping hands, and a place to stay in Stanley which was a home from home for me. Mrs Betts mothered me like a happy hen who has just found a lost chick. I had all the baths I'd been longing for, all the breakfasts too. I did a couple of interviews, but then she made sure I was left alone to recover. And *Kitty Four* was well looked after too. Within a week she was tidy and trim again, not a trace of slime, and the barnacles gone. She was ready to go. The solar panel was fixed—I'd been having a lot of trouble with that. She was filled up with diesel, and I had all the provisions on board I needed to get me to England, all the packets of hot chocolate I could ever want! I was just waiting for the right wind, and the right tide. But an onshore wind was blowing a gale, and it went on blowing for days on end, apparently quite common in the Falklands. So I couldn't leave. If I'd tried I would have been crunched against the jetty.

Mrs Betts offered to show me the island a bit while I was waiting. So off we went in her little Morris Minor van, bumping our way across the island. She took me all over, told me about the daughter she had who'd left the island and was living in New Zealand and had a baby now, but how she'd never seen her grandchild. I told her a bit about Dad. She knew something about him already from the newspapers, and she made me recite *The Ancient Mariner* just to prove to her that I could—she'd heard about that too, from the website I guessed. I knew almost forty verses by then, so she got the lot. We saw penguins and we saw sheep, all huddling against the cold of the wind. She took me to the British war cemetery, and told me about the war they'd had there when the Argentinians invaded the island twenty years before. It made me so sad to see all those graves. Standing there, the wind whipping about us, I thought of Dad and Vietnam, of

young men dying a long way from home. “They were fine boys,” Mrs Betts said suddenly. “But then so were the Argentinians. And they all had mothers.”

That evening, my last on the Falklands, I read her the last part of *The Ancient Mariner*, because she said she wanted to know what happened. She had tears in her eyes when I’d finished. “So in a way it’s a kind of happy ending,” she said. Then she looked at me hard. “I’ll be thinking a lot about you, Allie. I want your journey to have a happy ending too. And I want you to find Kitty. You deserve a happy ending.”

She offered me her phone then to ring home. She said I should, that a daughter needs to speak to her mother, that emails weren’t enough. So for ten minutes I talked to Mum and Grandpa, who kept snatching the phone from one another. We laughed a lot and cried a lot too, which meant we didn’t say as much as we should have. Grandpa kept going on about a “big surprise” that he couldn’t tell me about yet, and then he would almost tell me, and Mum would snatch the phone off him again, and I could hear her telling him off, that he’d promised to say nothing, not until they could be sure of it. I was certain I knew what it was.

“You’ve found Kitty, haven’t you?”

“No, it’s not that,” Mum said. “But we’re still looking.”

“Then what’s the surprise?” I asked.

“Nothing, nothing,” she told me. But I knew something was going on.

I had a big send-off the next day, and as we said goodbye Mrs Betts gave me a digital camera. “A going away present, because yours doesn’t work, dear,” she said. “This one does, I promise.”

And so it did too. The first photo I took was of Mrs Betts waving goodbye from the jetty. I was in such high spirits. I was on *Kitty Four* again. I’d had all my home comforts with Mrs Betts—but I’d missed *Kitty Four*, missed the smell of her, missed the movement of the sea underneath me. This was my real home. This was where I wanted to be. I knew I had a lot of tomorrows ahead of me before I reached England, about sixty-five days away. Then I’d go to London, go to St James in Bermondsey, and find Kitty if I could. As I left the Falklands, I had never felt better about the outcome of the whole expedition.

But now I was back at sea I had one growing doubt, and it was a doubt that nagged me every hour of every day that followed. My albatross wasn’t there. I had dolphins, dozens of them all around me. But the last I’d seen of my albatross was the day we’d sailed into the Falklands. I’d just presumed that he’d be out there, that he’d be just waiting for us to put to sea again.

I was wrong. The days went by. I began to feel so alone without him. My emails became shorter and shorter at this time, partly because I didn't want Mum to know how miserable I was, and partly because I wanted to be up there in the cockpit as much as possible so that I would be there when he came. But he didn't come and he didn't come. And by now I'd worked out why of course. Albatross rarely come this far north. They are southern ocean birds, I knew that. But I went on hoping he'd come back anyway. I tried to keep myself as busy as I could, tried so hard not to dwell on my loneliness. But I couldn't sleep at nights now for thinking about my albatross. I was beginning to believe, in the darkness of those long nights, that I really was on my own now, that Dad had gone too, gone with the albatross. I had been right about that then: they were one and the same. Having been so hopeful, so sure of everything, I was suddenly overwhelmed with misery.

There was a lot of kelp about, ugly-looking stuff, the bubbly kind, the thistly kind, and some of it in very thick long strands of up to twenty metres. And it was all around the boat. I felt hemmed in by it, threatened. It looked like writhing sea snakes coming to get me, reaching out to grab me. It would rise up on either side as we ploughed through it. I longed not to have to look at it, to go below, but I couldn't. It wasn't just because I was looking for my albatross that I needed to be up on deck. I had other reasons.

There were suddenly a lot of fishing boats around down there, I could see them easier at night all along the horizon—and fishing boats were every bit as dangerous as icebergs. Get caught in the miles of nets they trail behind them and I knew that would be the end of everything. I hadn't ever felt this low before. To make it worse my pc was playing up, and for the first time on the trip I could neither send nor receive. The wind died. The sea stilled. There was grey sea, grey sky all around, and I was marooned in a sea of serpents. I sang to keep my spirits up. I could think of nothing else to do. I sang till my throat ached, every song I'd ever known. But one song I sang again and again, *London Bridge is Falling Down*. It was a cry of pain, I think, but also a cry for help.

How fast things can change at sea. I came up into the cockpit one morning to find the kelp all gone, the fishing boats nowhere to be seen. And the wind was up and gusting. It was like the whole earth had suddenly woken up around me. Where there had been grey, there was blue, endless blue, beautiful blue. I breathed in deep and closed my eyes. When I opened them, he was there floating down towards me on the wind. An albatross, my albatross. He didn't care about north or south. He just wanted to come with me. When I'd finished all my crying

and whooping I told him exactly what I thought of him leaving me in the lurch like that for so long. Albatross can't smile of course, that's what most people think. But they can and they do. They smile all the time. And when I threw him a fish I'd caught for him that evening he was smiling all right. I know he was.

I was down below in the cabin a couple of hours later, baking the first bread I'd made since leaving the Falklands, and still revelling in the memory of my reunion with the albatross. His return had not only cheered me, it had clearly had some magical effect on my pc which was now working again, perfectly. Then the phone rang, the Satphone. It had rung only a few times on the whole trip, and then it had always been a coastguard calling, and always much nearer land. I picked it up, worried there might be something wrong at home, or maybe it was just Mum panicking because she hadn't been able to reach me on email.

"Hi there," it was a man's voice. "This is Dr Marc Topolski. You don't know me"—he had an American accent—"but your Grandpa's been speaking with NASA. They phoned right up and suggested I might like to talk with you."

I didn't understand what he was on about, not at first. "I'm not ill," I said. "I don't need a doctor. I'm fine."

"Sure you are, Allie. Thing is, Allie, that I'm up here right above you in the International Space Station, and you're right down below us, and your Grandpa said you can see us sometimes and how you'd like to get in touch. And I thought that seemed like a fine idea, because we're both kind of explorers, aren't we? And so I thought like you did, that maybe we could like get together on email or by phone, from time to time, whatever you like, a kind of ongoing conversation. Might be fun. Might be interesting. What do you say?"

I couldn't say a thing.

I had that first amazing phone call from space, so my emails tell me, on the 29th March. Grandpa's surprise was a surprise all right, the surprise of my life.

“One Small Step for Man”

0715hrs 29 March 45° 44'S 50° 13'W

G'day best Grandpa in the world. No question. You are the coolest Grandpa that ever lived, the greatest, the greekest. Just had the surprise you told me about, the one you made happen. I can't imagine anything more surprising happening to anyone ever anywhere. Thank you, thank you Grandpa. He's going to send me a pic of himself and the crew up there, and we're going to have what he calls "an ongoing conversation". I think it's the most amazing thing that's ever happened to me. He sounds like George Clooney, but don't you dare tell him I said that. I think Americans must all gargle in stuff that makes their voices so husky. And... and...and, what you don't know is that my albatross is back with me too! So I got an albatross and an astronaut all in one day. Not bad eh? Don't know how long my albatross can stay. He's already way too far north. I'm going to try to feed him lots of fish to keep him with me, which is silly I know because he can catch all the fish he wants for himself, albatross are quite good at that stuff, but he seems to like hanging around for mine too. Can't believe how many of you are looking out for me now out here, all of you at home, my albatross and now Dr Topolski. No one ever had a supporters' club like that before. Grib forecast is horrible, so I've got lots to do and in a hurry. I'll get back to you later soon as I can. Love y'all, specially you greek Grandpa. Axx

1112 hrs 31 March 42° 29'S 48° 30'W

Hi Mum, g'day Grandpa, not had a lot of time to do anything except sail the boat. So have had no time to write emails to you or to Dr Topolski. Just been through a storm like no other. Two knockdowns, but I'm still alive and kicking, still here to tell the tale so no worries. Most of the time there was nothing to do but hunker down below and hope, getting quite good at that. did a lot of bad singing and quite a lot of clutching Dad's lucky key too. 70 knot gusts rising to

80. vicious wind. Massive flat top waves, wind flattened, the worst kind, the really dangerous kind. Breaking waves of grey water, a spray storm all around me. I just tried to keep the wind and the swell on the quarter as much as I could. Not always possible which is when things went very badly wrong, nearly catastrophic. We came beam on twice into a rolling breaker, and she just went over. Both knockdowns happened in the space of half an hour. Not a half hour I ever want to repeat, I promise you! Nothing I could do, but I knew she'd pop right up again.

Kitty 4 is a real star, a real life saver, all the blokes in the boatyard should be so so proud of her. Wish you could have seen how she was lifting herself up out of the water, giving two fingers to the storm and the wind and the waves, like she was saying teeheehee you can't sink me. She was magnificent, awesome. And do you know the best thing? When I looked up through the cabin window after each knockdown was over, there was my albatross up there like he was on angel wings hovering over me, protecting me. We make a pretty good team, him and me. Managed to take a piccie of him with Mrs Betts' brilliant camera just when the storm was dying down. Sending it to you and Dr Topolski. When the worst was over, I managed to cook myself my first hot meal in two days, bacon and sausages and baked beans, a whole plateful – it was so yummy so good – and washed it all down with a mug of hot chocolate – of course. Still frozen in my fingers and feet, but I can feel a warm glow inside me now which wasn't there before. Love you loads. Allie.

2112hrs 3 April 38' 54"S 46' 03"W

Hi everyone. Tootling (Dad loved that word) along 5 knots. gentle swell. Phew. Got some time now to tell you bout Dr Topolski. We've emailed each other twice now, and we've spoken again too and we've seen one another at night at the same time. Here's how it happened. Dr Topolski phoned from the ISS and said they were passing over my position and could I see them. I went up on deck and there it was. He wanted me to shine a spotlight and put up a flare to see if they could see me. So I did and they saw me. Can you believe that, they really saw me. I could see him, he could see me. I could hear him – he could hear me – we laughed like a couple of kids, not cos it was funny but cos it was just amazing, amazing.

In his emails he has been telling me about the space walk, EVA he calls it, he's got to do in a couple of days. Never done one before and he was really looking forward to it. He's got to carry out some kind of scientific experiment. He told me a little of what it was about, but I didn't understand it really – didn't tell him that!

He's up there with a Russian physicist, Dr Uri Malakov and another American, Mike Petersen, he's the commander. The three of them have been up there nearly four weeks. Very cramped living quarters, that's what he told me. "I guess that's what you'd kind of expect in a Space Station. But at least we can fly about a bit whenever we feel like it. Weightlessness is the best, when you've gotten used to it."

He's told me a lot about himself, he's got a wife back home in Vermont and a couple of kids, ten and twelve, both girls. He's a scientist, a physicist, as well as an astronaut, pretty brainy sort of bloke, I'd say. I've been telling him a whole lot about us on my emails to him, about Dad and our trip to England to find Kitty. He's really interested, said he'd do anything he could to help, and I think he means it too. Decided he sounds more like Johnny Depp than George Clooney, but I've got his pic. He doesn't look like either. Looks more like Tom Hanks, got a kind face, a good face. He said he loved my emails and pics, specially the one of my albatross. He reckons we've got so much *incommon*, each of us circumnavigating the earth in our own way, each of us in a tin can not exactly built for comfort. I told him he's doing his circumnavigation just a little faster than me, and he's got wide wide space around him and I've got wide wide sea.

He says my albatross is the most beautiful bird he's ever seen. That's one thing he misses up in space, he says, you look out of the window and you never see any birds. He wants me to send him a lot more pics of birds, so I will. He's emailed me some brilliant shots of the earth – we do live on such an awesome amazing planet. I've got lots of pics too of him floating about in his space station with Uri and Mike. So cool. Have to do that one day. He's got more room up there than I have down here but he's got to share it. Nice pics of him and his wife too, she's called Marianne, and his two kids in the snow outside their home. He looks like his voice, kind, thoughtful, intelligent. Hope his EVA goes well.

Fishing's been good today. I caught six and kept two for myself. Threw the rest to my albatross, my lip-smacking albatross. Every day he stays with me I know is a bonus. I shall so miss him when he goes, but I keep telling myself that this far north he can't stay around much longer and I'd better get myself ready for the day he's not there any more. No more news about Kitty then? She's got to be somewhere, right? See you. A xxx

1216hrs 5 April (GPS on the blink for some reason, so not sure of precise position)

Hello from the Atlantic. It's me again. Dr Topolski's sent me an email all about his EVA. He sounded so excited. Said Uri took lots of pics of him doing his slow-motion space dance. He'll send them on down when he can. Here's part of his email:

"I was six hours out there in space. I was busy, but I had plenty of time to look around me. That was when I guess I really understood for the first time the immensity of space, and the timelessness of it, the stillness of it. And our planet seemed to be suddenly so precious, so utterly beautiful. I thought of my family down in green Vermont, and of you out there on that blue, blue sea."

I emailed him back asking him why he did it, why he'd become an astronaut in the first place. He said it was all Neil Armstrong's fault, the first man on the moon. When he was little he'd sat there in front of his TV watching him step down on the moon's surface. Said it was listening to him speak from the moon that did it for him. "One small step for man, one giant leap for mankind." He'd wanted to go into space ever since, and he was loving it, except he could do with a little more privacy he said.

