

**The Mole  
& Beverley  
Miller**

**Allan  
Frewin Jones**

## THE MOLE AND BEVERLEY MILLER

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**He stopped as though he had run into an invisible wall. It was a blue van. Michael felt violently sick. The van was against the kerb at an acute angle and the driver’s door was gaping. Michael’s head swam and his heart moved in convulsion against his ribs. Someone was lying in the gutter, someone with rainbow-striped leg-warmers. One foot was crossed over the other and one shoe was missing. . . .’**

**ALLAN FREWIN JONES** was born in London in 1954. After leaving school, he worked as a post boy, a civil servant and a local government clerk, before taking a diploma in Fine Art and History. He is now a ballot clerk with a trade union, and lives in London with his wife who is a local government officer.

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**PIP  
POLLINGER IN PRINT**

**Pollinger Limited  
9 Staple Inn  
Holborn  
LONDON  
WC1V 7QH**

**[www.pollingerltd.com](http://www.pollingerltd.com)**

**First published in Great Britain by Hodder and Stoughton  
Children's books 1987  
This eBook edition published by Pollinger in Print 2007**

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**A CIP catalogue record is available from the British Library**

**ISBN 978-1-905665-71-6**

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***For Jeanette  
who made me write it***

**Acknowledgment is made to The Estate of the Late Sonia Brownell Orwell and Secker and Warburg Limited; and Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Inc. for permission to publish the extract on pages 51–52 from *Animal Farm* by George Orwell.**

# *Chapter 1*

**‘Goodbye.’**

**‘Bye.’ Michael leaned on the gatepost, watching as Beverley adjusted her leg-warmers and wheeled her bike to the kerb. He licked the wetness of her last kiss off his top lip.**

**‘Take your time,’ he said as she leaned away over the machine, screwing the safety lock into place on the frame.**

**‘You’re rude,’ she said.**

**‘True.’**

**He gazed after her as she rode away. She waved once without looking round. She turned the corner and Michael walked back up the path. He halted on the doorstep, frowning. I never told her to mind how she went, he thought. The omission nagged at him as he closed the front door. Oh well, he thought, it’s only once. Once won’t hurt.**

**As he passed the hall stand he saw the book, left where she had laid it to free**



her arms for their parting embrace. Silly sausage, he thought affectionately.

Father stood at the kitchen door, toolbox in hand and woolly hat on head. There was not time for Michael to make a run for his room.

‘Just the very lad.’

Michael stared hollowly at him; rat under the cobra’s stare. A cobra with a woolly hat and a toolbox, a rat with no excuse on a Sunday afternoon in March.

‘Busy?’ asked Michael.

‘Yes, we are. It’ll only take half an hour. It’s nothing energetic, I only want you to hold the ladder while I scrape out the gutter.’ Of all the boring jobs in the world, holding the ladder was the most deadly; cold, monotonous, endless – and half an hour meant all the rest of the afternoon in his father’s work-speak.

‘I’ll get my coat.’

‘Get away with you. Coat!’ Michael was propelled to the front door. The two things hit Michael simultaneously: a blast of chill air and the distant scream of brakes on the main road.

‘That sounds grim,’ said his father. There was a slamming of an upstairs door and the clatter of feet on the stairs.

‘Did you hear that?’ called his sister Sophie. ‘That noise always makes me cringe.’

Michael looked round, seeing Beverley's book lying like a silent confirmation on the hall stand. He ran, pushing his father sideways, wrenching open the gate, pounding down towards the main road and a silence more frozen than his fear.

He sped round the corner; at the end of the street – only fifty metres away, the main road slashed across the houses like a razor. Cars were moving. No sign of an accident. As he ran he had time to hope that someone had been avoiding a cat, but a small crowd was already gathered and Beverley's bike lay wrenched and twisted on the pavement.

He stopped as though he had run into an invisible wall. It was a blue van. Michael felt violently sick. The van was against the kerb at an acute angle and the driver's door was gaping. Michael's head swam and his heart moved in convulsion against his ribs. Someone was lying in the gutter, someone with rainbow-striped leg-warmers. One foot was crossed over the other and one shoe was missing.

Michael walked slowly forward. He saw what had happened as clearly as if he had been there: Beverley had suddenly remembered the book and, without thinking, had turned to come back for it – turned into the path of a blue television rental van.

Michael stood on the perimeter of the ring of passers-by. Someone, a woman, had taken charge. 'Call an ambulance, will you?' she said. No one moved. 'You!' she pointed. 'Ambulance! Go on!'

Michael gazed down at Beverley. She looked pale but her face was undamaged. A halo of dark blood was spreading around her head.

'She forgot her book!' he said to no one in particular.

He closed his eyes and felt himself fall, but when he opened them again he was still on his feet. His father and sister ran up. His sister grabbed him and held him tightly, pushing his face into her shoulder, smoothing his hair.

'It's all right,' she said. 'It'll be all right.'

'Has anyone phoned for an ambulance?' That was his father's voice. 'What are you doing?' asked Michael, pulling away from his sister. 'Don't look,' she said. 'Come away.'

'Take him home,' said his father. 'I'll wait here for the ambulance.'

'She forgot her book,' said Michael as Sophie led him away.

'Yes, I expect so,' said Sophie.

'It's on the hall stand. She only put it down for a minute.'

'You can give it to her later.'

Michael's mother was on the doorstep, wiping soapy hands on a striped towel.

'It was Bev,' said Sophie, 'she's been knocked off her bike by a car. Dad's there.' She sounded very choky, as though she were giving voice to Michael's emotions.

In a cool daze Michael allowed himself to be led into the kitchen. He sat at the table, staring out of the window at the wall of the house next door.

'Would you like some coffee?' asked Sophie. Michael heard her quite clearly but could not answer. He felt his eyes pinned to the dark wall as his mind swam in slow circles. 'She only put it down for a second.' He relived their parting embrace; he always kept his eyes open so there could be no doubt that she was real. He had kissed too many phantoms.

'Just make it,' said his mother softly, turning the television down.

Black skiers spun dark threads down a white snow-face. It was a film and there was shooting going on and then the scene changed to a boy pushing another boy onto railings. Michael watched it, but images meant no more than his sister's endless talking. She was pouring out a stream of comforting words which Michael could not understand.

Time went by. The kettle boiled and Michael drank the coffee. The front door was

left open for his father's return and it was bitterly cold.

Michael was unaware of it, but his mother had been on the telephone to Mrs Harker, Beverley's grandmother, to tell her what had happened. Beverley lived alone with her gran and her dog, Gustav. Sophie vanished. A lot seemed to be happening around him but Michael sat quite still, staring through the window.

'Well,' said his father. 'That's it. Sophie's gone with her.' He put his hands on Michael's shoulders. 'How are you, my lad?'

'Okay.'

'She'll be all right.'

'Yes.'

'That's it.' He ruffled Michael's hair. 'Sophie'll phone from the hospital. Lucky we live so close, isn't it? I'll pick her up afterwards.'

'Cup of coffee?' asked Michael's mother.

'Not half. I'm perishing.' He leaned on the table, looking out of the window. 'And it's starting to rain. Oh well, no gutters for us this afternoon.' He looked at Michael. 'Not that you'll mind,' he said.

Michael smiled wanly. 'I think I'll go up to my room,' he said.

'Listen for the phone,' said his father. 'It'll be Sophie.'

‘It’s like a dream,’ he said, as the comforting warmth of his bedroom engulfed him. Half an hour ago she had been there: sitting cross-legged on the bed, holding his hand between the two of hers, using his forefinger to draw on the knee of her jeans, ‘I love you.’ And now where was she? In an ambulance, or maybe in hospital already, her light brown hair in a corona of dark red blood, her face peaceful and still.

Michael rolled onto the bed and stared at the ceiling.

Time passed.

He heard the telephone. His father’s footsteps sounded on the stairs. There was a peremptory knock.

‘She’s not too bad,’ he said. ‘She’s in emergency. Sophie says her gran’s there with her.’

‘Can I see her?’

‘Not today. She’s not come round yet.’

‘Is it serious?’

‘I don’t know.’ His father sat on the edge of the bed. ‘She’ll be okay. Just a few bumps and bruises, I expect.’ He stood up. ‘I’m just off to collect Sophie.’

Michael sobbed and tears filled his eyes. His father looked anxiously at him for a second then hastily left the room. Michael turned onto his stomach, rubbing his eyes on his pillow.

‘Please God,’ he said, ‘please don’t let her die.’

They had only been together for a few, short months, and as Michael lay desolately on his bed, he tried to recapture their time together and keep Beverley clear in his mind.

## *Chapter 2*

It was early in the new term and school still felt uncomfortable after Christmas. Michael stood by the red and white striped bunker with the notice 'Flammable Materials' on it. He kicked the wall with his heel, huddled in his coat.

'Want to buy a porno mag?'

Michael looked round. It was Cutler. Seedy as ever and liberally spotty.

'What is it?'

Cutler looked furtively around and pulled a crumpled magazine out of his coat front. 'It's a good 'un.'

'How much?'

'Fifty pence.'

'Leave off. Look at the state of it.'

'How much you got, then?'

Michael pulled out a handful of coins.

'Thirty-seven.'

'That'll do.'

The money and the magazine changed hands.



‘What’s all this then?’ A hand like a bunch of sausages snatched the magazine out of Michael’s grasp.

Michael and Cutler looked helplessly at Blackmore as he thumbed through the curling pages. ‘Oh no, I don’t think you’d better have this,’ he said grinning. ‘Naughty boys. I’m going to have to confiscate it.’ He folded it in four and jammed it into his pocket.

‘Give that back,’ said Michael.

Blackmore laughed and slapped Michael’s cheek. ‘When I’ve finished with it.’

‘I’ll throttle him,’ said Michael softly as Blackmore strolled off.

Cutler spat an oily globule that hung stickily on the wall. ‘Fat chance,’ he said.

‘I’ll have that money back.’

‘Sod off.’

Michael grabbed Cutler’s lapels. ‘Give me that money or I’ll kick your head in.’

Cutler’s squashed face went red. ‘Get off. I’ll give you half of it.’

Michael grasped Cutler’s closed fist and squeezed, keeping his other hand wrapped round Cutler’s tie. ‘All right, all right. Let go, you’re breaking my bleeding hand.’ Michael released him and held out a hand. Cutler spat in Michael’s palm and flew laughing down the alley, his coat tails flapping.

‘I’ll get you, you filthy sod,’ shouted Michael. He ran after Cutler, catching him

before he got into the quadrangle, pushing his spittle-sticky hand into Cutler's face and bouncing him off the wall until the money was retrieved.

Michael wandered down towards the cycle sheds.

Some older boys came in and there was a girl with them.

One of the boys was Finn. He and Michael had been friends last term but they had argued and weren't talking any more. Jim was there as well – Michael had known him since Primary School, but he was one of Finn's friends now. Michael stood in the shadows of the cycle shed. The five boys were gathered round the girl. She was obviously one of the sixth formers from the Edward Leventon Girls' School a few streets away. Michael's school was boys only, but it was not uncommon for sixth form girls from neighbouring schools to attend lessons there, particularly for science studies or art. Michael glowed with jealousy. If only he hadn't had that argument with Finn last year he could have gone over to them and met her.

The school doors were pushed open as the bell sounded. As the six moved to join the general entry Michael coughed in a desperate attempt to be noticed. Jim looked round and coughed theatrically back through his hand. The others didn't even notice.

‘What are you hanging about for?’ It was Cumbers.

‘Christmas,’ said Michael. They walked in together, bumping and barging through the black doorway, old enough now to shove boys from the lower school out of the way with hardly a thought.

‘What did you do over the weekend?’ asked Cumbers.

‘Not a lot.’

‘We went camping with the Youth Club, down Chertsey way.’ They clattered down to the upper school common room. ‘I’ve got one of those sleeping bags that you can zip up to another one . . .’ Cumbers nudged Michael hard in the ribs. ‘Know what I mean?’

There was already a scattering of people in the long basement room. There was a general dive for the couches; Michael and Cumbers managed to appropriate the end of one.

‘There was a girl there . . . we called her Blood Red.’

‘Blood Red?’

‘Yeah. We were down by the river and she got thrown in. She had white trousers on.’ Cumbers grinned evilly. ‘It was the wrong time of the month, see? She went in right up to her waist. She was shouting not to be pushed in but nobody took any notice, and when she came out there were red

streaks all down her legs. She was really embarrassed.'

'I can imagine.'

There was a faint haze of smoke in the air although smoking was banned. It was quite funny some days. Occasionally, teachers would poke their heads round the door if they were looking for someone, and sometimes the smoke was so thick that you couldn't see more than a couple of metres. But nothing was ever said. One teacher, after getting a lungful of smoke, actually shouted out that he hoped they realised that cannabis was illegal. In fact, it had been Finn smoking herbal cigarettes. He had bought them on impulse but they were so appalling that he had thrown most of them away.

At nine o'clock the common room emptied as everyone went off to be registered.

The morning passed. Michael sat in English. They were doing *Richard II* and Michael was given the part of the gardener because the teacher thought he would be uninhibited enough to give it an appropriately rustic accent.

'Go, bind thou up yon dangling apricocks . . .'

'No, no, no,' said Mr Benson. 'Whoever heard of an Elizabethan gardener with a South London accent? Give it a bit of life, boy.'

‘Oh. Right-o.’ Michael coughed and began again in his best yokel accent.

‘That’s more like it.’

When he had finished, Cutler leaned across the desks.

‘That was useless,’ he hissed. ‘Sounded like you came from Liverpool.’

‘Piss off, goat breath,’ said Michael genially.

Michael was free for the final two lessons of the morning. He made his way down to the common room. As he turned to go down the last flight of steps there was a clattering from above and something hit him a glancing blow on the head. A thick book lay open at his feet. He looked up. A face peered at him over the banisters; a face framed by long pale hair.

‘Sorry,’ she shouted, ‘my bag’s broken.’ Michael picked up the book and walked back up the stairs towards her. A cascade of books had tumbled down the stairs. He scooped a couple of them up and waited for her to join him, clutching her burst bag.

‘There you are,’ he said, holding the books out to her.

‘Thanks.’

And that was all that happened. She had taken the books from him, pushed them into her bag, and without another word had walked back up the stairs and out of sight.

Michael stood on the landing, wishing he had been able to think of something to say that was a bit more interesting than 'There you are.' He felt as though somehow he had thrown away the chance of doing something exciting. He felt first of all miserable then angry. Finn would have said something to keep her there. Finn, in his position, would have found out her name, where she lived and what she was doing. He would have arranged to meet her after school. Michael hated Finn more than ever. He threw himself onto the couch in the common room and tried to concentrate on the new book he was reading. But the vision of Finn and the girl floated in front of the words and obscured them.

Michael went home that afternoon immediately after registration and spent the afternoon in his empty house lying on his bed feeling sorry for himself. He did that a lot. Later on he went round to Jim's house.

'Hello,' as friendly as possible as Jim answered the door.

'Come on in, dear boy, we're listening to records.'

There were four or five of them in the front room, sprawled about in various states of school uniform. Finn was among them.

‘It’s young Mole,’ said Philip. ‘Where have you been hiding, Mole?’

Finn looked up, his face closed and quite unreadable.

‘Around,’ said Michael.

‘Good old Mole,’ said Wolf. ‘Batty as ever?’

‘Coffee?’ asked Jim.

‘Ta.’ Michael sat down. ‘What are you listening to?’

‘Rolling Stones.’ Wolf threw the cover over. ‘Jim’s dad’s.’

‘It’s ancient,’ said Michael.

‘It’s bloody good,’ said Philip. ‘Listen to those chords: Chang! Wham! Blam!’

‘Hea-vy,’ said Wolf. ‘Want a fag?’

‘Don’t smoke in here,’ said Jim. ‘My dad’ll go berserk.’

The record was turned over amid inconsequential chatter.

Suddenly, Finn jumped up. ‘Bah!’ he shouted. ‘Humbug!’ He swept up his coat and ran out of the room. No one took any notice.

‘What was all that about?’ asked Michael.

General shrugging.

On an impulse Michael ran after him.

‘Hoy!’ Finn was half way down the street. He stopped and looked round. Michael ran up to him.

‘Where are you going?’

‘Just off.’

‘Can I come?’

‘Why not?’

A little while later they were sitting on a wall waiting for a bus to Finn’s house. Reconciled.

‘Who was that girl you were with this morning?’

‘What, Bev?’

‘Bev?’

‘Beverley. Beverley Miller.’

‘Oh. Beverley Miller.’ A bus slewed round the corner.

‘Coming?’ asked Finn, bouncing off the wall.

‘Yes.’ They tramped upstairs and Finn got out some cigarettes. Ordinary ones.

‘Given up the peculiar ones?’

‘Yes. Horse-poo flavour. I chucked them out.’

The bus started as they lit up.



## *Chapter 3*

It was an old hospital that looked as if it might once have been a Victorian lunatic asylum. Red brick, dull – the colour of dried blood, Michael thought. Square towers and black iron fire-escapes. The towers were capped by grey minarets and above them the sky was wrapped round the world like dirty bandages.

Sophie hit his shoulder affectionately. ‘Cheer up,’ she said. ‘You’ve got a face like a wet weekend.’

‘How’s that?’

‘Repulsive.’

‘I don’t see what my expression matters anyway. She’s not going to see it.’

‘You don’t know that. She might’ve woken up.’

‘We’d have been told. They’d have phoned or something.’

‘Not necessarily.’ They passed into the tarmac courtyard. The hard face of the hospital reared up on three sides.

‘I’m going to hate this place,’ said Michael. ‘It’ll be all poxy white tiles and antiseptic smells and fat bossy women.’

‘Do you want to see her or not?’

‘Of course I do.’

‘Well, they’re not going to wheel her out here for your convenience, are they?’ Sophie took his arm. ‘Come on, put a brave face on it.’

‘I’ve only got my cowardly face with me.’

‘Well put that on, then, anything rather than your martyr-going-to-the-lions face.’

Michael thought he could find the way, but he soon discovered his sister had a far clearer sense of direction towards the little side room where Beverley was being looked after. The room contained three beds, but only Beverley’s was occupied. She lay, pale and still, her face ugly with tubes, some syphoning fluid out and some syphoning it into her. Michael felt the familiar pressing upwards against his throat. Bottles hung under her bed and the room echoed to an electric note as a small green dot danced across a television screen.

The small dark nurse who sat at her side looked up.

‘Hello,’ she said smiling.

Michael grinned half-heartedly.

‘What was that?’ she asked. ‘A smile or a grin?’

‘Neither,’ he said, ‘I’m having teething problems.’

‘Oh. I wondered what it was.’

‘Any change?’ asked Sophie.

The nurse shook her head.

Michael stood at the foot of the bed. A sick seething filled him, formed by something of laughter, something of tears, anger, anxiety, and a deep, aching sense of loss. This pale thing on the bed was Beverley and yet wasn’t. She was alive, and yet some dark hand clutched her brain in a numbing grip and the conscious creature that Michael knew swam elsewhere and could not be reached. It was a strange fantasy that Michael had created – that of the conscious Beverley swimming while her unconscious form lay beached and helpless.

‘He’s in a trance,’ he heard. ‘Michael?’

He looked round. ‘What?’

His sister looked into his blank face.