We sent emails back and forth comparing notes really. I'm down here at sea level, (well ground level), only the sea keeps moving so it's not level, and he's up 350km above ground. They're going at 5 miles a second up there in space. I'm doing 5 nautical miles an hour down here. I've got my laptop, my five GPSs (two of them are still on the blink) and some basic software. He's got all the most amazing gizmos in the world, most of it operated from NASA. He's floating around up there, I'm being bashed about down here. Don't tell him this,

but I've decided I'm definitely better off down here. Except for his space walk, he's been shut in up in his space station for weeks. And at least I can breathe good clean sea air, and to be honest, I couldn't live in such a confined space for so long – I'd go bananas. I mean you couldn't even talk to yourself without being overheard could you? And he's got another month cooped up up there. Think I'll stick to sailing. But we're both adventurers, he said, both explorers, and just about the luckiest people alive because we're out there doing what we love best. "Isn't that great?" he said. He's right. It is great. I am lucky. He asked after Kitty, after my albatross, about the weather, about how I'm doing down here. He says it's hard to imagine how life must be for me, but he wants to know all about it says he wants to see diagrams of my yacht, inside and out. So I'll send them soon as I can. When he passed over I let off a flare again, but he couldn't see it this time. He's become a real friend to me, like no other. A friend I've never met.

Can now wiggle my little finger again Mum. So I've got all ten in use again now. Hands still sore, but otherwise I'm fit as a fiddle another Dad-ism. Why is a fiddle fit? Always wondered that.

There's some flying fish around, the first I've seen. My albatross doesn't seem at all interested in them. He's sitting there now waiting for me to put my line over the side again. I'll do it right now. Got to keep him happy, haven't I?

1202hrs 11 April 28' 54"S 44' 53"W

Hi Mum, Grandpa. Haven't heard from the ISS for a few days. Hope all's well with Dr Topolski up there. More flying fish about. Getting closer to the Tropics all the time. Feel like I'm being boiled alive down here. A month or so ago I couldn't feel my feet and fingers, now I'm sitting here pouring sweat. I want to open the hatch but I can't because the spray comes in and soaks everything. So I wear very little, only way. Visibility is v. poor. Brazilian coast to port, but I'm keeping well away from it, much as I'd love to see it. Lots of fishing boats out there. Can't sleep in this heat either – above 30. can't wait to get further north into the cold again. When I'm hot I want to be cold. When I'm cold I want to be hot. What's the matter with me? Still all of it will be worth it if we can find out where Kitty is. As I get closer – and I am getting closer now – I think about it more and more. I hope for it more and more. I keep looking at her key, Dad's

key, keep wondering what it's for. GPS up and running again.

1520 14 April 25' 85"S 41' 31"W

The worst thing that could happen has happened, the saddest thing since Dad died. And it was me that did it. I should have known. I should have thought. My albatross is dead and I killed him. I didn't mean to, but that doesn't make me any less guilty, does it? I came up into the cockpit at dawn and looked around for my albatross as I always do. And he wasn't there. My heart sank because I always knew that one morning, I'd find him gone. I saw there were a few flying fish lying in the scuppers. I think that's what reminded me to check the fishing line. I could see at once the line was taut, so I thought I'd caught a fish. It wasn't a fish I'd caught, it was my albatross. He was being dragged along astern of the boat, hooked and drowned. I pulled him in and sat with him sodden and limp on my lap, his great wings stilled for ever. Mum, he came with me all this way and I've killed him, I've killed my albatross. but I've done something a lot worse than that. It's not just the albatross whose wings I've stilled. I feel deep in my heart that I've stilled Dad's spirit too. A.

Alone on a Wide Wide Sea

It was only in the days and weeks following the killing of my albatross that I understood what Dad really meant in his story when he said that his “centre would not hold”. I know only from the emails I sent home each day after this that I sailed north for a month. I think I must have sailed on almost as if I was in a trance. It was like I was on automatic pilot. I sailed efficiently. To get as far north as I did, I must have done. I did everything that had to be done, but I did it with no excitement, no joy, felt no fear and no pain, not even any grief. I was numb. I just sailed the boat. I told them I wanted the *Kitty Four* website down for good. I recorded only my daily longitude and latitude position. I didn’t want to have any communications with anyone any more. I ignored all the pleading emails that came in and I didn’t answer the Satphone either. There was nothing more I wanted to say to anyone. I no longer cared about Kitty or the key. I no longer cared about anything. I even ignored all the messages of sympathy and encouragement that came in from Dr Topolski up in the ISS.

After ten days or so I did send one email that wasn’t just longitude and latitude. Looking back now I’m not sure quite why I did it, unless it was an attempt to explain my silence to everyone at home, and up there in space. Maybe I couldn’t find any words of my own, but I think it was more than that. By now I knew all of *The Ancient Mariner* so well. The words echoed in my head without my even wanting them to be there. Sometimes I’d just find myself sitting in the cockpit and the words and the lines would speak themselves out loud. And the more I recited it the more I lost myself in it, and came to believe that I was in some way the *Ancient Mariner*, that my journey, like his, was cursed because of what I’d done. Here’s some of what I emailed on 28th April:

*And I had done a hellish thing,
And it would work ‘em woe:
For all averred, I had killed the bird
That made the breeze to blow.
Ah wretch! said they, the bird to slay,
that made the breeze to blow!*

...Water, water, every where
And all the boards did shrink;
Water water, everywhere,
Nor any drop to drink.

I know now of course how worried everyone must have been at home when they read this. I know now Grandpa wanted to call the whole thing off, to mobilise a major air—sea rescue at once to pick me up. But Mum had stood firm. And the only reason she had stood firm was that she could see my reports were still coming in each day. She could see on the chart that I was making good progress on my journey north. I know too that Dr Topolski was in close touch with them during my long silence, and encouraged Mum in her decision to give me time to work things out on my own.

I still don't understand why I came out of the darkness of my despair when I did. We can't ever really know these things, I suppose. For Dad it was the moment when a nurse was kind to him in hospital in Hobart when he was at his lowest ebb, and helped him through. But even so he wouldn't have come out of his black hole unless he had really wanted to. If there was such a moment of revelation for me, the moment I found I wanted to start living again, I know exactly when it was, the exact day, the exact place it happened.

I was in the cockpit of *Kitty Four* when I saw him. A turtle. A leatherback turtle. He surfaced right beside the boat, and just swam along with me. He looked at me quizzically like he was asking me what I was doing there. I told him I was going to England to find Kitty. I told him everything, and he stayed and listened. I wasn't alone. I heard myself singing aloud in the wind. I hadn't sung for weeks. I went through my whole repertoire from *London Bridge* to *Here Comes the Sun* to *What a Wonderful World* to *I Will Always Love You*, and I belted out the last one with tears pouring down my cheeks. When I'd finished, the turtle gave me one last look and left. I didn't mind. I hadn't cried ever since my albatross died. Something was gathering inside me, finding itself again, during these songs. It was my centre.

Maybe keeping myself as busy as I had been with the sailing was the best therapy I could have had to lift me out of the sadness I had been living through. Maybe also it was because I could see that the end of my journey was in sight now. I was only 2500 miles and twenty-three days out from Falmouth. But one thing I'm quite sure of. That day sitting there talking to the turtle, singing and crying in the cockpit of *Kitty Four*, I felt I was not alone any more. Mum was

there with me, Grandpa, Dr Topolski, everyone at home, and Dad too. They were all there with me, willing me on. There was still grief in those tears I cried, but it was a sudden surge of joy that had released them.

I went down into the cabin then to email home at once, and I saw there was an email waiting for me from Dr Topolski. He was back on earth now. They'd brought him down a week before, in Kazakhstan, a bit of a bumpy landing, he said, and he was back home with his family now on leave for a while, and he'd been doing some investigations. He hadn't forgotten about me. On the contrary, he'd been in touch with Mum and Grandpa a lot ever since he got down. He'd come up with something "pretty interesting" about Kitty, but, tantalisingly, he wouldn't say what it was. He did tell me that his whole family knew about me, that they were all thinking of me every day, that they had a map of the Atlantic ocean pinned up on the kitchen wall and were charting my progress, moving the bright yellow pin that was me a little further north and little closer to England every morning. He knew that I'd been going through a hard time, he said, but he wanted me to know, "There's a whole bunch of people here in Vermont and all over the world just rooting for you." Every day after that I felt as if I was recharging myself somehow.

I was sailing into trade winds which didn't make for comfortable sailing, but I didn't mind. It wasn't only the winds that were blowing us along now anyway—and *Kitty Four* was flying—it was the emails that came in all the time from everyone at home, and from Dr Topolski too, everyone contributing to my new sense of wellbeing, of euphoria almost. I never saw my turtle again, but I've never forgotten him. I can still see his face gazing up at me, a kind face, old and wise. Sometimes I think that turtle saved my life.

With every day that brought me closer to England, I kept asking them about Kitty, but all I got back was that there was no real news. They had one or two hopeful "irons in the fire," whatever that meant. It didn't sound very hopeful. To be honest, I thought they were just stringing me along, trying to keep my spirits up, knowing perfectly well that the last thing I needed to hear was bad news about Kitty—that they couldn't find any trace of her, or worse, that they had discovered she was dead. Often I'd sit there down in the cabin, Dad's lucky key cupped in my hand, wondering what had been so important about this key. What did it mean? Why had Kitty given it to Dad that day all those years before when they were parted? What was so special about it? He had always called it his lucky key. I'd hold it and squeeze it tight, and every time I'd wish on it, just as Dad used to wish on it. I wished I'd find Kitty alive and well in England and that

I'd find out at last what the key was for.

I'd be lying if I said that my new euphoria didn't from time to time give way to times of sadness. There was still an ache inside me, left by the loss of my albatross, that would not go away. I thought of him so often. Every bird I saw reminded me of him, of the majesty of his flight, of his grace and his beauty. And sitting in my cockpit in a cold grey North Atlantic, I looked out and saw an albatross of a different kind, an albatross of the north, a gannet, diving down to fish, splicing the sea. He was magnificent, but not as magnificent as my albatross.

“London Bridge is Falling Down”

It was a good thing I was so buoyed up now and so determined, because in those last couple of thousand miles just about everything that could go wrong did go wrong. First of all, the North Atlantic turned out to be every bit as vicious and hostile as the Southern Ocean. *Kitty Four* took a terrible battering. And it wasn't just one storm, it was a whole succession of them. We'd sail out of one and straight into another. We got knocked down three times in three days, and the last time was very nearly the end of the story.

Not many single-handed sailors go over the side and live to tell the tale. I did. It was my own fault it happened. As Dad used to say, I was a silly chump. I was in the cockpit in a storm and I wasn't harnessed in properly. Yes, I was tired. I hadn't slept for a couple of days. But that's no excuse. I was just a chump and very nearly a dead chump. I was caught completely unawares when the wave came. As the boat lurched violently I was catapulted overboard. Somehow I managed to grab a safety wire and just clung on to it. But *Kitty Four* was on her side and I was dunked in the ocean. I remember hearing the roar of the sea in my ears, and I knew that was always the last sound a drowning sailor ever hears. Then *Kitty Four* righted herself. She flipped up and I found myself flung back into the cockpit still in one piece, just. But I was nursing a broken arm—I knew it was broken at once because it was completely useless—and I was cursing myself loudly. You're a lucky chump, a very lucky chump, I thought, when I'd stopped my cursing. My survival was down to Dad's key, I had no doubt about it, it was entirely down to Dad's lucky key.

I didn't feel any pain in my arm at first. It was too cold after my dunking in the freezing waters of the North Atlantic. But when I'd dried off and warmed up down below in the cabin, then it began to hurt like hell. I knew I'd need help, so I picked up the Satphone and rang home. Grandpa answered. I told him all I needed was a doctor to tell me what to do, and I'd manage. No arguments, Grandpa said, he was going to have me airlifted off. “You can't sail a boat with a broken arm,” he said. I don't think I'd ever shouted at Grandpa before (or since) but I did now. I told him that we were only fifty miles or so off the coast of

England, off the Scilly Isles, which was less than a hundred miles from Falmouth; that *Kitty Four* and I were going to finish this thing together, and that I'd never speak to him again if he did it. Mum and Grandpa had a little talk about it—and five minutes later I had Dr Topolski on the phone. It turned out he was a doctor of medicine as well as a doctor of physics and engineering and just about everything else. He “examined” me by asking me dozens of questions. Then he talked me through how to make a splint, how to bandage it to my arm—not easy one-handed, but I did it.

Of course it wasn't just me that was beaten up and hurting. It was *Kitty Four* too. Not the boat herself, she was fine. She'd just rocked and rolled, and bobbed up again, like she always did. She'd been built to be indestructible and unsinkable, and she was. It was all the bits and pieces that were beginning to fail as we neared the English Channel. Neither the generator nor the desalinator was reliable any more. The self-steering was in pieces. I'd tried mending it, but with one arm I couldn't do it, so it meant I had to be up there in the cockpit almost all the time. In fact I'd have had to be there anyway, because there was a lot of shipping about now, more than I'd had on the whole trip, and for a little yacht, for any yacht, that's dangerous. I could see them, but in seas like this I'd be lucky if they saw me before they ran me down.

I didn't tell anyone how bad things were really getting. I knew how Grandpa would react, how upset Mum would be. Instead I wrote chirpy emails, sounded deliberately upbeat and jokey on the Satphone. I think maybe that having to sound chirpy was very good for me. The truth was that I was now really worried that I might not be able to make it. My arm pained me every time I moved. Every sail change I made was sheer agony. I came to a decision.

I emailed home saying I'd put into Scilly, and not go on to Falmouth. After all Scilly was England. It was as good a port as any to end the first half of my voyage. Mum phoned me back. She said she and Grandpa had thought about it and they were flying over to England as soon as possible, and they would let me know when they'd landed. I said I didn't want any fuss, and that they weren't to tell anyone what had happened. I was already dreading a welcoming flotilla coming out to meet me. Grandpa said that even with no website up there, there was huge interest in the papers everywhere.

“Just don't tell them I'm coming into Scilly,” I told him. “Promise me, Grandpa.” He promised, but I wasn't convinced. I knew the temptation of having “Stavros Boats” on the television news in big letters, and his little Allie, the apple of his Greek eye, standing on deck and waving, would be too much to

resist. To be honest I expected the worst, but I'd come to terms with it. Maybe it would be quite fun anyway, and even if I didn't like it, I could stand back and smile through gritted teeth—after all, I'd done that before in Hobart.