‘Never mind,’ she said. ‘It was nothing.’

‘Nothing comes of nothing . . .’ said Michael.

‘You what?’

‘Shakespeare. It’s from *King Lear*. You know, I thought Shakespeare was a load of crap before . . .’ His voice trailed off and his face became so abstracted that Sophie instinctively put her arm round his shoulders as if she was afraid he might topple over.

Michael spent so much time staring into blackness. The emptiness of a grey sky or a grey wall; and at night he would lie on his back in bed and stare into the blackness of his room seeing Beverley tied by plastic tubes to a bed with grilles like some sort of cage.

‘Might they switch her off?’ he asked suddenly, gazing round at the nurse.

She smiled broadly. Her teeth were very white, shining like hospital tiles. ‘Don’t be daft.’

‘What a thing to say,’ murmured Sophie.

‘She’s only sleeping,’ said the nurse. ‘This isn’t life-support, you know. You’ve been seeing too many hospital programmes on telly. She’ll come round . . .’

‘When?’

‘I don’t know. She could wake up in ten minutes or in a couple of days. I don’t know.’

‘Then how do you know she’ll come round at all?’

‘You’re in a morbid mood today,’ said Sophie.

‘It’s hardly surprising is it . . . this place . . .’

‘Is he sleeping all right?’ asked the nurse, as if Michael had suddenly become deaf, dumb and blind.

‘Well?’ asked Sophie. ‘Are you?’

‘Can I hold her hand?’

‘Of course. But don’t sit on the bed . . .’ Michael frowned.

‘You might pull out some tubes, that’s all. Just sit there . . .’ She motioned towards the chair.

Michael disengaged himself from his sister’s arm and sat by Beverley. Her hand was warm and soft. He slid his fingers under her palm and gave a slight squeeze. There was no response. He hadn’t really expected any, but it still crushed him that her fingers didn’t make even the slightest movement to acknowledge him.

‘It’s called Abred,’ said Michael.

‘What?’ Sophie thought she must have misheard.

‘Where she is,’ said Michael softly. ‘They call it Abred. It’s where people go when they’re unconscious. Not when they’re just sleeping, but when they’re really deeply unconscious they go down to a place called Abred. I read it somewhere. I can’t remember where.’

Sophie and the nurse looked at each other.

‘I’ve never heard of that,’ said the nurse.

‘You don’t read the right books.’

‘Obviously,’ said the nurse, and ‘Someone doesn’t,’ said Sophie.

A slight unease drifted over the air and Sophie, who hated those sorts of silence

said, just to break it: ‘Do you think she knows we’re here?’

‘I doubt it,’ said the nurse. ‘Would you know someone was in your room if you were fast asleep?’

‘I’d probably wake up,’ said Sophie. ‘I’m ever such a light sleeper. The slightest thing . . . you know . . . wakes me up straight away. Dad used to come into my room last thing . . . just to sort of check I was all right, sort of thing, and it would always wake me up. Night, night, sleep tight. He always said that: night, night, sleep tight.’

‘Hope the fleas don’t bite,’ said the nurse with a grin.

‘He hasn’t done that for years,’ said Michael. ‘And anyway, it wasn’t “night, night”, it was “nun-night”. He stopped doing it when I asked him what “nun” meant in that context. He thought I was taking the . . . he thought I was trying to be funny and he stopped doing it. Remember how he used to bring up a glass of milk and a couple of Lincoln biscuits – the ones with the pimples all over? And as I got older there was less milk and then one day there wasn’t any at all. I remember thinking to myself: hello, you’ve grown up. It was a funny sort of feeling. Like the first time you have to see yourself to bed.’

‘Yes I remember,’ said Sophie. ‘I had to make sure all the landing lights were on.

The worst thing was that I didn't have a bedside light at the time and I had to turn the middle light out and actually get all the way to bed in the dark. It frightened me to death – especially right near the bed,'cos you could never be sure there wasn't something under it that would grab you as you got in. It was all right once you were in bed 'cos nothing could get you then. If I heard anything in the room I'd just stick my head under the covers and hope it'd go away.' She grinned. 'I still do.'

'I turn the light on if that happens,' said the nurse.

'You're braver than I am,' said Sophie.

'It's better than letting something creep up and get you in the dark.'

'It can't get you if you're under the covers,' said Michael. 'It's a well-known fact. Do you remember that time Uncle Tom was staying with us and we kept creeping into his room and pulling his covers off?'

'Yes.'

'And he found a box of toy soldiers and spent half the night standing them all up around his bed so we'd step on them.'

'That's right,' said Sophie, 'but we'd got bored with it by then and by next morning when he woke up he'd forgotten them and trod on them himself.'

‘That’s one of the problems with setting traps for people . . .’ said Michael, ‘. . . when they backfire on you.’

‘Do unto others as you would have them do unto you,’ said the nurse, ‘only quicker . . .’

‘And twice as hard,’ added Michael. He leaned forward and took Beverley’s hand in both of his, turning the palm upwards.

‘She taught me how to read hands,’ he said. ‘But I can’t remember much of it.’ He studied her palm. ‘That’s the heart line,’ he said looking closer. ‘Hers is very long and deep and it sort of fans out at one end like a feather.’

‘That probably means she’ll have lots of children and love them all enormously,’ said the nurse, examining her own hand.

‘That’s her head line,’ said Michael.

‘Read all about it . . .’ said Sophie.

‘Thank you,’ said Michael. ‘Her health line sort of collapses half way through, but her life line is very long. If the mount of Venus is round and padded it means you’re very sexy, I think. I think that’s what she said.’

The two girls surreptitiously prodded the bases of their thumbs.

‘I must be incredibly sexy,’ said Sophie, displaying her hand.

‘That’s the wrong one,’ said Michael. ‘You only read the right hand.’



‘What if you’re left-handed?’ asked the nurse.

‘I don’t know, she never mentioned that.’

‘Well, there you are,’ said Sophie. ‘I’m left-handed so I’m going to believe what my left hand tells me.’ She moved round the bed. ‘Come on give me a reading, and if it’s any good I’ll buy you a Mars bar on the way home.’

Michael scrutinised her hand. ‘You’re going to meet a tall, dark handsome gorilla . . .’

Sophie batted his head. ‘Do it properly.’

‘Oh, all right. You’re going to live for a million years, have twenty kids and die of typhoid. Your grandmother is going to be trampled to death by elephants in the Outer Hebrides and you’re going to buy your dearly beloved brother a Mars bar on the way home.’

‘That’ll do,’ said Sophie.

‘I should hope so.’

‘Want some?’ asked Michael, opening the Mars bar. Sophie grabbed his arm in both hands and took an enormous bite.

‘Ta,’ she slurred. Michael regarded the stump of the chocolate bar. ‘You’ve got a gob like a mechanical excavator,’ he said.

‘All the better to scoff Mars bars with,’ she spluttered.

‘Nice of you to buy it for me.’

‘It was nothing.’

Michael pushed the last piece of chocolate into his mouth, ‘I can see that.’

‘Are you coming up to see her again tomorrow?’

‘I’m not sure. There’s something on telly I want to see . . .’

‘Michael!’ Sophie was aghast.

‘Oh, for Christ’s sake, it’s not even as if she knows I’m there.’

‘It’s up to you.’

‘I know.’ He stared out of the bus window.

‘Has Mrs Harker been every day?’ asked Sophie, killing the silence again as she always had to.

‘I expect so, she goes up in the afternoons.’

‘You ought to go and visit her.’

‘I want to see something on telly.’

‘No. I meant her gran. Go and see Mrs Harker.’

‘What for?’

‘It’d be a nice gesture. She’s all on her own now Bev’s not there. I expect she’d like to have some company. You wouldn’t have to stay long. Just pop round to check she’s okay. How old is she?’

‘I’m not sure, sixty or seventy-something, I think.’

‘There you are then . . .’

‘But she’s not like our grans – she’s not helpless or anything.’

‘I’m sure she’d still . . .’

‘All right, don’t go on. I’ll go and see her tonight, if you like.’

‘You’d better ring first.’

‘What? In case she’s having an orgy, or something?’

‘It might be her bath night.’

‘Oh, that’ll be good. Ring her up and get her out of the bath in order not to go round and get her out of the bath. Brilliant.’

‘Don’t start getting smartalecky, little squirt, or I’ll box your ears.’

They wrestled briefly on the seat until Michael yielded. Sophie knew his ticklish places too well.

‘I’m still going to watch television tomorrow,’ he said as they got off the bus.

‘It’s your conscience.’

He stuck out his tongue, narrowly avoiding a smack around the ear.

‘Let’s get Mum an evening paper,’ said Sophie. ‘She likes the crosswords.’

They ran across the road, Sophie clutching his arm, and dived into the newspaper shop.

## *Chapter 4*

The quadrangle was a cauldron of noise and violence. But behind the gym, through the broken fence and out of bounds, there was a strip of green wasteland where cigarettes and cans of Special Brew did the rounds. A small group of sixth formers sat or lay in scrubby, tree-shaded grass and assumed themselves to be, temporarily at least, beyond the law. Michael, despite being a year their junior, was with them.

Finn stretched out his long legs and blew smoke rings. The hand-rolled cigarette was as thin as a match, pierced through the end with a pin so that it could be held without burned fingers, and smoked to the absolute limit. Money for tobacco was in short supply and Wolf was in the habit of dismembering dog-ends and making cigarettes out of the blackened stubs even though they tasted revolting. It was one way of making sure no one else wanted a drag.

‘Did you see Gibbon, the other day?’ said Jim.

‘No. What was that?’

‘He spent all dinner-hour rolling on the grass up here rubbing his crutch ’cos he’d finally made it with his girlfriend.’

‘He’s an idiot,’ said Wolf.

‘But no longer a virgin,’ said Gary.

‘But still virgin on the ridiculous,’ said Philip.

‘She’ll probably get pregnant,’ said Wolf. ‘Sort of cock-up he would do-hoo!’ He burst into deep laughter as the double meaning struck him. ‘Cock-up! You get it? Cock-up!’ He rolled and laughed, making sure of milking the joke for all it was worth.

‘Go on then,’ said Gary when Wolf had finally finished exploding. ‘Regale us with tales of the filth you’ve been up to.’

‘I’ll show you,’ said Wolf, delving in his back pocket.

‘Oh, God, what’s he got there?’ asked Finn.

‘Don’t ask!’ said Jim.

But they all leaned forward as Wolf pulled out his wallet and produced from an inner pocket a few strands of dark brown hair.

‘What’s that?’

‘Guess.’

‘Oh my God, that’s sick,’ said Finn, throwing an empty can at him. It missed and

Wolf's throaty laugh reverberated through the trees.

'What is it?' asked Michael.

Wolf brandished it. 'Something you've never see, Sonny-Jim.'

'I can't stand this,' said Finn, clambering to his feet.

'How did you get it?' asked Philip.

Michael, mystified, stood up and followed Finn towards the hole in the fence.

'I'll tell you for fifty pence,' he heard Wolf say, but the rest was lost as he clambered through the hole in pursuit of Finn. He would actually have preferred to stay with the others – he was excited by their talk about sex and it made him feel pleasantly sophisticated to be with them when they dissected their adventures. He remembered when, three years ago, Jim had told him a few lurid details about sex, how he had refused to believe it. The memory embarrassed him now: how could he have been so wet? He remembered saying, 'Are you trying to tell me that everyone does it? Even the Queen? You're just telling fibs!' Jim had laughed indulgently and within a fortnight Michael had done enough clandestine research to know better. For the following few months he had taken great pleasure in telling boys younger than himself. 'Do you know how babies are made?'

‘Yeah.’

‘How, then?’

‘By kissing.’

‘Ha-ha! What a twerp!’

Knowledge was power. When he had been about seven Sophie had told him that women were given babies by having their breasts rubbed. It sounded quite plausible at seven.

Michael and Finn squeezed through the gap between the art block and the gym and made their way around the perimeter of the quad to the steps that led to the Green. They sat half way up the steps. Finn was in a reflective mood.

‘Single sex schools are insane,’ he said.

‘Yes,’ said Michael. Wisdom through agreement with the wise.

‘Schools are mad places anyway. For forty minutes you have to be a mathematician and then,’ he clicked his fingers, ‘for forty minutes you’re a linguist. Just like that you have to stop thinking vectors and cosines and gear your brain to learning irregular verbs. And you know what’s really sick about it don’t you? The fact that it’s all geared to retaining information for one specific purpose – so that you can vomit it all up in an exam. There’s no suggestion of learning ’cos knowing things can be interesting.’

‘It’s all memory,’ said Michael. ‘Anyone with a memory can do really well – but that doesn’t make them any cleverer, does it? Memory isn’t intelligence. I think I’m intelligent but I can’t remember facts to save my life, so I end up looking like a dummy.’

‘Poor old Mole,’ said Finn.

‘Oh, I don’t care,’ said Michael. ‘I’d rather be me than anyone else. Except maybe you.’

Finn laughed. ‘I don’t want you to be me, you silly Mole. Who’ll I have to talk to. I’d have to spend all my time trading sordid details of my love life with the likes of Wolf Smith. He really is a sick sod.’

‘It’d be nice to have some sordid details to trade,’ said Michael.

‘Don’t start that again.’

‘I want a girlfriend.’

‘Invent one, then – that’s all they do.’

‘I did – a couple of years ago.’

‘Oh, yes?’

‘I called her Susan Arron. I went on about her all the time. I knew just what she looked like and everything. It was all right until Cumbers’ birthday party. He said I should bring her along.’

‘How did you get out of that one?’

‘I said she moved to Catford.’

‘Catford?’



‘Well – it was far enough away for me not to be seeing her anymore. I even got my sister to write a letter from her so I could show him. He had a book about analysing handwriting and my writing is too obvious so Sophie did it. I wanted her to put things like how much she was missing me but she wrote about all the nice new boys she’d met. Cumbers said her handwriting proved she was a flirt. Sophie was dead chuffed.’

‘We’ll have to invent you another girl until a proper one comes along.’

‘I don’t want another invented one. I want a proper girl.’

‘You’ll get one in good time.’

‘Oh, no I won’t. Never.’

‘You’re going through one of your phases again, aren’t you?’ said Finn.

‘I suppose so.’

There was a silence – the sort that Sophie would have used a crowbar to smash.

‘If I tell you something will you promise not to get paranoid about it?’ said Finn.

Michael brightened. He liked secrets. ‘What is it?’

‘No paranoia.’

Michael shook his head.

‘I’m going out with Bev Miller.’

‘Since when?’

‘We went for a wander in Beckfield Park last Sunday and we’re going to a concert on Wednesday.’

‘How did you ask her? What did you say?’ Michael was torn between admiration, fascination and envy.

‘She asked *me*.’

‘What?’

‘To the Youth Club she goes to. You know, St Paul’s Church?’ Michael nodded. ‘It’s in the crypt. Every Friday night. She mentioned it the other week – said that she went there regularly and that they played some good music, so I just went along. You don’t have to sign on or anything. Just turn up. I thought a lot of the others would be there. There were some boys from my year but none of my lot so I hung around with Bev – not really knowing anyone else. She was with a gang of her mates.’ Finn’s eyes went misty. ‘Girls are lovely.’

‘What happened?’

‘Eh?’ Finn came back to earth. ‘She said she was going for a walk in Beckfield Park on Sunday afternoon with her dog. I said I wished I had a dog to take for walks and she said she’d meet me if I liked. If I liked!’ Finn laughed.

‘That’s fantastic’

‘Yes. It is, isn’t it?’

‘What’s she like?’

‘She’s incredibly intelligent, much more intelligent than me. Her dog’s a Labrador. It’s called Gustav.’

‘Gustav? That’s German. It should be an Alsatian.’

‘She said it was named after Gustav Mahler.’

‘Who?’

‘Gustav Mahler. It’s her favourite composer. Apparently.’

‘What? The dog?’

‘No. Mahler. But you wouldn’t believe their house. It used to be a sort of vicarage or something. She’s got a collection of two hundred records – all classical.’

‘Oh, my God.’

Finn laughed. ‘She does music, you know. That’s what she comes here for. Flute lessons. And English. She’s shit-hot on Shakespeare. She stood on a park bench and did the whole of Richard III’s soliloquy – word for word.’

‘Weird! I don’t even know what it is.’

‘Yes you do: “Now is the winter of our discontent made glorious summer” blah blah blah. She knows it all. She’s absolutely incredible.’

‘Friends, Romans, countrymen . . .’

‘That’s Julius Caesar.’

‘Not the way I do it,’ said Michael. ‘Friends, Romans, countrymen, alligators

and crocodiles, I stand before you, sitting behind you, showing you all the hairs on my bald head. Next Tuesday is Good Friday and there'll be a mother's meeting for men only. Admission free, pay at the door. Seats all round, sit on the floor. If you don't like that you can go next door.'

'What's that? Molespeare?'

'Shakemole. Pure Shakemole. Is it a classical concert you're going to?'

'Yes.'

'But you don't like classical music.'

'That's only 'cos I don't know any. Anyway, everyone likes some of it. Every home has got *The Planets* and bits of Tchaikovsky.'

'My dad's got Beethoven's Fifth, and that one with all the singing on it. I never thought of listening to any of it.'

'You should. She took me home on Sunday and played me Mahler's First Symphony. It was absolutely amazing. Makes rock music look really sick.'

'What are you going to hear?'

'More Mahler. The Second Symphony.'

'Isn't it expensive?'

'Two pounds fifty.'

'That's cheaper than a rock concert. How long's it go on for?'

'I don't know. About an hour and a half I think she said.'

'I don't suppose I could come?'

‘We’ve already got the tickets. She got them a few weeks ago. She was going with her gran but now her gran can’t make it so she’s invited me.’

‘Oh.’

‘Come on,’ said Finn. ‘Let’s go to the art block. You’re getting depressed about it – I know you.’

His father looked up as he came down to breakfast.

‘Good morning, my lad,’ through bacon and eggs. An outspread *Sun* occupied half the table.

Within seconds of his sitting down his mother slid a plate in front of him. ‘Don’t dawdle,’ she said. ‘We’re all running a bit late.’

Unexpectedly, Sophie wandered in, fully dressed, very smart but looking early-morning vague.

‘I can’t find my keys,’ she said.

‘On the mantelpiece.’

‘Oh yes.’

‘What time is it you’ve got to be there?’ asked her father.

‘Ten o’clock.’

He looked at his watch. ‘Best be early,’ he said.

‘It’s only a half hour journey. Do I look all right, Mum?’

‘Get your hair off your face,’ said her father. ‘They won’t want to talk to you through a wall of hair.’ Simply to avoid an argument she pushed her fringe back. It bounced down over her eyes almost immediately.

‘You look fine, love,’ said her mother.

‘Can’t you put a clip in it to keep it back?’ asked her father.

‘It’ll be all right.’

‘And don’t sit staring at your feet when you’re in there. Hold your head up when you’re talking to them. You know what you are – mumble, mumble, head down. It makes a bad impression.’

‘All right Dad, I know.’

‘Are you going to clip it back?’

‘It’ll look stupid.’

‘Mum, tell her,’ said Father, bringing his chair round so that he was facing his daughter instead of his food. He still clutched his knife and fork and for a moment Michael imagined him having a go at her with them, carving her into a shape he approved of . . . a bit off here, chop, slice, a bit off there, cut, hack. This bit up here, that bit over there . . .