So there we were the next day tootling along with a bit of a limp, but happy as Larry (I do sound like Dad sometimes I know, but I love the phrases he used. I inherited them. They're mine now.) All the storms were behind us. The forecast was set fair all the way to Scilly. Sunshiny day, clear skies, and not a sign of a welcoming flotilla—amazing, Grandpa had kept quiet. I had just sighted land, not much land, but land all the same, and it was the land I wanted to see—the Scilly Islands. I toasted the occasion with a mug of hot chocolate. The Scillies looked like little grey dumplings lying there low in the sea, about ten miles off. We were going nicely, about five knots. It was early morning. I was so nearly there. I'd seen a whale, or perhaps a basking shark, in the distance the day before and was looking out for him again. What I saw instead was a school of porpoises playing off my starboard bow, giving me quite a show. This was the kind of unexpected, spontaneous welcome I really wanted.

But I was enjoying it so much that I wasn't keeping a good look-out all around. That was when a sickening shudder shook the boat. She reared up and rolled, and then crashed down into the sea, where she stopped dead, as if the life had suddenly gone out of her. The tiller was light in my hand, so I knew at once that we'd lost the rudder. Then I saw pieces of it floating away astern of us. I thought at first we must have hit the whale, but we hadn't. The dark shape I saw lurking just beneath the surface rose then and showed itself. It was a dirty orange with flat sides and sharp edges. A container, a lousy stinking container. I cursed that container ship wherever she was, then I cursed all container ships wherever they were. Cursing over, I checked below. At least we weren't holed. We hadn't lost buoyancy. We were rudderless and helpless, but still afloat. I hoped we could drift in on the tide at first, but a quick look at my chart confirmed what I already knew, that there were rocks all around Scilly, thousands and thousands of them.

I had no choice. I used the Satphone and called out the lifeboat. Within half an hour they were alongside and threw me a line. So with a busted rudder and a busted arm I arrived on the Scilly Isles, came into St Mary's Harbour, towed in ignominiously by the lifeboat. Because of that, of course, there was a lot of interest, and very soon they found out who I was. No flotilla, thank goodness, but any hope I might have had of slipping in unnoticed was gone. They whisked me up to the hospital to have my arm looked at and told me I had to stay there

the night, but I said I didn't want to. I'd had a better offer. Matt Pender, the lifeboat coxswain, said he could put me up at home with his family. So after my arm was set and plastered he came to fetch me, and we went straight to a pub where they feted me as if I was Ellen McArthur. "Proper little hero" they called me. Everyone made a fuss of me and I loved it. I tried phoning home, but no one answered. They'd probably left already. I didn't mind. I was so happy to have got to England, so happy the boat was in one piece, just about.

I did some TV and radio interviews the next day, got them over with. Then I went down to the jetty to tidy *Kitty Four* before she went off for repairs. There were crowds all around her, dozens of people photographing her, and she was just bobbing up and down loving it all, taking her bows.

I waited about till everyone had gone before I went on board. Then we had a quiet time together, just *Kitty Four* and me. I emailed Mum, emailed Dr Topolski, told everyone that repairs would take a couple of weeks at least, that I would catch the ferry the following day from Scilly to Penzance, and then the night train to London Paddington getting in at seven o'clock on the Wednesday morning. If they were there by then, they could meet me, and we could go off to Bermondsey and start looking for Kitty right away. I told them something else too, something I knew neither of them would want to hear. I'd decided that once *Kitty Four* was repaired, once my arm was better, I would be sailing *Kitty Four* home. I'd do the whole thing just as I'd planned, the whole circumnavigation, and nothing anyone could say would stop me. "I mean it, Grandpa," I wrote. Before I left *Kitty Four* I got an email back.

"Whatever you say, Allie. See you at Paddington seven a.m. Wednesday morning. There's a big clock there on platform one. Meet you there. Love Mum and Grandpa." They'd given in just like that. I couldn't believe it.

Matt and the whole lifeboat crew came to see me off on the ferry to Penzance. I'd never been hugged so much in all my life. I liked it, I liked it a lot. I had to wait around a while until I could get on the night train for London. So I was quite tired by the time I got into my seat. I was getting out my laptop. I wanted to send another email to Mum. When I looked up, there was this bloke sitting opposite smiling at me. We got talking as you do. His name was Michael McLuskie.

The rest you know already, just about all of it, anyway. What you don't know is what happened when I'd finished telling him my story, when we got into Paddington Station the next morning. The train came into platform one, and we got out together, Michael carrying my rucksack as well as his. (He wasn't just

good-looking, he was thoughtful too, still is—mostly.) I could see Mum and Grandpa under the clock waiting, looking around for me.

“That them?” Michael asked.

“That’s them,” I said.

“So it’s true, all if it, everything you told me. None of it made up?”

“None of it.”

“Then,” he said, looking straight at me, and meaning every word he said, “then you are the most incredible person I’ve ever met, and I’d like to see you again, if that’s alright.”

I don’t know to this day what made me say it. “Look,” I said. “I’m hungry. Why don’t you come and have breakfast with us, with Mum and Grandpa and me?” He didn’t say no, which was why, after Mum and Grandpa had each hugged me again and again, and after we’d all cried and laughed Cretan style under the clock at Paddington, we all piled into a taxi, and went off to their hotel for breakfast.

They seemed, I thought, a little nervous. Grandpa kept looking away whenever I caught his eye. I thought he was cross with me because I’d insisted on doing the whole circumnavigation. He’d always been so much against it. Mum couldn’t seem to find her voice at all, just sat there patting my hand fondly. I exchanged glances with Michael who shrugged with his eyes, as only he can do.

It was one of those huge modern hotels, made entirely of glass, and was right on the river. We walked into the breakfast room which was full of laid up tables, all of them empty except for a large round table near the window. Sitting around it were what looked like a family with a couple of kids and all of them were looking at me very intently, which was odd, I thought. And Mum and Grandpa weren’t leading us to one of the empty tables, as I expected they would. Instead they were leading us directly towards the round one by the window. “And this,” Mum said to them, not trying to disguise the pride in her voice, “this is Allie, my daughter Allie. Arthur’s daughter, Allie.”

Still they stared, and then, one by one the stares turned to smiles. “I think you had better introduce yourselves,” Mum went on.

“Shall I start?” I knew who he was before he opened his mouth. I recognised him from his photograph. “I’m Marc, Marc Topolski. From up there, remember? And this is my family, Marianne, Molly and Martha, known in the neighbourhood back home in Vermont as the M&Ms.” I couldn’t speak, partly because I was so choked up. But there was another reason too.

Even as he was talking, I was looking at the old lady sitting next to him. Her

smile was Dad's smile, from the eyes, from the heart.

"And I'm Kitty," she said. "Your dad's sister."

She could hardly speak either, but smiled through her tears. "You got Arthur's key, dear?" she said. "The one I gave him?" I took it off from around my neck and gave it to her. There was a small wooden box on the table in front of her, carved and painted with red and white flowers. She turned the key in the lock. It fitted. She smiled up at me again. She turned it, then she went on turning it, again and again, which seemed strange. Then she opened the lid, and I understood everything. The box played music. It was a musical box. And the tune it played was *London Bridge is Falling Down*. We listened until it slowed right down, and then finished mid-tune.

"And that," said the old lady pointing out at the river, and I noticed now that she too had a kind of American accent, "that is London Bridge, and it isn't falling down. I was born just down the road in Bermondsey. It's where your dad was born too. My mother and father were killed in a bombing raid in the war. This musical box was all that was left of our home. We were in the same orphanage together, Arthur and me. We loved listening to this, over and over. We'd listen to it for hours. Then they took your dad away. I gave him the key, and I told him I wouldn't play our tune again until he brought the key back. Then I would wind it up for him and we would listen to it together—I was the eldest you see, I always did the winding up. I never heard it again until today. It's yours now, Allie. And if you have children one day, then maybe you'll pass it on to them, and you'll tell them the story of how in the end the key found the musical box and the musical box found the key."

I was still unable to make sense of it all. "But how did they find you?" I asked. "I don't understand."

"That was your astronaut friend here," said my Aunty Kitty. "He went on television in the US when he came down from his space travels and told the whole world about you, this amazing eighteen-year-old girl from Australia called Allie Hobhouse, sailing single-handedly around the world on a little boat called *Kitty Four*, sailing all the way to England to find her father's long lost sister to fulfil a promise she'd made to her father on his death bed. The father, he said, was called Arthur Hobhouse, his sister, Kitty Hobhouse. Anyone who can help, phone in. So I did. You see, when they sent your dad off to Australia all those years ago, a lifetime ago, they sent me to Canada. I got lucky. I landed up with a lovely family in Niagara-On-the-Lake. I live there still right by the shore in the same house I was brought up in. You must come and see it sometime."

I noticed then a copy of Dad's story in front of her, right by her bowl of cornflakes.

"Have you read it yet?" I asked.

"I only just got it," she said. "Trouble is, my eyes aren't very good at reading any more. Maybe you could read it to me after breakfast."

So that's what I did, an hour or so later. I read it to them, sitting there overlooking London Bridge and the Thames.

*

"The story of Arthur Hobhouse'," I began. "Arthur Hobhouse is a happening. I should begin at the beginning, I know that. But the trouble is, I don't know the beginning. I wish I did..."

Now you've read the book

Now you've read the book, I want you to know something. The two stories we wrote were never intended to be published. We each of us wrote our story simply as a record of what had happened, first to my father, Arthur Hobhouse, and then to me. I thought long and hard about whether to publish. This is after all a family story. How much you tell the world about your family is a delicate matter for everyone concerned. But the family is happy about it, as I am, because our stories, Dad's and mine, had already been acted out in public, to some extent at least. And certainly, had this not happened, our story could not possibly have ended as well as it did. In other words our private family story was never totally private in the first place. It was in the newspapers, on the radio, on television. But the whole of our story has never been fully told. And that's why we all thought that it should be. Dad would have wanted it, I know, because he believed that we live on only as long as our story is told. I believe that too.

Afterword

It is estimated that between 1947 and 1967 somewhere between 7000 and 11,000 British children were sent to Australia alone.

It was at one time thought convenient to pack up your troublesome people, whether they were convicts or simply unwanted or orphaned children, and ship them off to what were then the colonies – mostly Canada, New Zealand and Australia.

The first white Australians were convicts settled there forcibly in 1788. It was a form of banishment.

The banishment of children, which went on for centuries and reached its modern peak in the years after the Second World War, was in many ways just as cruel, but it was sometimes well meant. Children who had nothing could be provided with a new land, a new family, some prospects of living a happy life, away from the seething slums of Britain's cities. And many of them did get lucky, landed up in the right place with genuinely kind people who looked after them and cared for them. However just as many did not. One former child migrant said, "Most of us have been left with broken hearts and broken lives."* Cruelty, abuse and exploitation were tragically all too common.

Another wrote this:

"For the vast majority of former child migrants the most often asked question is 'Who am I?' Most of us were born in the British Isles of British parents. Our culture, heritage and traditions are British. Our nationality, our rights and our privileges were our inheritance. Unable to make a reasoned decision we were transported 20,000 kilometres to the other side of the world. Our crime for the most part was that we were the children of broken relationships. Our average age was eight years and nine months. In this one act, we were stripped of our parents and our brothers and sisters. We were stripped of our grandparents and extended families. We were stripped of nationality, culture and

birthright. Many of us were stripped of our family name and even our birth date. We were stripped of our personhood, human rights and our dignity. We were referred to as migrant boy number 'so and so' or migrant girl number 'so and so'. And so we arrived, strangers in a lost land, lost and with no way back.”*

It was because of harrowing accounts like this that I wrote my story.

Michael Morpurgo

If you or your family are interested in locating a former child migrant, or you are a former migrant seeking your family, you can obtain a document describing the available resources (including a contact database and financial support) from the UK Department of Health.

As a clickable file:

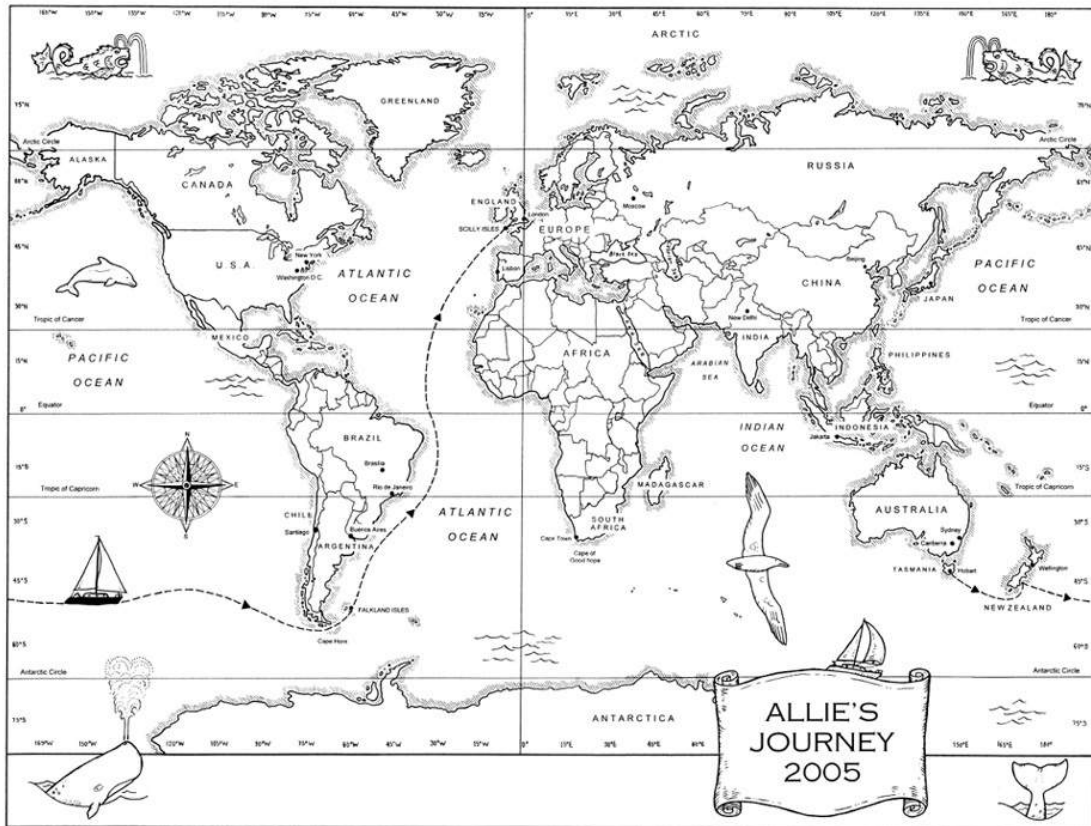
www.dh.gov.uk/assetRoot/04/09/00/30/04090030.pdf As a text-only file:

www.dh.gov.uk/assetRoot/04/09/00/31/04090031.pdf

* Source: The House of Commons Health Select Committee's report
On the Welfare of Former British Child Migrants, 1998

Acknowledgements

My thanks to Alex Whitworth and Peter Crozier, mariners extraordinaire and quite ancient too, whose emails while circumnavigating the world in their yacht Berrimilla in 2004 informed and inspired this story. Thanks also to Graham Barrett and Isabella Whitworth for all their wonderful help and encouragement. And of course I mustn't forget Samuel Taylor Coleridge...



michael morpurgo

Illustrated by
Michael Foreman

Farm Boy

The sequel to **War Horse**



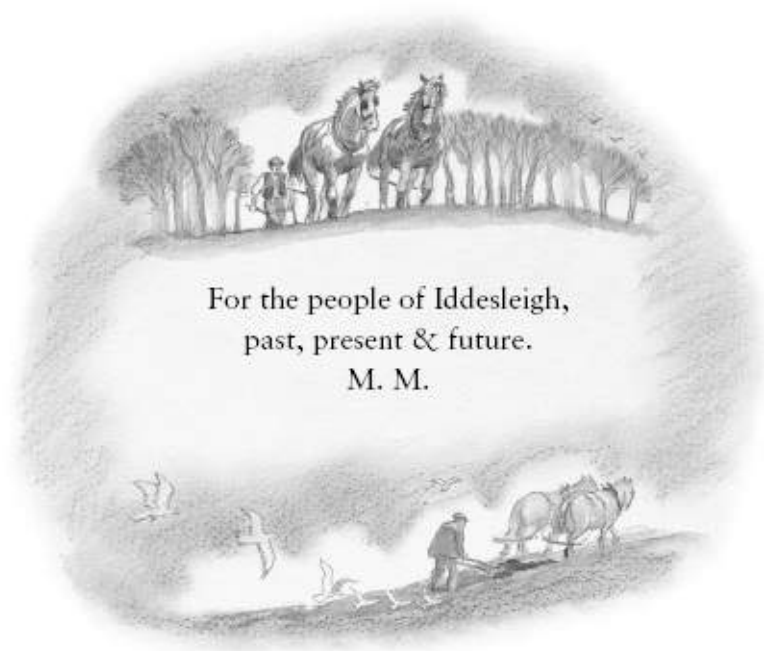
michael morpurgo
Farm Boy



Illustrated by
MICHAEL FOREMAN



HarperCollins *Children's Books*



For the people of Iddesleigh,
past, present & future.
M. M.

Contents

Dedication

Chapter 1

Chapter 2 - Grandpa's Story

Chapter 3



BAMFORDS'

WORLD FAMOUS

MACHINES

FOR

BARN & FARM





Catalogues on application to

BAMFORDS, LTD. Agricultural Engineers  By Appointment to His Majesty King George V. **UTTOXETER.**



There's an old green Fordson tractor in the back of Grandpa's barn, always covered in cornsacks. When I was very little, I used to go in there, pull off the cornsacks, climb up and drive it all over the farm. I'd be gone all morning sometimes, but they always knew where to find me. I'd be ploughing or tilling or mowing, anything I wanted. It didn't matter to me that the engine didn't work, that one of the iron wheels was missing, that I couldn't even move the steering wheel.

I In there on my tractor I was a farmer like my Grandpa and I could go all over

Up there on my tractor, I was a farmer, like my Grandpa, and I could go all over the farm, wherever I wanted. When I'd finished, I always had to put the cornsacks back and cover it up. Grandpa said I had to, so that it didn't get dusty. That old tractor, he said, was very important, very special. I knew that already of course, but it wasn't until many years later that I discovered just how important, just how special it was.

I come from a family of farmers going back generations and generations, but I wouldn't have known much about it if Grandpa hadn't told me. My own mother and father never seemed that interested in family roots, or maybe they just preferred not to talk about them. My mother grew up on the farm. She was the youngest of four sisters, and none of them had stayed on the farm any longer than they'd had to. School took her away to college.





College took her off to London, to teaching first, then to meeting my father, a townie through and through, and one who made no secret of his dislike for the countryside and everything to do with it.

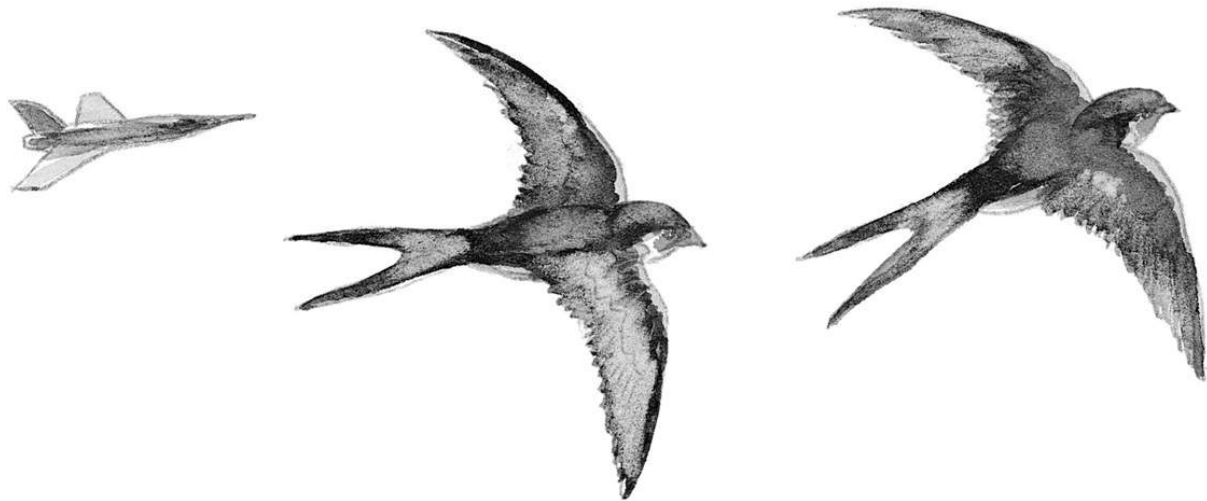
‘All right in pictures, I suppose,’ he’d say, ‘just as long as you don’t have to smell it or walk in it.’ And he’d say that in front of Grandpa, too.

I have always felt they were a little ashamed of Grandpa and his old-fashioned ways, and I never really understood why – until recently, that is. When I found out, it wasn’t Grandpa I was ashamed of.



I always loved going down to Devon, to Burrow, his old thatched house at the bottom of a rutty lane. He was born there. He'd never lived anywhere else, nor had any desire to do so. He's the only person I've ever met who seems utterly contented with his own place on earth, with the life he's lived. That's not to say that he never grumbles. He does – about the weather, about his television reception – he loves detective series, whodunnits, police dramas. He'll curse the foxes when they tip over his dustbins, and shout abuse at the jets when they come screaming low over the chimney pots. But he never ever complains about his lot in life. Best of all, he never pretends to be someone he isn't, and what's

more he doesn't want me to be anyone I'm not. I like that in him, I always have. That's maybe why I've spent so many of my school holidays with him down on the farm in Devon.



Sometimes he'll tell me how things were when he was young. He doesn't say things were better then, or worse. He just talks about how they were. I think it's because he loves to remember.

Grandpa loves his swallows. We'd often watch them together as they skimmed low over the fields and he'd shake his head in wonder. He once told me why it was that he loved swallows so much. That was when he first told me about his father, my great-grandfather, or 'the Corporal', as everyone in the village called him. And that's when I first heard about Joey, too.

'Swallows,' Grandpa began, settling back in his chair. I knew I was in for a story. 'Now they must've been the very first bird I ever set eyes on. And that's funny, that is. My father, when he was a lad, used to go round the farms seeking out all the sparrows' nests and crows' nests and rooks' nests. He'd pinch the eggs, see; and he'd get money for that, for every egg in his hat. It wasn't a lot, but every penny helped. Sparrows and crows and rooks, they was a terrible nuisance for the farmers. They'd soon get at the corn if you let them. Anyway, Father got himself into some trouble, and it was all on account of the swallows. He had a friend – I can't remember names, never could – but a school friend anyhow; and this lad, he went and robbed a swallow's nest, silly monkey, instead of a sparrow's nest like he should have. Well, Father saw what he'd done, and he saw red. He gave him an awful licking, so the lad went home with a bleeding nose. Father went and put the swallow's eggs back. Next thing Father knows, the boy's mother comes round and boxes his ears for him, and he gets

sent to bed without any tea. Not hardly fair when you think about it, is it? Anyway, putting the eggs back didn't do no good. Mother bird never came back.



'Father was always getting into scrapes when he was a lad. But the worst scrape he ever got hisself into was the war, First World War. And just like with the swallow's eggs, he didn't want to fight anyone. It just happened. This time it was all on account of the horse. See, he didn't go off to the war because he wanted to fight for King and Country like lots of others did. It wasn't like that. He went because his horse went, because Joey went.



'Father was just a farm boy when the war broke out; fourteen, that's all. Like me, he didn't get a lot of schooling. He never reckoned much to schooling and that. He said you could learn most of what was worth knowing from keeping your eyes and ears peeled. Best way of learning, he always said, was doing. He was right enough there, I reckon. Anyway, that's by the by. He had this young colt, broke him to halter, broke him to ride, broke him to plough. Joey, he called him. He had four white socks on him, a white cross on his forehead, and he was bay. Turned out to be his best friend in all the world. They had an old mare, too. Zoey, she was called; and the two of them ploughed like they'd been born to it, which they was. I suppose. Weren't a team of working horses in the parish to

which they was, I suppose. weren't a team of working horses in the parish to touch them. Joey was strong as an ox, and gentle as a lamb. Zoey had the brains, kept the furrow straight as an arrow.





But it was Joey Father loved best. If ever he got sick, Father would bed down with him in his stable and never leave his side. He loved that horse like a brother, more maybe.

‘Anyway, one day, a few months after the war started, Father goes off to market to sell some fat sheep. In them days of course, you had to drive them down the road to market. No lorries, nothing like that. So he was gone most of the day. Meanwhile the army’s come to the village looking for good sturdy horses, and they’re paying good money too. They needed all the horses they could get for the cavalry, for pulling the guns maybe, or the ammunition wagons, ambulances too. Most things was horse-drawn in them days. Father comes back from market, and sees Joey being taken away. It’s too late to stop it. It was his own father that did it. He’d gone and sold Joey to the army for forty pounds. More like forty pieces of silver, I’d say.



‘Father always said he was drunk and he didn’t mean no harm by it, but I don’t reckon that’s any sort of excuse, do you?



And do you know, I never heard Father say a harsh word about it after. He was like that. Kindest man that ever lived, my father. Big and gentle, just like Joey. But he had spirit all right.





Couple of weeks later he's upped and gone, gone to join up, gone to find Joey. He had to tell the recruiting sergeant he was sixteen, but he wasn't of course. He was tall enough though, and his voice was broke. So off he goes to France. Gone for a soldier at fourteen.

'Now there's millions of men over there, millions of horses, too. Needle in a haystack you might think, and you'd be right. It took him three years of looking, but he never gave up. Just staying alive was the difficult bit. Hell on earth, he called it. Always waiting, waiting to go up to the front line, waiting in the trenches with the whizzbangs and shells bursting all around you, waiting for the whistle to send you out over the top and across No-Man's-Land, waiting for the bullet that had your name on it.

'He was wounded a couple of times in the leg, lucky wounds, he said.



You were always a lot safer in hospital than in the trenches. But his ears started ringing with all the thunder of the shells, and he had that trouble all his life afterwards. He saw things out there in France, terrible things that don't bear thinking about, his friends blown up, horses drowned dead in the mud before his very eyes. And all the while he never forgot Joey, never forgot what he'd come for.



‘Then, at first light one morning, he’s on “stand-to” in the trenches waiting for the Germans to attack, and he looks through the mist and there’s this horse wandering around, lost in No-Man’s-Land. Course, Father never thinks twice. He loves horses, all horses, so he’s got to fetch him in, hasn’t he? Quick as a twick he’s up over the top and running.

‘Trouble is, there’s a German chap doing just the very same thing. So the two of them met, right out there in the middle, both armies looking on. They tossed for it, honest they did. They tossed for the horse, and Father won. And...you guessed it, when they got that horse back and cleaned him down, he had the four white socks, he had the white cross on his forehead, and he was bay. He was Joey. Takes some believing, I know. But it’s true enough, I’m telling you.



‘And that weren’t the end of it, not by a long chalk. When the war was over, the army decided to sell off all the old warhorses for meat. That’s right, they were going to kill them. Kill the lot of them. They were going to kill Joey. After all he’d been through, all he’d done, they were going to have him slaughtered for meat. So Father did the only thing he could. He bought Joey back off the army with his own money, all the pay he’d saved up, and brought him home safe and sound at the end of the war. ‘They had banners and bunting and flags up all over the village. Hatherleigh Silver Band too, just for him. I seen the photograph. Everyone was there, whole parish, shouting and cheering: “Welcome home Corporal! Welcome home Joey!” Always called him Corporal. Everyone did.



‘But once the celebrations were over, Father went straight back to work just like before the war – ploughing, reaping, milking, shepherding – and of course he had his Joey with him. Everyone said he was so fond of that horse he’d never marry. Not room enough in his heart, they said. They were wrong, weren’t they? Else I wouldn’t hardly be here, would I?’

‘He’d had his eye on Maisie Coppledick ever since school. More important, she’d had her eye on him; so it was all right. Married on May Day in 1919 in Iddesleigh church. It rained cats and dogs, so Father said; and they moved down here to Burrow next day.’



‘One year later, give or take a week or two, and I come along. There was a swallow’s nest under the offices – the eaves – right above the window of my bedroom where Mother would sit with me that first summer of my life. Always loved swallows I have, since the day I was born. Always will, too.’



Grandpa loves to tell his stories, and when he does, I love to listen. But it isn’t just the stories I like – to be honest, I’ve heard most of them several times before – it’s the way he tells them. He talks with his eyebrows, with his hands. And he’s good at listening, and that makes me want to talk. He listens with his

eyebrows, too. We just get on. We always have. I don't know why really. After all, we were born into two completely different worlds. He's an old country mouse through and through, and I'm a young town mouse – bus at the end of the road, supermarket round the corner, leisure centre, that sort of thing. I don't much like *The Bill* or *Columbo* or Agatha Christie films; but when I'm staying with Grandpa I watch them because I like watching him watching them, his eyebrows twitchy with excitement, his hands gripping the arms of the chair.