‘It’s one thing for Princess Diana to go around like a whimsical sheepdog, but that sort of effect won’t get you a job.’

‘Don’t go on at me, Dad.’

‘Pin it back eh, there’s a love. You’ve got a nice face when all that hair’s out of the way.’

‘I’m not putting a clip in it – I’ll look like I’m retarded or something. Don’t go on about it, Dad.’

Her father turned his chair to the table again, indicating that he had given up with her. ‘It’ll be your own fault,’ he said through bacon, ‘if someone with a bit of thought to their appearance gets it instead of you.’

‘I have thought about my appearance,’ said Sophie.

‘Then you’ve thought wrong, if you ask me, but you’ll have it your own way I expect.’

‘Yes I will, thank you.’

‘I think it looks fine,’ said Michael.

‘Pipe down, you,’ said their father, gesturing at Michael with his knife. ‘We don’t need your tenpence worth.’

‘I only said . . .’

‘Here you are dear,’ Sophie’s mother handed her a pink plastic hair clip. She gave an encouraging nod of her head which was a sign for her to humour her father. ‘Go on, it won’t hurt, there’s a good girl.’

Frowning, Sophie fixed the clip in her hair. She looked in the mirror. ‘I do,’ she said, ‘I look like a complete spasma.’ She pulled out the clip and threw it on the chair. ‘I’ll see you later,’ she said.

‘You’re a bloody fool,’ shouted her father after her, spraying food.

‘Fool yourself!’ from the hall. The front door slammed.

‘She thinks she owns this damn house, the way she behaves.’

‘You know what she’s like before an interview.’

‘She’s a fool. She’ll fail this interview just like she did all the others until she pulls her socks up.’

‘She’s doing her best.’

Father pushed his plate away in disgust. ‘She sells herself short. She’ll always sell herself short until she starts behaving as if she really wants a job. Who’s going to employ someone who wanders around like a tit in a trance, mumbling away, peering at them through all that hair. I tell you that girl doesn’t have the first idea on how to project herself. And she won’t listen to a word that’s said to her. They think they know it all, these kids.’ The knife pointed at Michael again. ‘And you can wipe that smirk off your face. It’ll be your turn soon and you’re no better. And it’ll be worse for you, boy, unless you knuckle down and do some proper work at that school of yours instead of spending all your time mooning over pictures of women in their underclothes up in your room. And you can get those filthy



pictures down off your walls. How do you think your mother feels – going in there to clean up with all those things Sellotaped on the wall. And I've told you before about Sellotape on the wallpaper. You'll be coming whining down here soon wanting the place redecorated.'

Michael remained silent under this tirade, but as he looked into his father's eyes he was thinking, I hate you. I hate you. Like a slow pulse beat of rebellion that he was too scared to give voice to.

The doorbell rang.

'That'll be Jim,' said his mother. 'Come on, Michael, don't keep him waiting.'

Michael put his coat on.

'Bye Mum,' he called. He slammed the front door. The cold air seemed very clean and refreshing and he took a deep breath as though to clear a nasty smell out of his body.

'Morning dear boy,' said Jim.

They walked briskly along the road to school.

'Hold on,' said Michael outside a newsagents. Jim waited outside while Michael bought the *Star*.

'You'll go blind,' said Jim as Michael turned to page seven.

'Cor, look at them.' They both laughed, hunched over the picture as they set off again for school.

## *Chapter 5*

‘Hello, Michael, come along in.’ Vivien Harker, Beverley’s grandmother, was a tall, slim woman. She was dressed smartly but plainly, all in black, upright and remarkably beautiful. Her black-grey hair was tied in a hard bun and pierced through with long shiny pins with jewelled ends. The house fitted her to perfection: old and grand and formidably elegant, but at the same time quietly welcoming.

A pyramid of school books lay on the floor by the hall stand. Beverley’s.

‘I’m negotiating a new bike,’ said the elderly woman. ‘Beverley’s old one’s a write-off. Forks all twisted. The wheels must have gone right over it. Bit of luck she went over rather than under, isn’t it?’

‘I suppose so.’

‘You should always count your blessings. She could’ve been killed.’

‘Have you seen her today?’

‘Yes, I went in this afternoon. Ah! That reminds me.’ She scribbled something on a small pad on the stand. ‘I have to write everything down these days, my memory’s on its way out. There we are: phone garage in morning about odd knocking under bonnet. I hope the car’s not going to collapse on me as well. It’d be like losing a leg. I hope you’re hungry.’

‘I haven’t eaten since breakfast,’ said Michael, forgetting midday sandwiches and crisps.

‘Splendid, I’ve done us a lamb vindaloo out of my Madhur Jaffrey book. You like curry, don’t you?’

‘Yes. Lots.’

‘Good. I’ve been eating a bit junkily since Beverley’s accident. Cooking for one’s not much fun, so I made the most of you coming round. There’s a nifty little spice shop just round the corner so I was able to get the right ingredients without trekking to the Punjab. Do you like pils?’

‘Pils?’

‘No. Pils, it’s a type of lager.’

‘I’m not sure.’

‘You will, I’m sure, it’s very sweet. Did I tell you this house used to be a manse?’

‘No.’

‘Come into the lounge, the curry won’t be ready for half an hour or so, so we’ve plenty of time to fiddle about.’

The room had a large mullioned bay window, a grand piano and an impressive three-piece suite. One corner was filled by a very expensive-looking record player with a control panel like something out of Concorde. Beverley and her gran had rigged up speakers in every room so that if you pulled the right levers and pressed the right buttons the whole house would reverberate with music.

A record was playing softly. Piano music.

‘It’s no good,’ said Beverley’s gran.’ I know Beverley loves all that boisterous stuff best, but I can’t resist a bit of refined tinkling when I’m left to my own devices.’ She talked as though Beverley was simply out of the room rather than lying in a coma in hospital.

‘It’s nice,’ Michael said.

‘Do you think so? Chopin. I’m so glad. I’m sure Beverley, only tolerates it. I’m sure she humours me, you know – putting up with my taste because I’m old and dodder.’

Michael smiled. Beverley’s gran wouldn’t have known a dodder if she trod on one in the street.

‘Where are my manners?’ she said, tapping her forehead. ‘I told you – my brain’s going like cotton-wool. Sit down, sit down, you’re only making the place look untidy. That sofa came with the place, you know. Imagine the

bottoms that have been on it. This whole room is like that – full of ghosts.’ She rubbed her hands. ‘Smashing! Would you like a sherry? Do you drink sherry?’

‘I don’t think so.’

‘No. Maybe not. Maybe not. I’ve got . . . now, what have I got? The fridge is full of cans of Beverley’s stuff – diet this and diet that and diet whatever. I keep telling her she’s so thin she doesn’t cast a shadow. There was a joke. Something about having to walk around in a shower to get wet – something like that. I can never remember jokes, can you?’

‘Not often.’

‘Do you still see much of . . . what’s his name . . . the thin blond chap . . .’

‘Finn Fraser.’

‘That’s him. Do you?’

‘Not since he split up with Beverley. He thinks I nicked her off him.’

‘Does he indeed? What a patronising attitude! As though Beverley couldn’t choose for herself.’

‘You don’t think I did, then? We were really good friends before . . .’

‘People don’t steal other people – people go where they want to. The whole idea of women being possessions that are handed round . . .’ she snorted. ‘Hang on, I shall have to get myself a drink if I’m going to start a harangue.’

She poured a sherry and sank comfortably into an armchair. 'Ah, that's better.' She took a sip. 'Now, where was I?'

'I'm not sure. Something about women being handed round . . .'

'Absolutely! It's the old partriarchal society. Did you know I had a man stand up at a meeting I was addressing and actually advocate a return to Victorian morality? Ordinary chap, suit, tie, balding a bit and he was going on *ad nauseam* about the importance of the woman in the home. God help his wife. And the really grim bit is that a clown like that can have children and bring them up believing all that old claptrap. Boys for the offices, girls for the home. It was funny, in a way, I suppose, going on about how vital a family was: mum, dad, two point thingummy kids, and when I asked him how much time he spent with the family, do you know what he said? He said he was building up his business at the moment but he planned to spend more time with his family next year. Next year. I said – they all say next year, and it always is next year. The kids were in bed when he got home – he was working a six day week and he was too tired on Sunday. What can you do with people like that?'

'Pour treacle over them?' suggested Michael.

‘Now there’s a thought,’ said Beverley’s gran with a bright-eyed laugh.

‘Up-end a tin of syrup over them.’ She took another sip of sherry. ‘What an invigorating idea. To hell with passive resistance – treacle’s the answer.’ She levered herself out of the armchair. ‘Right,’ she said. ‘I must peruse the grub. I’ve never burnt a vindaloo and I don’t intend to start at my age. Shan’t be a tick.’

Michael felt strangely at ease, alone in the grand old room. He found Mrs Harker’s age dominating and overwhelming, but more than that was the effect of the immediacy of her mind. It was as though a woman in a Victorian print came to life, stepped out of the frame and leapt astride a motorbike. It was exhilarating and bewildering. Michael’s own grandmothers, Nanny Wise and Nanny Byfield, behaved in a predictable manner: they ate mostly convenience foods, or meat and two veg; they liked Max Bygraves and Esther Rantzen, they disliked loud music and public kissing. They talked through a lifetime’s accumulation of clichés: ‘Yes dear, that’s young girls for you . . .’ ‘Things are so expensive nowadays, shocking, shocking . . .’ They seemed in a permanent state of shock like plump old budgies repeating the same few phrases over and over again. ‘Shocking!’

They ate in a long, ivory coloured back room at a polished table that darkly reflected the chandelier. The old lady had drawn velvet curtains over french windows. At the centre of the magnificent fireplace stood an old-fashioned gas fire.