But then there are times when he can be a right old goat. On days like that I just keep out of his way, and he keeps out of mine. He'd get to be suddenly sad and silent and never looking at me, and I'd know then. When he didn't polish his boots last thing at night – that was a bad sign. He wouldn't ever have the television on when he was like that. He'd just sit and stare into the fire. He could barely drag himself out of his chair to shut up the chickens at night. He was angry or sad about something, but I didn't know what, and I knew better than to ask.

And then last summer, when I'd just finished school for the last time, exams all over and done with, and I was down on the farm for a while, he told me what it was.

Until now, Grandpa had hardly ever said a word about my grandmother. He had a photo of her on the dresser in the kitchen, and I knew she'd died before I was born, that he'd been alone for some years. I knew nothing more about her, and I didn't like to ask. He was in one of his deep grumps, sitting by the stove in his holey socks, when I came in for my tea. I'd been cleaning down the cowyard. I didn't expect him to speak.





‘I was thinking about her on the dresser,’ he said. It took me a moment or two to work out who he meant. ‘Be twenty years today. She went and left me twenty years ago today. Everything to me, she was, and she goes and dies on me. And you know what? We was in the middle of something, something we hadn’t finished. And she took ill and died. She shouldn’t have. She shouldn’t have.’

‘What were you in the middle of?’ I asked.

He looked at me and tried to smile. ‘You’re a good lad. Come to think of it, you’re something like her, y’know. You let a fellow be when he wants it. There’s others that have guessed it, your Mum and Dad for sure; but her on the dresser, she’s the only one I ever told. I told her before I married her, and she said it didn’t matter, that there was more important things about people than that. Nothing to be ashamed of, she said. Bless her heart. She was shamed right enough, she must’ve been. Course, once I had her with me, I didn’t need to do anything about it, did I? I mean, she did it all for me. And I had all the excuses I needed, didn’t I? There was the farm. I was out working morning, noon and night; and there was the children growing up and mouths to feed and rent to pay. Oh yes, I had all the excuses; but truth of it was that I just didn’t bother.



‘Then with the children growed and flown the nest, more or less, she said we both had the time to do it. She said we should sit down together in the evenings when I come in off the farm, and do it. And so we did. No more’n a month later, I wake up one morning and she’s still in bed beside me. She was always up before me, always. And she were cold, so cold. I can mind I knowed at once she was dead. Weak heart, the doctor told me. She had the rheumatic fever when she was little. I didn’t know it. She never told me.’

He waved me into the chair opposite him, and looked me long and hard in the eye before he began again. ‘I still talk to her, y’know. Last night I asked her. I said: “Shall I tell him? Would he do it? What d’you think?” And she was listening, I know that. She never says anything, but it’s like I can hear her listening, hear her thinking sometimes. Like last night. She was thinking: “It’s about time you finished what we started. No use just sitting there for the rest of your life feeling all sorry for yourself. Ask him, you old misery. Worst he can say is no.” ’

He reached out suddenly and took me by the arm. ‘Well, will you?’ I still

hadn't a clue what he was asking me. 'Will you stay here for a few months? You could give us a hand out on the farm. I'd pay you mind, proper man's wages. And maybe...' He was looking down at his hands, picking at his knuckles. He didn't seem to want to go on. 'And maybe, you could teach me, like she did. I'd learn quick.'

'Teach you what, Grandpa?' I said.

'I can't read,' he mumbled. 'And I can't write neither.' There were tears in his eyes when he looked at me. 'You got to teach me, lad. You got to.'

'But you went to school,' I said. 'You told me.'

'Till I was thirteen, and I wasn't bad either. Few wiggings for this and that, but we all had wiggings, 'cepting Myrtle. Oh, she could read and write something terrific. Didn't help her much though, did it? She went into service up at Ash House and died of the diphtheria before I was twenty. Poor maid. Pretty as a picture she was, too.

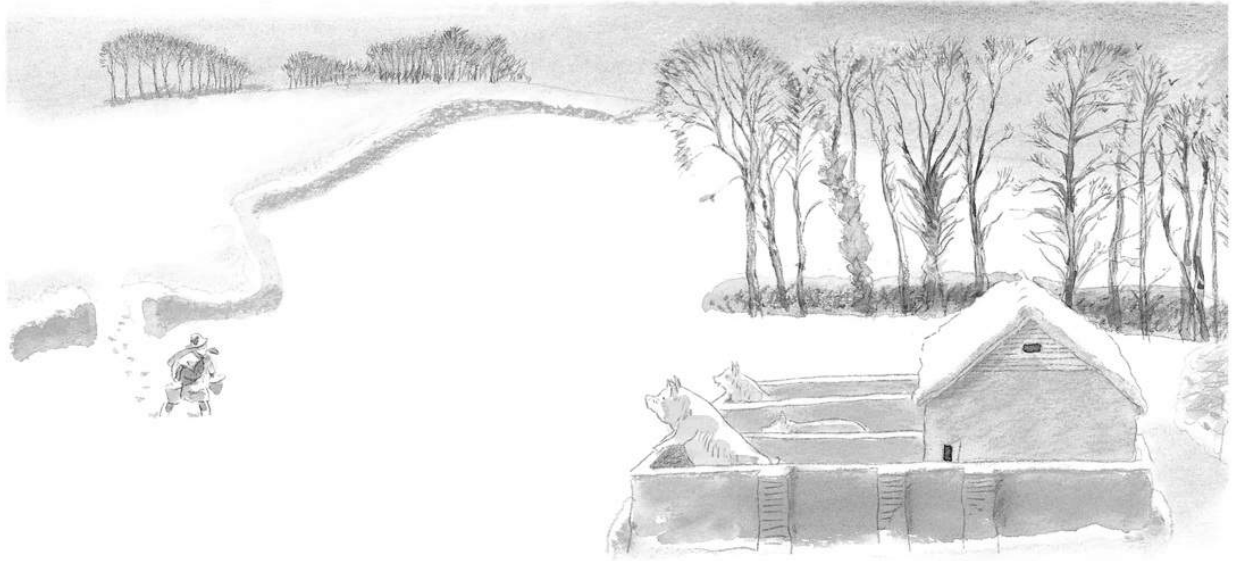


'I never had the diphtheria, but I got the scarlet fever. I'd have been all right without the scarlet fever. Missed a year of school with that. And then when I got better, I wanted to be out on the farm all I could. I'd fetch in the cows before I went off to school. I'd feed Joey in his stable, and old Zoey too. It was near enough a two-mile walk to school after that. I was late most mornings, so I got a wiggings of course; but I never took no notice of that. Trouble was, I was always dropping off to sleep in Mr Burton's lessons, and he didn't like that; so then I got a wiggings again. And sometimes, if the brown trout were rising down on the Ockment, I'd bunk off school anyway.

‘Harvest times, of course, I never bothered much with school anyway. I’d be out in the fields, sunrise to sunset if need be. Hay in June, wheat in July, potatoes in October, cider apples too. I’d go rat catching at threshing time, bash ’em on the head as they came a-skittering out. I’d trap the beggars too, when I could. Father’d give me a penny a tail for that. And he’d give me sixpence for a nice rabbit.



‘Father couldn’t do it all on his own, see. He weren’t ever well enough. Leg from the war played him up something rotten, and he still had the ringing in his head, and the pain with it. Mother helped when she could, but they couldn’t have managed without me, ’specially at harvest time.



Always something to be picked up, there was: mangolds, swedes – I do love a good swede – turnips too. And stones. I used to be out there with Mother days on end, picking up the stones off the corn fields. Weren't slave labour. Father paid me for every bushel I picked up, and I'd give half of everything to Mother for the housekeeping. But I was happy enough to do it. You ask me where I'd rather be, in Mr Burton's writing lesson at school, or cleaning out the pigs? Pigs any day. Honest.

I was doing something useful, wasn't I? Don't matter how smelly it was. Mr Burton said I was a turnip-head, and if I wasn't careful I'd be nothing but a farm boy all my life, and I didn't see anything wrong in that. Still don't. And besides, I could read enough words, all the words I'd need. That's what I thought. I could write a bit, too. I wasn't stupid like Mr Burton said. I just didn't like being in school, and I didn't like him much either, not with all the wiggings he give me.

'Trouble was that when I left school, I forgot even the little learning I had learnt. No cause to practise much, see? Then, like I say, your grandmother comes along, and she can read and write well enough for both of us. So I never bothered with it after that, until she told me I wasn't a turnip-head at all, and how she'd teach me. But we left it too late, didn't we?'

He sighed and sat back in his chair. 'So? Will you do it? Will you teach me like she did?'



Will you? I want to learn so as I can write just like I can speak, so as I can read an Agatha Christie book from cover to cover. Well? Proper wages. I'll pay you proper wages.'

'I don't know, Grandpa,' I said. 'I've never taught anyone anything. And besides, I was thinking of going to Australia for a while, after Christmas, when I've got some money saved up.'

'Australia!' He chuckled and shook his head. 'What a world it is!' He leant forward. 'All right,' he went on. 'Tell you what we'll do. You stay here till after Christmas, till the New Year, say. I'll do it in four months, easy. You'll see.' I must have made a doubting face. 'You don't think so, eh? All right.' He looked back over his shoulder, a little nervously. 'Her on the dresser there, she never liked me to bet. Chapel she was, said it was a sin.' He was whispering now. But I'm betting you one hundred pounds that if you teach me...let's say three hours a day till Christmas, I'll be able to read an Agatha Christie book all on my own, cover to cover; and what's more, I'll write you out a bit of a story of my own, too. You see if I won't. Hundred pounds says I can do it – the reading and the writing, both. So you'll have a hundred pounds more to take with you to Australia. Well, what do you say?'



We got out the paper and pencil there and then, sat down at the kitchen table and began. It turned out to be a lot more than three hours a day. Grandpa stopped only to cook, to eat, to walk up the lane at dusk to shut the chickens up – ‘fowls’, he always calls them – and to sleep. The moment I came in from feeding up the cows or checking the sheep or mucking out the pigs, he’d be sitting there at the kitchen table with his pencil and his books, waiting. He’d barely give me time to wash my hands. To begin with he learnt all his reading from newspapers. He liked the large print, and the photographs helped him to guess a word sometimes when he couldn’t quite make it out. Any new word he came across he’d write down in his book.

That way, I thought, he could practise his reading and writing at the same time. He found the writing harder. He said his fingers wouldn’t do what he told them. Mostly he’d find ways to laugh off his failures; but from time to time, when things didn’t go right, he would become angry and morose, and then I’d leave him to get on by himself.

After a while I could see the newspapers weren’t helping. He’d sit silent through a meal, dwelling on some dreadful story he’d just struggled so hard to read. One evening, after he’d read a piece about yet another savagery in Bosnia, I saw there were tears in his eyes. ‘Don’t it ever stop?’ he said. ‘I can mind Father telling me that there’d be no more wars, not after his one. It shames me. It shames all of us. What’s the good in reading, if that’s all there is to read about?’

I tried *Farmer's Weekly* on him for a while, but the print was small. And besides, he said, he'd done farming all his life, he didn't want to read about it too. Then there was a jumble sale up in Iddesleigh Village Hall that produced sudden and unexpected treasures: a copy of *Animal Farm* and *Travels with a Donkey*, and a dozen Tintin books; but best of all a dictionary and a magnifying glass. After that, his reading seemed to come on in leaps and bounds. His writing was slower though. He couldn't seem to manage joined-up very well, so I didn't make him. He would print each letter very deliberately, pressing down too hard on the paper and often breaking his pencil in the process. He went through pencils as if he was eating them. But he never let up, not for a single day. Some nights he'd stay up till midnight and he would still be at it; and I'd be dead on my feet and longing for bed. When it came to the lessons, it was Grandpa that was the slave driver, not me.



On Christmas Eve at midnight he took me up the lane to the barn. 'I want to show you something,' he said in a whisper, and he opened the door slowly. 'Same every year. Look at this.' And he switched on the light. The cows on one side lay in their straw, blinking at us; and on the other side the sheep eyed us lazily. 'All kneeling, see? Christmas Eve, and they're all kneeling, just like they was in the stable two thousand years ago.'

'They're lying, Grandpa, not kneeling,' I said. 'And besides, they always lie down in the middle of the night.'

'Do you want your Christmas present or not, you miserable beggar?' he chuckled, gripping me by the back of the neck. 'Now, my lad, are they lying or kneeling?'

kneeling?





‘Kneeling, Grandpa,’ I squealed, and he released my neck.

He smiled at me, sat down on a bale of straw, patted the straw beside him and told me to sit. He took a book from his coat pocket. ‘I’ve got a surprise for you,’ he said. Then he began. ‘*Death on the Nile* by Agatha Christie. Chapter One.’ He read slowly, stumbling every now and again, his eyebrows meeting in a frown of frustration whenever he did. When he’d finished the chapter, he closed the book and looked at me, a smile of wild exhilaration in his eyes. His face was flushed with the effort of it. ‘You’ll get two chapters a day till I’ve done,’ he said. And so I did, sometimes three, and by the end, by New Year, he wasn’t reading the words, he was reading the story.

A week or so later, I found myself on the train from Eggesford Junction to Exeter, my rucksack on the floor between my knees. I was on my way home, then off to Australia sometime in February. I should have been looking forward to it, but I was not. I had been a farm boy for only a few months, and had loved every smelly, backbreaking moment of it.

I had no real desire to travel any more, nor to go to college either. I had hated leaving Grandpa all alone down at Burrow. He had waved me off rather abruptly, a quick pat on the head. ‘Off you go. Miss your train else,’ he’d said. Then he’d turned away and gone inside. I’d just walked away.



My rucksack tumbled over at my feet. As I picked it up, I saw a white envelope sticking out of its side pocket. I pulled it out. There were ten ten-pound notes inside. The bet! The hundred pound bet. I'd forgotten all about it. There was a note with it. It read:

I hope you like my story. I wrote it for you just to show you I could. It's about the old Fordson tractor at the back of the barn and it's about Joey and its about me thanks a million for teaching me. God bless.

Grandpa.

After a short search, I found the story. It was folded down the inside of my rucksack, just six crinkled sheets of paper, heavily indented with black pencil, every letter laboriously, meticulously formed, all of it quite legible. There wasn't much punctuation. We'd done capital letters and full stops, but not much more.



When I was a littleun Mayday up in Iddesleigh village was always the best day of the year. There was the march around the village behind the Hatherleigh Silver Band all the menfolk following the Friendly Society banner blue ribbons on their jackets and Father standing a head higher than any of the others.



There were swing boats up around the village green and a carousel and pasties

and toffee apples and lemonade and then in the afternoon we had games down on West Park Farm. We did all sorts of egg and spoon races and sack races three legged races skipping races. You name it we did it. But best of all was chicken chasing. They let some poor old fowl loose in the middle of the field and old Farmer Northley waved his flag and off we went after him, the fowl not old Farmer Northley. And if you caught him well then he was yours to keep. We had some fun and games I can tell you. You could see more bloomers and petticoats on Mayday up in Iddesleigh than was good for a chap. Every year I went after that cockerel just like everyone else but I never caught him.



I can mind it was the year that Father caught him that it happened. I were maybe seven or eight perhaps. He flew at Fathers face and Father had him and hung on spite of all the flapping and squawking.

We would have a good supper out of that and we were pleased as punch I can tell you. Father and me stayed up in the village and Mother went off home with the fowl.

There were a whole crowd of folk in the Duke of York and as usual there was some that had too much of the beer or cider. It were rowdy in there and I was sat outside with the horses waiting for Father. It was the drink that started the whole thing. Mother always said so after.

Harry Medlicott he had West Park in them days. Biggest farm in the parish it was. Harry Medlicott comes out of the Duke drunk as a lord, he was knowed for it. He was a puffed up sort of chap a bit full of himself. Had the first car in the parish the first tractor too. Anyway Father and me we were mounting up to

leave. Father was on Joey and I was up on Zoey and this Harry Medlicott comes up and says.



Look here Corporal he says you got to get yourself up to date you have.

What do you mean says Father.

Those two old nags of yours. You should go and get yourself a proper newfangled modern tractor like me.

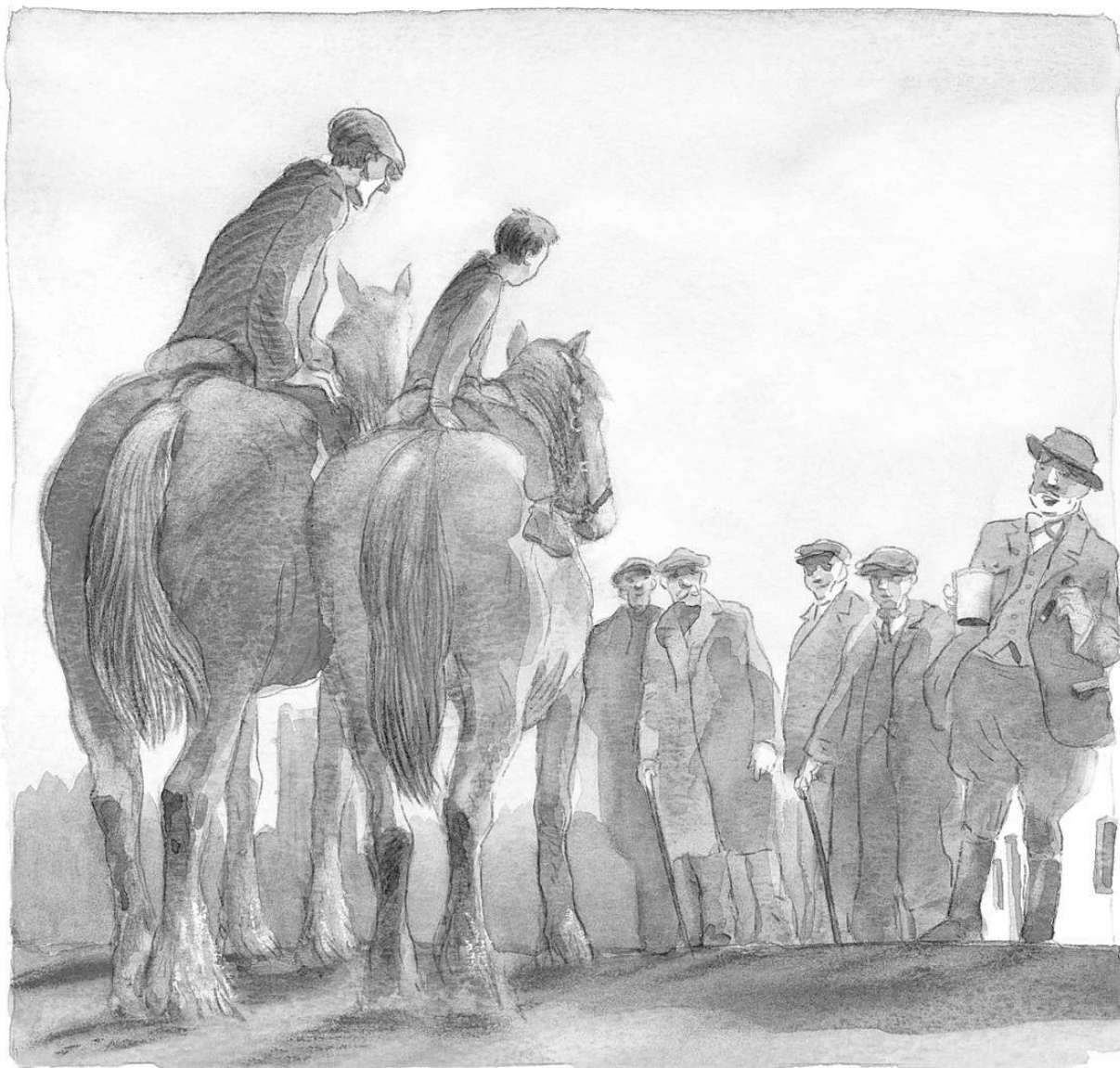
What for says Father.

What for. What for. I'll tell you what for corporal says he. My Fordson can plough a field five times as fast as your two old bag of boneses. Thats what for.

Bags of bones is it says Father. Now everyone knows what Father thinks of his Joey how he won't hear a word against him. Common knowledge it was at the time. Well for a moment or two Father just looks down at Harry Medlicott from on top of Joey. Then he leans forward and talks into Joeys ear.

Do you hear that Joey says he. Joey whips his tail and paws the ground like he wants to be off. A bit of a crowd was gathering now most of them as drunk as Harry Medlicott and laughing at us just like he was. He dont much like what youre saying Mr Medlicott says Father. And whats more neither do I.

Like it or not Corporal, Harry Medlicott is still swigging down his cider. Like it or not the days of horses is over. Look at them two. Fit for nothing but the knackers yard if you ask me.



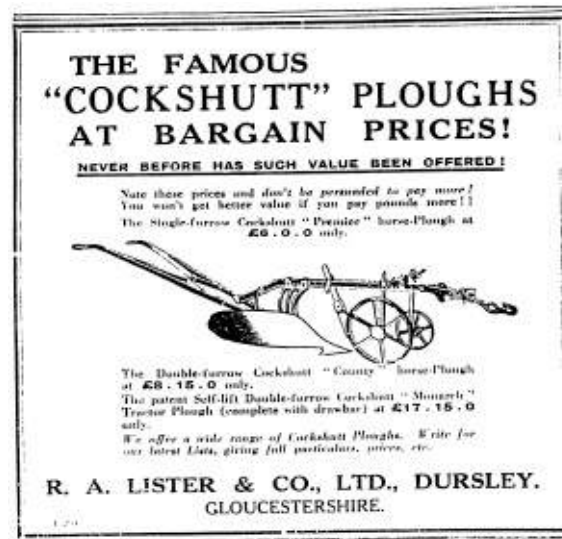
Tis true that Father had drunk a beer or two. I am not saying he hadn't else I am certain sure he would have just rode away. I don't think he was ever angry in all his life but he was as upset then as I ever saw him. I could see that in his eyes. Any rate he pats Joeys neck and tries to smile it off. I reckon theyre good enough for a few years yet Mr Medlicott says he.

Good for nothing I say Corporal. And Harry Medlicott is laughing like a drain all the while. I say a man without a tractor these days can't call himself a proper farmer. Thats what I say.

Father straightens himself up in his saddle and everyones waiting to hear what hes got to say just like I was. All right Mr Medlicott says he. We will see shall us. We will see if your tractor is all you say it is. Come ploughing time in November. I will put my ten horses against your tractor and you will just see

november. I will put my two horses against your tractor and we will just see who comes off best shall us.

Well of course by now Harry Medlicott was splitting himself laughing, and so were half the crowd. Whats that Corporal he says. They two old nags against my new Fordson. I got a two furrow plough reversible. You got an old single furrow. You wouldnt stand a dogs chance. I told you I can do five acres a day easy. More maybe. You havent got a hope Corporal.



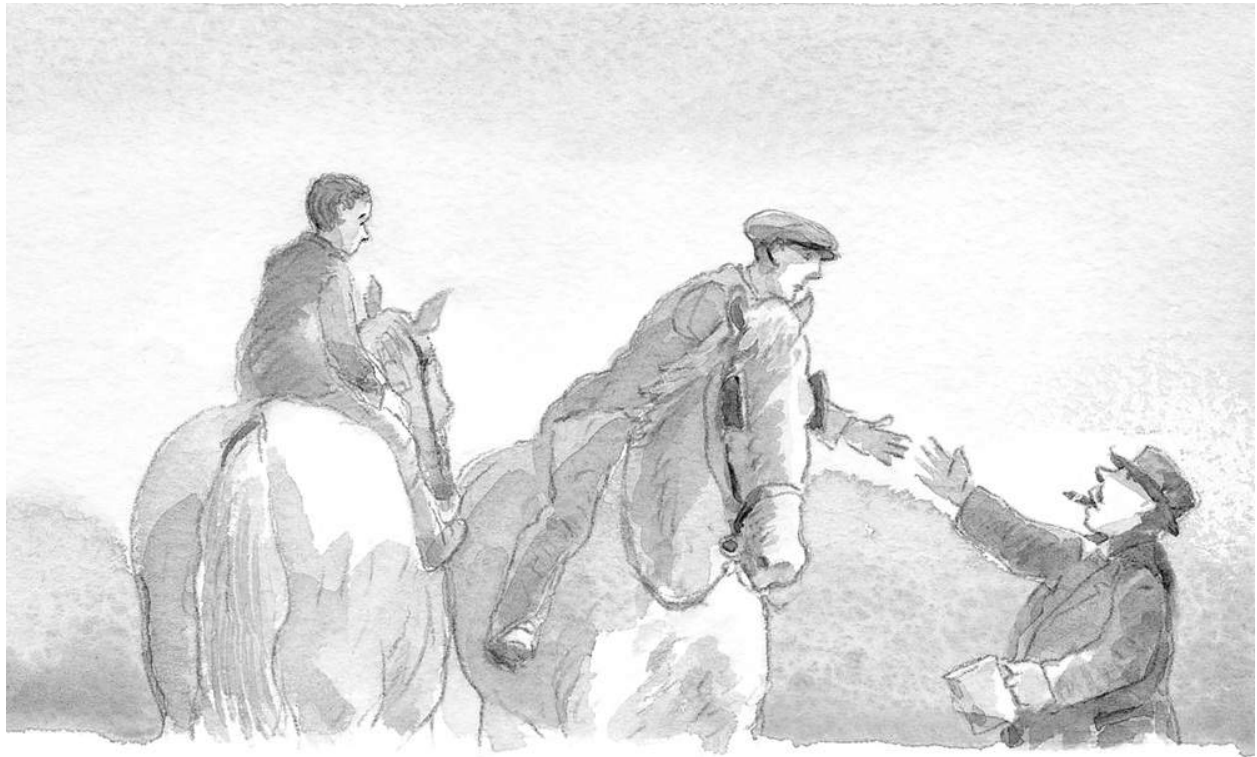
Havent I now says Father and theres a steely look in his eye now. You sure of that are you.

Course I am says Harry Medlicott.

Right then. And Father says it out loud so everyone can hear. Heres what we'll do then. We'll plough as many furrows as we can from half past six in the morning to half past three in the afternoon. Hour off for lunch. We'll have Farmer Northley to do the judging at the end of the day. Furrows got to be good and straight like they should be. And another thing Mr Medlicott since youre so sure youll win we'll have a little bet on it shall us. If I win I drive away the tractor. If you win theres a hundred bales of my best meadow hay for you. What do you say.

But my Fordsons worth a lot more than that says Harry Medlicott.

Course it is says Father. But then your not going to lose are you so it don't matter do it. And he holds out his hand. Harry Medlicott thinks for a while but then he shakes Fathers hand and that was that. We rode off home and Father hardly spoke a single word the whole way. We was unsaddling by the stables when he sighs deep and he says. Your mothers going to be awful vexed at me. I shouldnt have done it. I know I shouldnt. Dont know what came over me.



He was right. Mother was as angry as I ever saw her. She told him just what she thought of him and how could we afford to go giving away a hundred good bales and how he was bound to lose and how no horse in the world could plough as fast as a tractor. Everyone with any sense knew that she says. Father kept his peace and never argued with her. He just said he couldn't go back on it now. What was done was done and he would have to make the best of it. But I tell you something Maisie he says to her. That Harry Medlicott with his fancy car and his fancy waistcoat and his fancy tractor hes going to be worrying himself silly from now on till November you see if he wont.

But you'll be the silly one when you lose wont you says Mother.

Maybe I will maybe I wont Father says back. And he gives her a little smile. Be something if I win though wont it.

In June we had a good harvest of hay off Higher Redlands and Mother didn't seem so worried any more after that. But at home none of us ever said a word about the ploughing match. Mother just didn't want to hear about it. I could tell that. But I can mind Father and me talking of nothing else all summer and autumn.

Father would say things like Well if any horses can do it then its Joey and Zoey, and You come out on top after four years in the mud of Flanders like Joey has then you can win a little ploughing match standing on your head in your

has then you can win a nice ploughing match standing on your head in your sleep. I tried to believe him but I just couldn't. We went easy on Joey and old Zoey, worked them slow and fed them like kings so as their coats were shining in the sun as bright as a new penny.

And the ploughing match between Father and Harry Medlicott was all the talk at school too. But I had a hard time of it. Everyone said Father was on a hiding to nothing. Even Billy Bishop and he were my best friend even Billy said Father must've been mazed in the head if he thought he could win. And I'd say something like You don't know Joey like I do or We got two horses and he's got one tractor. Or when I could think of nothing else I would just say Wait and see. But I never believed any of it even when I was saying it. I knew in my heart of hearts like everyone did that it were hopeless. Joey was maybe fifteen by now and Zoey twenty near enough but if they'd been half their age it wouldn't have helped. Horses cannot plough as fast as tractors. That was all there was to it. There was lots of friends at school wanting us to win. Just about everyone liked Father more than Harry Medlicott. But even so they all said we hadn't got a chance. And I knew they were right.