‘Where’s Gustav?’ asked Michael, realising he hadn’t seen the dog.

‘Up lying on Beverley’s bed, poor old thing. He misses her enormously. Well – we both do – it’s like having all the sunlight taken out of the house. If I spend more than a couple of hours here I begin to feel like old Miss Haversham . . .’

‘I know: *Great Expectations*.’

‘Not that Beverley is anything like Estella, of course. Quite the reverse.’

‘Mm.’ Michael took a sip of lager. It was ice cold, cutting cleanly through the sharp spice of the curry.

‘I hate indecision, you know,’ said the old lady suddenly. That’s what’s really getting me down about all this at the moment. If they just said: she’ll wake up Tuesday week, or even: she’ll wake up on the fourth of July, it wouldn’t be so bad, but they don’t appear to have the foggiest idea when she’ll wake up. It’s enough to drive you potty, isn’t it?’

‘I know it’s daft,’ said Michael, ‘but I keep imagining she’s somewhere else, swimming away from me.’



‘She loves swimming. She won awards at Junior School. Did you know that?’

‘No. She never said.’

‘Yes. When she was ten. There were people who wanted her to take it up properly, but it meant an awful lot of training and she had to choose between her music and her swimming . . .’

‘And she chose music?’

‘Yes. It was very difficult for me not to put my oar in, but I managed to maintain a dignified silence until she’d made her decision.’

Michael was surprised. ‘You didn’t try to persuade her to do what you thought best?’

‘Good grief, no. You look as if you don’t believe me.’

‘No. It’s not . . . you just seem . . .’ Michael laughed, ‘ . . . a bit . . . well . . . very strong . . . I’d have thought.’

‘So’s Beverley.’

‘Yes, but – well . . . I’m sure my dad would’ve made sure I did what he thought was a good idea if I’d had a choice like that. He tends to let you know what he thinks.’

‘Surely he wouldn’t make you do anything you didn’t want to.’

‘I never get a chance to find out whether I want to do anything or not. As soon as anything comes up, he’s in there with his opinion and then you’re stuck. If you do

what he says, you can't tell if it's 'cos you really want to, or if it's 'cos he's suggested it and it's too much of a battle to do the opposite. At the same time, if you really don't want to do something, you can't tell if that's 'cos you're fed up with him telling you what to do, or 'cos you actually, truly, don't want to do it. It drives me crackers sometimes.'

Michael began to warm to the subject. 'And you haven't simply to do what he says, either: you've got to do it with a big beaming smile or he gets ratty. It's not enough for him to get his own way – you've got to pretend you honestly agree with what he says.'

'It sounds very difficult.'

'My mum says it's only 'cos he's concerned – 'cos he loves us so much – but I can't help feeling it's a funny sort of love that does that to you – stifles you like that. I sometimes feel that I'm never going to get a chance to grow up properly until he's . . . well, until I can get away from him. And even then I've got this horrible feeling that, even if I move away, he'll still BE there – even if it's miles away – he'll still be there affecting my behaviour. Before I started going out with Beverley, Finn and I were talking about getting a flat together. My mum just said "that'll be fun," but Dad . . . you wouldn't believe it. . .'

‘Fathers do get very twitchy at the thought of their fledglings quitting the nest.’

‘Why fathers? Mum didn’t go barmy – just Dad.’

‘The patriarchal society,’ said Mrs Harker. ‘We’re still deep in it.’ She made a gesture with one hand. ‘Up to our necks in it.’

‘I’m completely underneath it,’ said Michael. ‘Drowning in it. It wouldn’t be so bad if he was always unpleasant – then I could just write him off as a waste of time, but Mum’s always defending him. He had a very unhappy childhood, she says. Apparently his parents just ignored him. She says he’s overcompensating. But I don’t see why I should have to suffer because of what my dad’s parents did to him . . .’

‘We all suffer the consequences of our parents’ childhoods. That’s why, in one way, Beverley is quite lucky.’

‘She never told me about her parents.’

‘Her father lives in Bristol. Angela – her mother – died when she was five. Did you know she was illegitimate?’

‘No.’ Michael was slightly shocked.

‘Yes. It was all a bit messy. Her father’s got a family. Her mother worked for him as a secretary – it was her first job. They had a brief affair and she got pregnant. The father disowned her – he couldn’t

have his tidy family unit disrupted by that, so she came back here to me. He used to send money. Quite regularly at first – but that dried up some years ago. I suppose I could've sued for it, but I had enough money of my own for it not to be vital; I thought it was better for him to be left out of it, especially as he didn't seem over-anxious to be involved. Blood isn't always thicker than water and it didn't strike me that Beverley would be any better off having contact with a man like that. Mind you, I told her all about it as soon as I thought she was old enough to understand. I told her she could have his address if she wanted to get in touch with him. I think she wrote once – but there was never any reply.'

'She's never mentioned any of that,' said Michael.

'It's probably not important to her. On the other hand, it's probably best if you don't let her know that I've told you. She might want to tell you her own way in her own time. It's quite a private sort of thing, isn't it? If I wasn't such an appalling chatterbox . . . oh, well . . . never mind, eh – I don't imagine it'll change your feelings about her, will it – knowing her grisly past?'

'Not at all. It's funny: I never even wondered about her parents – they just weren't around and that was that. I can't

have a very enquiring mind. I wish I did sometimes. I take everything at face value and never bother to question anything. The only thing I can remember thinking was how lucky she was not to have a father to boss her about.'

'I sometimes think that the kibbutz system is the fairest for children,' said Mrs Harker.

'What's that? It's in Israel, isn't it?'

'That's right. It's a system of communal living where all the adults are responsible for all the children. It would give a child a far wider outlook. Instead of only being fed the views of one or two dominant adults, a child would take in a broad cross-section of ideas – it would mean the child would have to make its own decisions far earlier – and have a far greater chance of coming to its own decisions. I don't suppose it would work in England though. People are more horrified by the idea of the break-up of the nuclear family than they are about nuclear war, you know.'

'But the family is so stupid.'

'I quite agree. I think it probably worked better when there were larger family circles: you know – cousins and uncles and aunts and so on, all living together . . . although for ordinary people that was never a really serious option – the average working person has always had to be prepared to migrate

to where the work was. Pernicious damned system. Hold on – I'm in danger of getting onto my soapbox and you should never mix soap and curry. Have you finished?’

‘Yes, thanks. It was super. My mum's curry comes out of a tin – this is the first time I think I've eaten a proper one.’

‘You'll have to have one of Beverley's concoctions when she comes out. I think she's an even better cook than I am, if that's possible.’ She pushed her plate aside. ‘More lager?’

‘Please.’

‘You'll have to open another can. I hope I'm not getting you tiddly. Oh, I don't know though – what's the harm eh?’

Michael smiled, a warm glow filling him. ‘Can I help you wash up?’ he asked.

‘No. I make it a rule. I never wash up in other people's houses and they never wash up in mine. It saves a lot of confusion. Come along, bring your glass and we'll go and sit in the lounge and bask in the warmth of some of my favourite music’

The dog was sitting patiently outside the door.

‘Hello, Gustav. There's a good boy. Been waiting for us, have you? Come on, then.’ The three of them went into the lounge.

‘What time have you got to be back?’ asked Mrs Harker.

‘Oh, I don’t care. Any time.’

‘Don’t worry about getting home. I can drive you.’

The curtains were pulled closed. Beverley’s gran put on a record and they settled themselves in armchairs, the dog at Michael’s feet, its chin on his knee, its questioning eyes on his face. ‘She’ll be all right,’ Michael whispered to it. ‘She’ll be better in no time.’

The evening passed in a heady haze of soft music and adult conversation. For the first time in his life, Michael found himself being treated as a grown person.

‘Goodness gracious me,’ said Mrs Harker. ‘Look at the time.’

Hazily Michael focused on the ormolu clock on the mantelpiece. Ten past eleven.

‘I’m supposed to be up at half past seven,’ she said. ‘I’m lecturing in St Albans tomorrow morning. Bother it. My only lecture this month and it’s got to be tomorrow. I can remember when I did two or three a week, not all that long ago, either,’ she half-sighed. ‘*Sic transit the jolly old gloria mundi* eh?’

Michael stood up, a trifle wobbly.

‘I can get a bus,’ he said.

‘No, no, I have the car,’ she said with a flourish. ‘Coming, Gustav? Coming for a ride?’

They piled into the car.

‘You’re sure you won’t get into trouble?’

‘No. It’ll be all right.’

‘I can come in with you and explain that we forgot the time.’

‘No. It’s all right.’

Unsteadily Michael put his key in the lock. The door was flung open before he could turn it.

‘Where the bloody hell have you been?’ His father was in his dressing-gown.

Michael stared unblinkingly at him. ‘You know where.’

‘You know the rules. You’re supposed to be in by ten. What’s the idea?’

‘We forgot the time.’

‘You’re lucky you didn’t get locked out.’

Michael took a deep breath.

‘Your mother’s been worried sick about you. I know bloody well that you don’t give a damn about what I think but . . .’

‘Can I come in?’

‘Get up to your room. I’ll talk to you in the morning. You’re not too big for a thrashing, yet, my boy, so wipe that insolent look off your face.’

Michael slid past him. ‘Where’s Mum?’

‘In bed.’

Michael knocked on his parents’ bedroom door. ‘Mum?’



‘Yes?’

He pushed the door open. ‘I’m back,’ he said. She was sitting up in bed reading a book. ‘Were you worried?’

‘Your father was getting anxious.’

‘He said you were worried about me.’

‘Didn’t I tell you to get to bed?’ His father came in like a thunderbolt.

‘I was just seeing whether Mum was really worried. She says she wasn’t.’

‘Don’t backtalk me, boy.’

‘I’m not a boy,’ shouted Michael. ‘I’m sick of you calling me a boy. And I’m sick of you using Mum against me.’

‘What?’ His father’s face went a deep wrathful red.

‘You’re always doing it. Do you think I’m completely stupid? “I know you don’t care what I think but Mum thinks so-and-so,” you’re always doing it. I’m sick of it. You’re always using Mum to get at me.’

‘Don’t talk such complete rubbish. Your mother was worried about you.’

‘She just said she wasn’t. Mum: you just said you weren’t . . .’ Michael saw his father’s arm come up out of the corner of his eye but there was no time to dodge. With the follow through of the slap his father caught hold of his collar and flung him out of the room.

‘Get out of my sight before I do something I’ll regret.’

Michael scrambled to his feet, his eyes smarting with tears of anger and pain. For the first time in his life he stood defying his father. It was all the bravado he could muster: simply to stand there staring into his father’s eyes – he had no courage left for words. They could only have stood facing each other down for a few seconds but it felt like hours to Michael. He would not be sent to his room like that.

His mother appeared.

‘Do as Dad says, Michael.’ He looked at her and the violence ebbed out of his expression. ‘Go on, there’s a good boy.’

Keeping his eyes on his mother to make it clear that he was doing it for her and not for him he nodded and walked slowly up the stairs and into his room.

Sophie was leaning over the banister, out of their father’s sight. She put out an arm and caressed his hair. ‘Good for you,’ she whispered, and vanished soft-footed back into her bedroom.

Michael lay fully clothed on the bed, gradually calming down as the enormity of what he had done overwhelmed him.

There was a storm of feet on the stairs and his bedroom door banged wildly open.

His father stood, crimson with anger, at the foot of his bed.

‘I’ve just got one thing to say to you my lad.’ Michael sat up silently. ‘We’ll have no clash of personalities in this house, is that clear?’ Silence. ‘Is that clear?’

‘Yes.’

‘There’s only one boss in this house, and, by thunder, it’s not going to be you. If you don’t like that you can pack your bags. But if you do leave, don’t think you’ll be able to come whining back. It’s a one-way ticket if you walk out and I’ll wash my hands of you. Got that?’

‘Yes.’

Michael was alone, but the image of his father seemed to leave a stain in the air. For a long time Michael sat in numb silence, but eventually thirst drew him to his feet. He took off his coat and shoes and tiptoed downstairs. He gazed at his parents’ bedroom door, and then his expression altered. He crept closer and put his ear to the door. He could hear sobbing. He frowned, licking his lips nervously. The sobbing was that of a man and in among it he could hear his mother’s soothing voice.

## *Chapter 6*

**‘I’m afraid I must end this assembly on a very serious note.’ It was unlikely that a single boy in the hall could have cared less about how the headmaster ended his assembly. He could have whipped out a banjo and done a rendering of ‘When I’m Cleaning Windows’ for all the interest it would have engendered.**

**In Michael’s row Blackmore had a pincer-like grip just above Murray’s knee and was increasing the pressure just to see the smaller boy squirm. Cumbers was re-reading a much creased love letter from a girl he had met the other weekend in Guildford. Berry and O’Donnell were surreptitiously playing cards: O’Donnell was one of those enviable people who could shuffle a deck of cards by flipping them smoothly through his fingers without the need of a tabletop. Cutler was fiddling with his spots and Burbage was carefully picking the threads of the silver**

stripe out of the bottom of his tie. All quite normal assembly behaviour.

Michael was examining the backs of his hands, idly wondering why veins were blue and blood was red. Concern for Beverley was a constant backdrop to his most trivial mental meanderings, but sometimes her face would float in front of his eyes and he would realise he hadn't given her any thought for an hour or so – and then he would feel guilty and chastise himself by running over in his mind the dreadful minutes of her accident.

He frowned. The crescent moon. That little silver crescent moon which she wore on a thin chain round her neck. He pictured her in the horrible hospital bed but he couldn't see it. She hadn't been wearing it. They must have taken it off. He made a mental note to ask them where it was.

The headmaster droned on – but suddenly he gained Michael's attention. 'A pupil associated with our school is presently lying unconscious in a hospital bed following a serious road accident. Many of you in the sixth form will be acquainted with Beverley Miller and will, I'm sure, be saddened to learn of her plight. A collection is being organised to send some token of our concern to her. Anyone wishing to contribute to this should see the School

Secretary at short break this morning.' The headmaster leaned forward, elbows on the lectern. 'Beverley Miller is in hospital due to riding her bicycle carelessly on a main road . . .'

Michael stared at him in amazement.

' . . . I feel sure that this incident will serve as a timely warning to all of you who use bicycles on your journey to school. You cannot afford a moment's loss of concentration.' He became pious, 'Alas, it is a sad fact that the drivers of motorised vehicles give scant thought to those who have less robust frameworks with which to protect themselves. Incidents such as this give me serious pause for thought as to whether I should allow the use of bicycles at all. Beverley Miller's carelessness has resulted in her hospitalisation – others may not be so fortunate . . .'

Michael stayed glued to his seat while, in his imagination, he jumped up and shouted abuse at the headmaster.

'Let Beverley Miller's example be a lesson to you all. Dismiss.'

Dismiss! Michael felt for the first time how easy it was for people to shrug off others' problems. The headmaster dismissed the assembly and dismissed Beverley with the same indifference. He had gone through the official ritual of

caring and now, as far as he was concerned, the incident was closed.

He might, later on in the day, ask how much money had been collected – or he might not.

Michael sat at his desk, sorting out books for the morning's lessons, his thoughts elsewhere.

‘Want some dirty pictures?’

He looked up. Cutler's palm was curled round a Polaroid shot.

‘Don't you ever think of anything else?’ said Michael, tiredly. ‘Push off.’

‘Only fifty pence,’ persisted Cutler.

‘I said push off.’

‘Gone off girls, have you?’

‘Just go away, will you?’

Cutler hovered indecisively. It was unusual for Michael to refuse his wares.

‘Got no money? That it?’ Michael didn't bother answering. ‘I'll keep 'em for you if you like.’

‘Are you going deaf, you great spotty goat?’

‘Spotty goat yourself – you going poofy or something? Old poofy Byfield. Don't like pictures of girls anymore?’

Michael thrust out an arm, pushing Cutler into a row of desks.

‘Trying to touch me up, are you?’ shouted Cutler, rubbing his bruised leg.

‘Old Byfield’s gone queer. He’s trying to touch me up.’

Normally Michael would have simply walked off in the other direction and left Cutler to shout his abuse at the empty air, but Michael had been under abnormal pressure recently and although Cutler’s attempted insult didn’t bother him in the least, there was something deeply offensive about the fact that a nasty little creature like Cutler could be standing there full of life and health while Beverley lay unconscious in hospital.

Michael stormed up out of his chair, picking his desk bodily from the floor and flinging it towards Cutler who, unhurt, had fallen between two desks and was trying to crawl away.

‘Byfield!’ Michael looked round. His form tutor stood in the doorway.

‘Get him to leave me alone, then,’ he shouted.

‘Come with me.’

Cutler had scrambled out from the wreckage of the desks and was pressed against the far wall like a cornered rat.

Michael followed his form tutor out of the classroom.

‘Well? What’s the idea?’

‘Cutler’s a pest, sir. He wouldn’t leave me alone.’



‘So you chucked a desk at him?’

‘I didn’t mean to.’

‘Come again?’ Come again always meant that Mr Willis was waiting for a sensible reply to a question.

Michael shrugged.

‘I shan’t ask you to apologise because I know it wouldn’t mean anything, but if I see another incident like that from you I’ll have you off down to the headmaster so quick your feet won’t touch the ground. Have I made myself absolutely clear?’

‘Yes sir.’

‘Good. Now go and clear that mess up and if there’s anything broken it’ll be your responsibility.’

‘Sir.’

Michael sat through morning lessons in an angry stupor. The world seemed to be closing in on him and when he tried to visualise Beverley she kept swimming away from him.

‘Are you going deaf, Byfield?’

He looked up blankly.

‘Carry on reading where Khan left off.’

He stared at the book.

‘The animals crowded round the van,’ hissed Cumbers.

Michael found the passage.

The animals crowded round the van.  
'Good-bye Boxer!' they chorused,  
'Good-bye!'

'Fools! Fools!' shouted Benjamin,  
prancing round them and stamping  
the earth with his small hoofs.  
'Fools! Do you not see what is written on  
the side of that van?'

Michael poured all his feelings into that  
reading – his pent-up emotions gushed out  
as he read aloud the final betrayal of Boxer,  
the dumbly loyal shire horse from *Animal  
Farm*.

Too late, someone thought of racing ahead  
and shutting the five-barred gate; but  
in another moment the van was through  
it and rapidly disappearing down the road.  
Boxer was never seen again.

Michael stopped reading and glanced up,  
almost startled to find himself in the  
classroom, so deeply had he identified  
himself with the story. The room was  
absolutely silent and every eye was on him  
as though mesmerised.

Mr Benson was looking at him with  
a most curious expression on his face.  
Suddenly Michael realised that tears were

silently flowing down his cheeks. He rubbed his sleeve across his face; the intensity of the room made him feel dizzy. And still no one spoke. Michael threw the book down and blundered blindly to the door and ran and ran, along the corridor, down the stairs and out into the open air. He had forgotten his coat, but he could not bring himself to go back into the school; somehow he felt that this course he had started on must be followed to its end.

He walked to the school gates, ready at a moment's notice to alter course if a teacher or a prefect appeared, but none did. He passed through the gates and ran to the corner of the road where he would be out of sight and safe. He pulled his jacket round himself, buttoning it against the inclement weather, and strode purposefully along the pavement.

A figure rose up from between two parked cars.