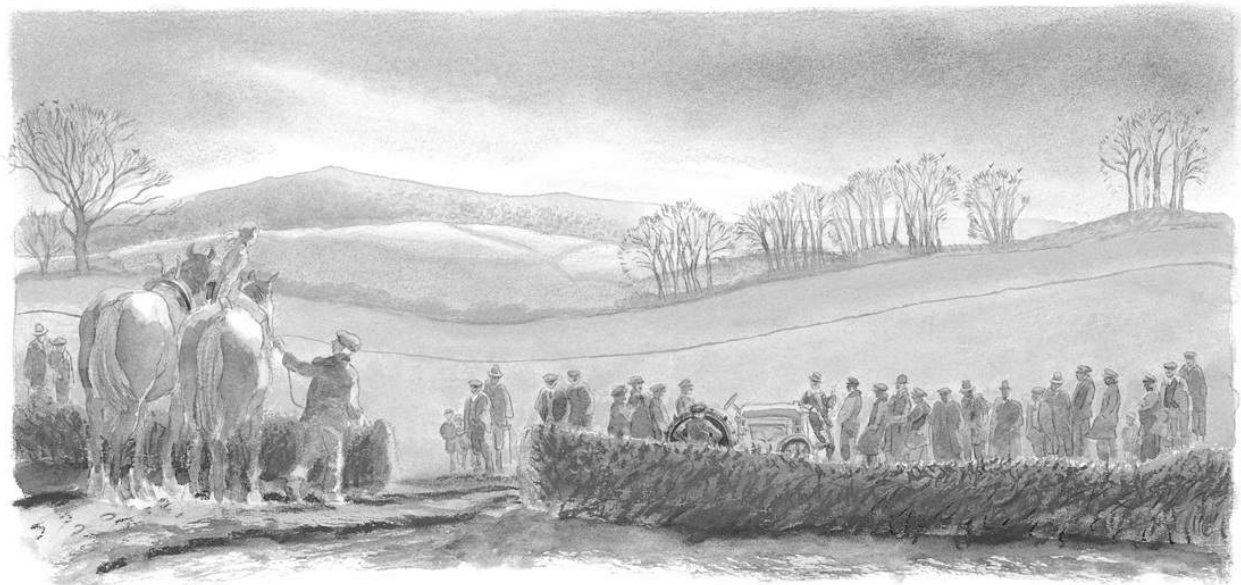
November the sixth it were going to be. I can mind that well enough because the night before was Bonfire Night and I was watching Father sharpening up the plough for the last time and I could see the fire from the big house up the hill in the silver of the ploughshare. Old Farmer Northley had picked out Candlelight Field on Mr Arnold's farm as the best place. Three acres almost square it is with hedges all around down by the river. There was people coming from miles around to watch and I knew we couldn't win not a chance in a million.



It'll be all right you know says Father and he smiles at me out of the bonfire in the ploughshare. We're going to win. You'll see. He weren't just putting a brave face on it. He really thought we would win.

Lets say goodnight to Joey and Zoey he says. And wish em luck. And we did. I prayed that night like I never prayed before.

I was up at four o'clock the next morning to help Father feed up the horses with corn mash and hay. We brushed them down and went in for breakfast. When we had finished mother had pasties ready for our lunch. She saw us off at the door. She wouldn't come and watch she said. She had things to do about the house and she kissed Father on the cheek and went away indoors. Father was a bit took back by that kiss and I was too. She didn't do kissing that often.



We walked the horses down across Burrow Brimclose towards Candlelight Field. Father and Joey together and me behind with Zoey. It weren't just the village folk that was there it were dozens of other folk too from miles around.

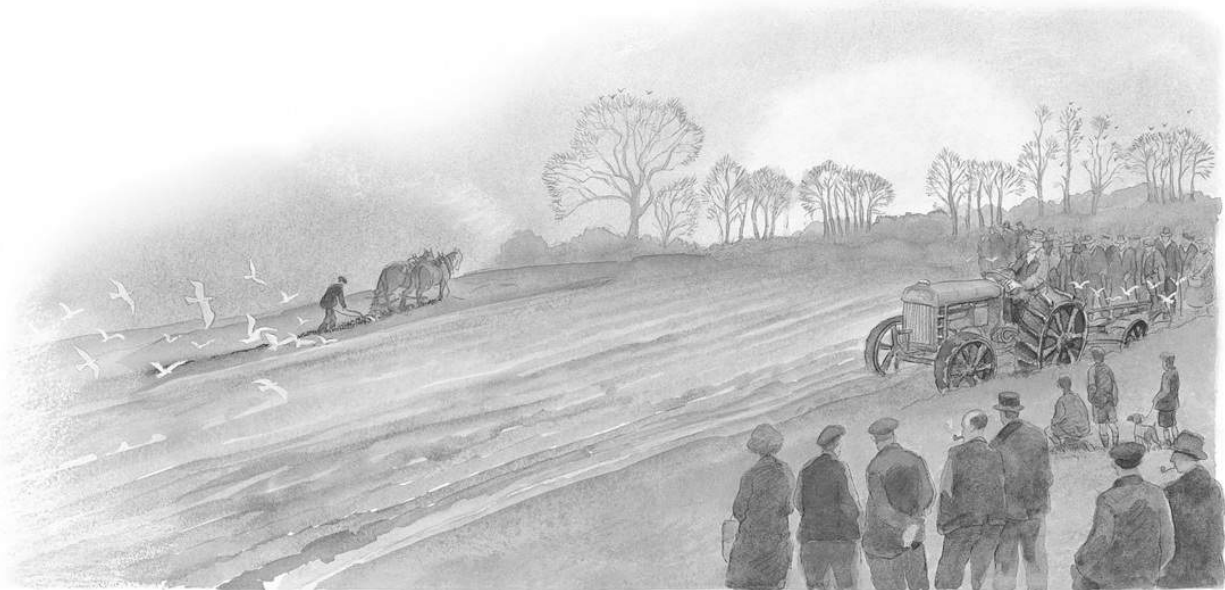
Like a fair it was down on Candlelight that morning. Harry Medlicott was waiting for us hands in his pockets and leaning up against his green Fordson with his band of cronies all around him. He had such a grin on his great fat face. I could've kicked him. Honest I could.

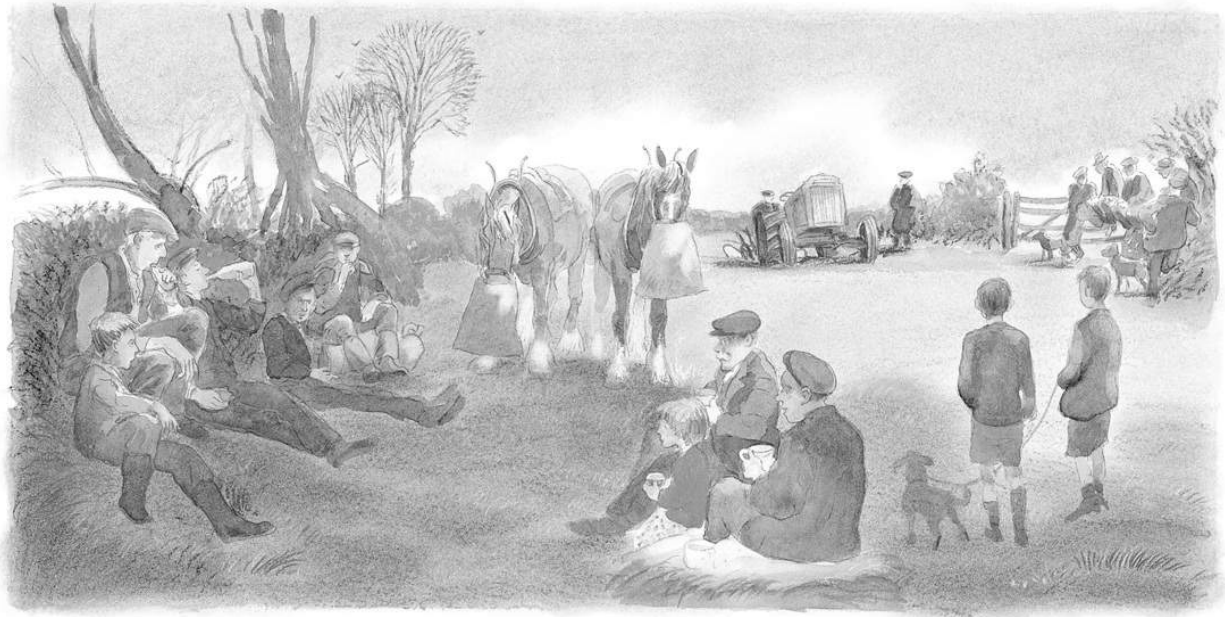
Old Farmer Northley had us all lined up and ready by halfpast six. It were grey all around but you could see the field was parted in two with a single furrow. As many good furrows as you can plough by halfpast three this afternoon says old Farmer Northley. The tractor to the General if he wins. A hundred bales of best

Farmer Northey. The tractor to the Corporal if he wins. A hundred bales of best hay to Mr Medlicott if he wins. And then he ups with his flag and waves it. Father calls out to Joey and Zoey and off they go up the field. Harry Medlicott takes his time gives the starting handle one good turn and the Fordson starts up easy as you like. He gives a great wave of his hat, climbs up and hes off too.

As the sun came up through the trees everyone could see plain enough that Father was already a long way behind.

The tractor was ploughing faster and he was turning faster on the headlands too. Father was falling further and further behind all the time. There were nothing he could do about it. But he kept going talking to the horses as he ploughed sweetening them on like he always did. Go on then Joey. Giddyup. Theres a boy. Good old girl Zoey. The crowd were on Fathers side most of them anyways. Everyone loves a loser I thought and there was tears coming in my eyes and I couldn't stop them neither. They were all clapping and whistling and cheering him every time he turned. So was I. But it didn't do Father nor the horses much good. I wanted to run off. I didnt ever want to look but I had to. I was there at the end of the furrow each time Father came back and he would give us a smile and I would try to give as good a one back. That weren't at all easy I can tell you.





By the time old Farmer Northley called a stop for lunch everyone could see the match was already as good as over. Harry Medlicott and his green Fordson had almost finished their half of the field. He had ploughed forty eight furrows and Father had done fifteen. I watched Harry Medlicott as he sat up against the hedge eating his lunch with his friends all around him and I hated him moren ever. You could hear them laughing out loud clear across the field. I sat with Father eating our pasties. We had a bigger crowd around us tis true but we hadnt got much to celebrate had us. More like a funeral it were. Joey and Zoey stood nearby munching into their feed sacks and then Father and me led them down to the river for a good long drink. They needed it. Drank and drank they did and we watched em.

Ploughs

SINGLE and
DOUBLE FURROW.

RIDGING.

IMPROVED
TURN-WREST.



Ruston & Hornsby Ltd.
ENGINEERS GRANTHAM

Also Binders, Reapers, Mowers, Drills, Thrashers, Tractors, Portables,
Elevators, Chaff Cutters, Self-Feeders, Trussers, Petrol-Paraffin Engines.



A kingfisher went by quick as a twick he went and sat on a branch. Good luck that is says Father. He puts his hand on my shoulder. I am not done yet not by a long chalk. You know the story of the hare and the tortoise do you.

No says I.

Well I do he says. And he gets down on his knees and drinks with the horses. After a bit he stood up and was wiping his mouth with his hand. Suddenly hes smiling. Theres a thing he says looking back up the field. She came after all. I hoped she would. Whats she up to. And there was Mother walking round Harry Medlicotts tractor, having a good look. Then she was coming across the plough towards us.



Farmer Northley says you got ten minutes til you start again she says. You all right. Hows the leg.

Itll do Father says. Glad you came Maisie. Horses are ploughing well. They may be old but theyre as good as ever. And then I saw Father was limping as he walked away and Joey was nuzzling his neckhair like he did.

At noon Farmer Northley waved his flag again.

On you go Joey, Father calls out. Theres a good girl Zoey. And they took the strain and off they went up the field the plough cutting clean. I can mind how I stood there and watched him my heart full of pride for him and I breathed in the smell of the earth. Nothing like the smell of new turned earth. A cold metal smell it is, but clean and good like the first breath of life.

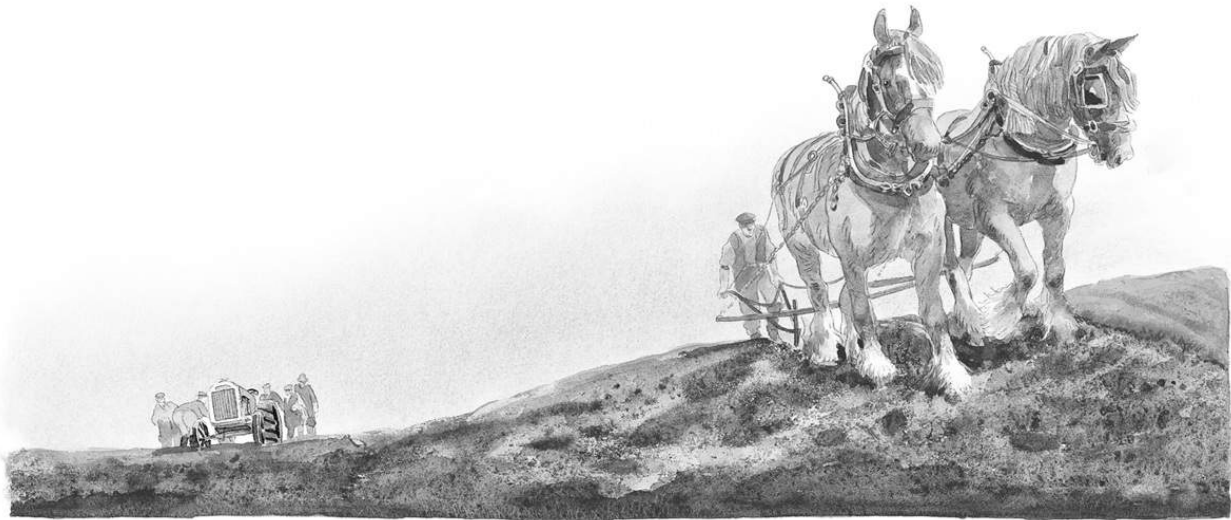
smell it is, but clean and good like the first breath of life.



Harry Medlicott was spitting on his hands and rubbing them. Still laughing and joking with his friends he was. He turned the starting handle over once twice three times.

Nothing happened. He tried again again again. All it did was cough and splutter. Father had done a whole furrow by now and was turning. Still the tractor wasn't starting. Then all Harry Medlicott's friends were running over to give a hand pulling this pushing that and they were arguing too. There was lots of shaking heads and shouting going on. A little light of hope lit up inside me. I could hear Harry Medlicott shouting that they should get out of the way and stand back. He was hopping mad and I liked that. I liked that a lot. He spat on his hands and tried again. Didn't work. The Fordson wouldn't work, it wouldn't start. Someone else tried the handle then someone else. No one could start him up and Father had ploughed another furrow.

A couple of hours later and the tractor engine was in bits and Harry Medlicott was bending over, his head inside the tractor his great fat bottom in the air and I was happy as a lark. Father was plodding on behind the horses and I was counting every furrow.



He had done thirty five furrows by now but I could see he was tiring with every one. Mother and me stood side by side and cheered him at every turn till our throats were raw with it. I knew and she knew and everyone knew that maybe just maybe a miracle might happen. Father knew it too.

He could see well enough for himself what was going on and he was giving Mother and me a bigger smile each time he came back towards us to turn. The sweat was pouring off him and I could see there was pain in his face now too. Time and again he staggered and stumbled to his knees. He had to call the horses to a stop and every time he fell he was slower getting to his feet again. He had done forty eight furrows by now as many as the tractor. All he had to do was keep going.

We had almost forgotten about the tractor. We shouldnt have. I looked across the field. It was together again. Harry Medlicott was waving everyone back and spitting on his hands. He tried the handle. The beggar started first time. He clambered in and roared off up the field catching Father with every second. When he passed him a great groan went up from all over except for his little band of cronies but I tell you that groan werent nothing compared with the groan inside me. I was sick to my stomach. Harry Medlicott would win now. Nothing could stop him. We were done for and we all knew it.



That was when Father went down on his knees in the middle of the field and couldn't seem to get up. Mother ran to him and I went with her. He was looking up at her trying to catch his breath.

Legs wont take me no further Maisie he says. And then his eyes were looking straight at me. You finish it for me says he. Let the horses do the work. You just keep em straight. You seen me doing it times havent you. You can do it.

Thats how I found myself following the plough that afternoon behind Joey and Zeey. We werent going to win but we werent going to give up neither. You

zoey. we werent going to win but we werent going to give up neither. You shouldve heard the noise that crowd made. Filled my legs with strength of a growed man it did. I never thought I would manage the turns but like Father said the horses did it all. I just did what I had seen him do and followed the horses.



I was coming back towards the crowd when I saw it happen. Harry Medlicott was turning fast on the headlands as he always did but this time it were too fast even for him. The tractor never hardly slowed down like he should. He just keeled it over in the ditch and leant up against the hedge with his ploughs ploughing nothing but air and his great muddy wheels spinning round and round. It were a handsome sight that. A sight for sore eyes. The engine choked and stopped and then there was a lot of smoke. When it cleared I could see Harry Medlicott jumping up and down. Like a mad thing he was. Well you can imagine the crowd was wild with it all by now and cheering me on. I ploughed on and on. Up and round and down and round and up and round and down and round. I kept my eye all I could on my line. I knew I had to keep my furrows straight. I hadnt to take my eye off them. But from time to time I had to sneak a look at the tractor to be sure he was still there in the ditch where I wanted him to be and

every time I looked he was.



And all the time I was making up the lost ground. I called out to Joey and Zoey just like Father did. I was showing off a bit I reckon. They two horses knew what was going on without me saying a word. They were pulling faster and faster never a foot wrong and together like one horse with eight legs.

By the time old Farmer Northley at last waved his flag for the end of the match I was so tired I could hardly stand. When he counted up the furrows Harry Medlicott had ploughed sixty and we had done sixty one. All of them good deep straight furrows just like they should be. We had won.



To be fair to Harry Medlicott he came right over and shook Father by the hand and me too. Said I was a good lad and ruffled my hair with his oily hand.

Well then Corporal says Harry Medlicott to Father. You won fair and square. Its your tractor if you can pull it out of the ditch.

And by that evening with the help of a dozen or more men we pulled the Fordson back onto his wheels. We couldn't start him though so we hitched him up to Joey and Zoey and between them they pulled him all the way across Burrow Brimclose and into the barn. They enjoyed that I reckon. So the Fordson was ours for ever and Joey and Zoey never had to plough again.



Joey lived on long after dear old Zoey till he was near enough thirty. He had ten

Joey lived on long after dear old Zoey till he was near enough thirty. He had ten good years of retirement most of it up in the orchard. Loved his apples did Joey. Looked well on them too.





Father says to me once its not the same working with a tractor. Cant hardly talk to a tractor can you. But all the same I can mind he looked after that old Fordson like a baby. Never get rid of it he says to me. Family history that old tractor.



In spite of his bad leg Father went on working till the day he died. Every evening when it was getting dark he would walk up the lane to shut up the fowls against the fox. Never let anyone else do it no matter how much his leg was paining him. And then one evening he goes off and doesn't come back. I found him lying outside the fowl house with his stick still in his hand. The doctor told Mother and me it was the best way to go. He would never have knowed a thing.

When my time comes I want it to be just like that. Good and quick. Maybe I'll be shutting up the fowls just like Father was and someone will find me outside the fowl house and the police inspector will come along and look for footprints and fingerprints and write in his report

Death by natural causes.

Fowl play not suspected.

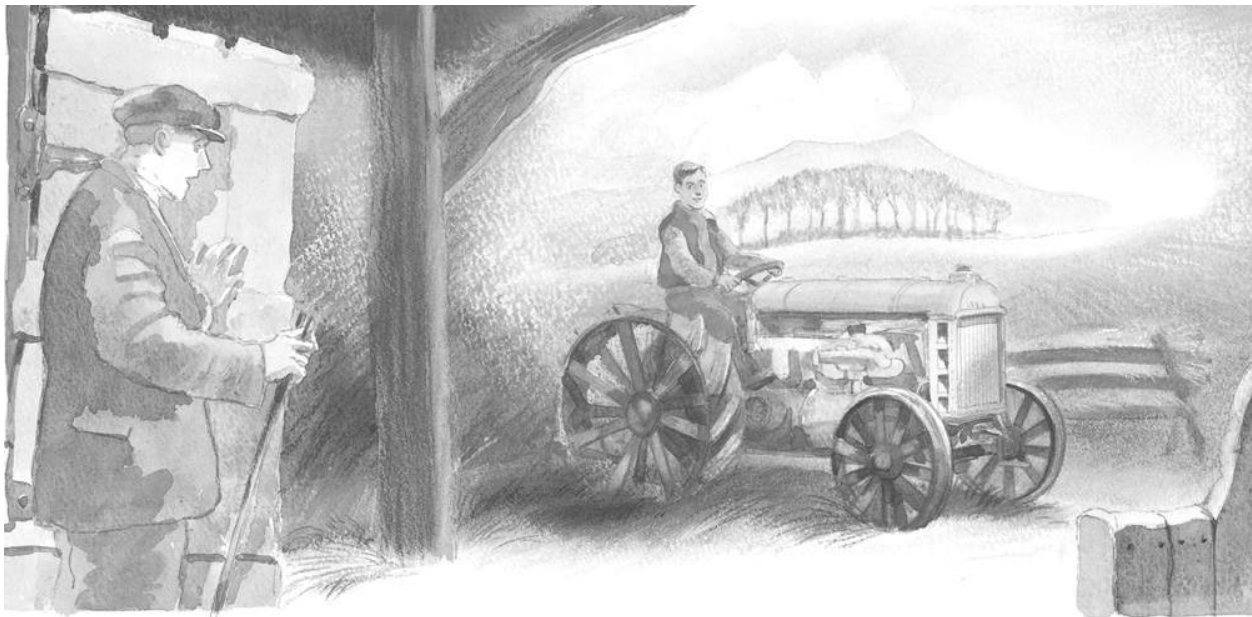
Make me smile that would



THE END



Grandpa's story came with me in my rucksack, all the way to Australia. I read it by torchlight lying on my bunk in the sheep station. I read it in the bush by the light of the moon. I read it on the plane home, the paper glowing red with the last of the Australian sun. By then I think I had already made up my mind.



I did go to college to study engineering as I'd planned, but four years later I was back at Burrow, farming with Grandpa. He's retired now, or as good as. He spends most of his days reading – Sherlock Holmes at the moment. He leaves most of the farming to me. It's all I hoped it would be, and more.

I've been spending my evenings up in the barn restoring the old green

I've been spending my evenings up in the barn restoring the old green Fordson. It now has four wheels again, a reconditioned engine, and the bodywork is almost finished. My pride and joy.

Grandpa came in to inspect it yesterday evening. He walked around, patting it and stroking it, just as if it were a horse.

'Looks good as new,' he said. 'Wish you could do the same for me.' And he went off to shut up his hens. No matter how cold and wet and windy it is, he still likes to do that himself.

Once he'd gone, I sat myself up on the seat. I gripped the steering wheel, closed my eyes, and off I went, thundering out over the farm. I was out on Candlelight and roaring along in the wind when he interrupted my dreams. He was waving his stick at me from the barn door, and laughing. 'Mighty noisy, that old tractor,' he said. 'And you want to watch the brakes. You can't trust 'em. Remember what happened to old Harry Medlicott.'

'I remember,' I said.



For your Fordson
*Gargoyle Mobiloil "BB" in Summer
Gargoyle Mobiloil "A" in Winter
— and why?*

Gargoyle Mobiloil "BB" for summer and Gargoyle Mobiloil "A" for winter were the grades specified for the Fordson Tractor only after careful engineering study of the Fordson engine. Following this study, extensive field tests were made to verify this recommendation.

The Fordson Tractor uses paraffin as fuel. The correct grades of Gargoyle Mobiloil thoroughly seal the Fordson pistons against oil-ring escape of fuel, thus preventing undue dilution of the oil and conserving full engine power.

Gargoyle Mobiloil protects the friction surfaces under the highest operating temperatures. You will find these oils giving full efficiency under all conditions of climate, load and use.

Write for "Correct Lubrication," a booklet containing complete instructions and torque Charts and other valuable data.

GARGOYLE
Mobiloil
Mark the Lion on the Can

READ SERVICE: Canon Works, London, E.P.1 WORKS: Rotherham and Widdows

About the Author

MICHAEL MORPURGO OBE is one of Britain's best-loved writers for children. He has written over 100 books and won many prizes, including the Smarties Prize, the Blue Peter Book Award and the Whitbread Award. His recent bestselling novels include *A Medal for Leroy*, *Shadow* and *Born to Run*.

His novel *War Horse* has been successfully adapted as a West End and Broadway theatre play and a major film by Steven Spielberg. A former Children's Laureate, Michael is also the co-founder, with his wife Clare, of the charity Farms for City Children.

Also by Michael Morpurgo

Mr Skip A Medal for Leroy Cool!

Dear Olly Outlaw - the story of Robin Hood Sparrow - the story of Joan of Arc
Billy the Kid

Order the Morpurgo War Stories collection featuring six novels: Private Peaceful, Little Manfred, The Amazing Story of Adolphus Tips, Toro! Toro!, Shadow and An Elephant in the Garden here: [9780007530885](#)

Copyright

The Butterfly Lion

Text copyright © Michael Morpurgo 1996 Illustrations copyright©

Christian Birmingham 1996

Jacket photographs; © Martin Harvey; Gallo Images/CORBIS (lion cub);
Royalty-Free/CORBIS (savanna) Jacket design © HarperCollinsPublishers

Ltd The Butterfly Lion - 978-0-00-731735-6

EPub Edition © April 2010 ISBN: 9780007380626

Kaspar - Prince of Cats

Text © Michael Morpurgo 2008

Jacket photographs © Masterfile (cat); Shutterstock (sea and sky).

Jacket design © HarperCollins Publishers Ltd Kaspar - The Prince of Cats -
978-0-00-726700-2

Ebook Edition © MAY 2010 ISBN: 9780007385935

Born to Run

Text copyright © Michael Morpurgo 2007

Illustrations © Michael Foreman 2007

Jacket photographs: Dog by kind courtesy of the Retired Greyhound Trust;

Background © Jonathan Gale/Getty Images Jacket design ©

HarperCollinsPublishers Ltd Born to Run - 978-0-00-723059-4

Ebook Edition © 2007 ISBN: 9780007369997

Running Wild

Text copyright © Michael Morpurgo 2009

Illustrations © Sarah Young 2009

Jacket photographs © PhotoAlto/Alamy (boy); Michael Llewellyn/Getty Images (Indian elephant); Gary Vestal/Getty Images (tiger); Michael Nichols/Getty Images (monkeys); JH Pete Carmichael/Getty Images (snake).

All other images © Shutterstock Jacket design © HarperCollinsPublishers Ltd Running Wild - 978-0-00-726701-9

Ebook Edition © JANUARY 2012 ISBN: 9780007380664

Alone on a Wide Wide Sea

Copyright © Michael Morpurgo 2006

Jacket photographs © by kind permission of the author (boy); Ralph A. Clevenger/Corbis (porthole); Patrick Robert/Sygma/Corbis (rivet texture); Kevin Scafer/Getty Images (albatross); Altrendo Images/Getty Images (splash); The Mariners' Museum/Corbis (ship); William Vandivert/Getty Images (waves).

Jacket design © HarperCollinsPublishers Ltd Alone on a Wide Wide Sea - 978-0-00-723058-7

Ebook Edition © 2006 ISBN: 9780007369980

Farm Boy

Text copyright © Michael Morpurgo 1997.

Illustrations copyright © Michael Foreman 1997

Jacket photographs © Shutterstock.com (horse); istockphoto.com (sky);

Museum of Rural Life, University of Reading (plough horses); Hulton

Archive/Getty Images (soldiers).

Jacket design © HarperCollinsPublishers Ltd Farm Boy - 978-0-00-745065-

7

Ebook Edition © JANUARY 2012 ISBN: 9780007479627

All rights reserved under International and Pan-American Copyright Conventions. By payment of the required fees, you have been granted the non-exclusive, non-transferable right to access and read the text of this ebook on-screen. No part of this text may be reproduced, transmitted, downloaded, decompiled, reverse engineered, or stored in or introduced into any information storage and retrieval system, in any form or by any means, whether electronic or mechanical, now known or hereinafter invented, without the express written permission of HarperCollins.

Ebook Edition © JULY 2013 ISBN: 9780007536696

Version 1

About the Publisher

Australia HarperCollins Publishers (Australia) Pty. Ltd.
Level 13, 201 Elizabeth Street Sydney, NSW 2000, Australia
<http://www.harpercollins.com.au>

Canada
HarperCollins Canada
2 Bloor Street East - 20th Floor Toronto, ON, M4W, 1A8, Canada
<http://www.harpercollins.ca>

New Zealand HarperCollins Publishers (New Zealand) Limited P.O. Box 1
Auckland, New Zealand
<http://www.harpercollins.co.nz>

United Kingdom HarperCollins Publishers Ltd.
77-85 Fulham Palace Road
London, W6 8JB, UK
<http://www.harpercollins.co.uk>

United States HarperCollins Publishers Inc.

10 East 53rd Street

New York, NY 10022
<http://www.harpercollins.com>