‘Byfield? What are you doing here?’

Michael stared at Mr Willis, unable to believe his eyes.

‘Dentist, sir,’ he said automatically. The boot of Mr Willis’s car was open: it was sheer bad luck that he had chosen that time to get some sports equipment out for the afternoon.

‘Dentist?’

‘Yes sir.’

‘Did you give me a note?’

‘No, sir. I forgot.’

‘I’ll have it now, then.’

‘I forgot to bring it,’ said Michael.

‘Come again?’

‘It’s at home, sir. I forgot it.’

‘Do you want me to pursue this; I can check up on you very easily,’ said Mr Willis.

Michael said nothing.

‘Come with me.’

Desolately Michael followed his form tutor back into the school. Up the steps and into the lobby: the headmaster’s office to the left of him, the school secretary’s office to the right of him, on went Michael Byfield into the valley of death.

‘What are you going to do sir?’

‘Wait here.’

‘You’re not going to tell the head, are you?’

‘What do you think?’

‘Don’t sir, please.’

‘Wait here.’

‘Please?’

Mr Willis knocked on the dreadful door and entered. He came out again a few seconds later, ‘In you go,’ he said.

It had all happened too quickly for Michael to be frightened, but he felt severely anxious as he went into The Presence.

‘What’s the idea, boy?’

There really was nothing to say.

The headmaster stood up, took a deep breath and began to shout. Gradually through the noise, it began to dawn on Michael that the headmaster’s rage was insincere. Michael looked at him, curiously, at his blazing eyes and ranting mouth and felt strangely unconnected with it.

‘Don’t shout at me,’ said Michael, but even as he spoke all the courage that had been building up within him, rising and rising like a wave, crashed against the indomitable rock of his headmaster’s face and was smashed to fragments.

‘What did you say?’

‘I said . . . I . . . nothing . . . nothing . . . I’m sorry. I didn’t say . . . I . . .’ and then the tears came again and Michael felt utterly defeated, he knew what he had intended to say; he had thought it in letters a mile high as the mouth of his headmaster opened and closed and the noise billowed around his ears.

‘You don’t CARE about Beverley. You don’t CARE,’ he sobbed, the words coming into his mouth like boulders, hardly coherent.

The headmaster’s face drained of its official rage and a strange light came into his eyes.

‘What’s your name, boy?’

‘Michael Byfield.’ Michael’s nose felt uncomfortable and wet and his eyes were stinging with more held-back tears.

‘Sit down, Michael. I’ll be back in a moment.’

Like a trained dog Michael found himself on a chair. The headmaster went out, returning shortly with a thin file.

He sat down. ‘Michael Byfield, 23 Glamorgan Road.’

‘Yes.’

He flicked through the file. ‘You’re not exactly brilliant,’ he said without expression, ‘but you’re not an idiot either. ‘There are no notes in here about any previous trouble except a couple of detentions for talking too much. Is that right: too much talking?’

‘I don’t know. I s’pose so.’

‘It says here, written by your form tutor: “Michael must not let his sunny disposition interfere with his work!”’

‘Does it?’

‘Why were you playing truant?’

Michael shrugged.

‘That won’t do. I want to know. I’ve got all day. Why were you truanting? Were you meeting some friends?’

‘No.’

‘What did you intend to do?’

‘Go home.’

‘Would there have been anyone in?’

‘My sister, probably.’

‘Your mother?’

‘No – she works. She’s a part-time secretary.’

‘And your father? What does your father do?’

‘He drives a lorry for the PSA – the Civil Service.’

‘And your sister? Is she in work?’

‘No.’

‘How old is she?’

‘Nineteen.’

‘Has she been on a training scheme?’

‘Yes. It finished last year.’

‘What was she trained as?’

‘I don’t remember – something to do with catering, I think.’

‘And what plans do you have?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘You’re perilously close to the end of your school career not to know what you intend to do. What subjects are you taking?’

Michael endured this questioning for ten or more minutes, every trail of questions eventually winding down to ‘I don’t know.’

‘You mentioned Beverley Miller just now, the pupil about whom I spoke this morning. It was her you meant, wasn’t

it – the girl from Edward Leventon who had the accident – that was the Beverley you were referring to, wasn't it?

'Yes,' said Michael softly.

'Did you know her?'

'Yes.' said Michael. 'I DO know her, and it wasn't her fault. You made it sound like it was her fault. But it wasn't, not really. She'd forgotten her book and she must have suddenly remembered it and turned round to come back . . . I've visited her nearly every day . . . the doctors say she could wake up at any time: it's just a matter of being . . . patient . . .'

'You appear to know more about this than I do. Are you a personal friend of her family? Do you know them from outside school?'

'She hasn't got a family: just a gran.'

'Do you know her . . . Beverley . . . personally?'

'Yes. We've been going out together for about a month. Four weeks and four days today.'

'I see . . .' said the headmaster slowly. He leaned back in his leather chair, his fingers spread out on the padded arms. 'It must be a very difficult time for you.'

'I suppose.'

'Were you going to visit her this afternoon?'



‘I don’t know. I hadn’t thought.’

‘Now listen, Michael,’ he was leaning forward again, elbows on desk, hands clasped to form a pyramid. ‘You can’t just wander off any time you like. We’re responsible for you all the time you should be in school. We can’t just have boys strolling out whenever they feel like it – no matter how important the reason may appear. Do you understand that?’

‘Yes.’

‘Now look, you’ve not got a bad report here, your work is satisfactory, you mustn’t let yourself down now, lad, you’ve got some important exams coming up. I know they seem a long way off at the moment but you can’t slack rein now – this is the most vital time for you to knuckle down to some good solid work. I know it must be difficult, but you’ve got to keep your eye on the goal. Your friend . . . um . . . Beverley . . . she wouldn’t want you to neglect your work . . . and neither do we, we want to see you do well. You can’t let this defeat you, Michael. Come along, what lesson should you be in now?’

‘English.’

The headmaster looked at his clock. ‘There’s only five minutes left. Now, why don’t you go on down to your common room and have a quiet think about what I’ve said – there’s no point in you disturbing

the lesson this late.' He stood up. 'Hold on,' he said, 'I've just had an idea. Come along with me.'

Michael followed him across the lobby and into the secretary's office.

'Miss Fielding, has any money been collected for the injured Edward Leventon pupil?'

Surprisingly enough, considering the callousness of teenage boys, four pounds twenty-five pence had been donated.

The headmaster took the money and guided Michael out.

'Now look, I'm sure you would be by far the best person to deal with this,' he said, handing Michael the money. 'You're bound to know the sort of thing she would like.' He delved into his trouser pocket. 'And here's another pound. Off you go and buy her something. Come and show me what you've got after long break and we'll see about getting a card signed.'

Greatly confused, Michael found himself walking along a row of shops, the money heavy in his pocket. What can you get for someone who can't see, hear, speak or react. Flowers? Waste of time. Grapes? Useless. Magazines or books? Huh!

Michael passed outside a record shop. He remembered reading about people having tapes of their favourite music played to them

while in a coma. There was one in particular, a young girl who had Elvis Presley playing twenty-four hours at a stretch by her bed. He seemed to recall it had helped bring her round. God knows why. He dived into the shop and headed for the classical section.

There was a lot of Mozart and Tchaikovsky and Liszt, but Michael was looking for something specific. In the end he had to ask. They didn't have it. He came out into the street. There wasn't another record shop for miles and anyway the only place he felt certain would have it was a shop up town. Beverley had told him that they had everything.

He ran back to school, just catching the headmaster on his way out.

'I know what to get,' he said breathlessly, 'I know just what she'd like but I can't get it round here. Can I keep the money until Saturday? I'll be able to get it then.'

The headmaster looked searchingly at him. 'I don't see why not. Come to my office first thing Monday morning. All right?'

'Yes,' said Michael almost smiling. 'Yes sir.'

The headmaster nodded and made his way down the steps. 'Good,' he said, turning briefly. 'First thing Monday.'

'Yes sir.' Michael clutched the money in his pocket. He knew exactly what to get Beverley, and he knew exactly where to get it.

# *Chapter 7*

It was quarter to two on a bleak, drizzly Sunday afternoon in January. Easter was months away. Summer was out of sight and the school term had only just begun. Michael was hanging around in the kitchen getting under his mother's feet.

His mother rubbed herself. 'Your elbows!' she said.

'What's up?' said Sophie, leaning in the doorway.

'He's just at that height,' she said, rubbing herself again. 'Every time I turn round I get an elbow in my chest.'

'Shall I lay the table yet?' asked Michael.

'There's a love,' said his mother and, as he scooped up knives and forks she mouthed to Sophie, 'It gets him out of the way.'

Their father was working on something in the cellar – Michael dared not inquire too closely in case he got roped in. Sophie turned the radio up to listen to a favourite song.

She sat in her father's chair with her ankles tucked up to her bottom and her arms round her knees. Michael thought she must be double-jointed, the way she could fold herself into these positions. She had another interview lined up for Tuesday afternoon. She was no longer hopeful but she had to go through the motions or Father would shout at her and call her a lazy, good-for-nothing parasite. Their father, comfortably buffered from the realities of work-hunting by a job that was more or less guaranteed for life, gave short shrift to Sophie's horror stories. She had happened to meet the receptionist of the man who had interviewed her for her last job in the pub afterwards and she had told her that there had been one hundred and fifty applicants. It was a lottery, she had said, any one of that one hundred and fifty could have done the job. How could you choose? And it wasn't as though it had been any special sort of job either – just some clerical drone in a tatty old office in Camberwell. The odds were appalling.

Sophie helped transport plates to the table. 'Tell your dad,' said Mum.

'Dad,' she shouted down the cellar stairs, 'it's on the table.'

'Five minutes,' he called back.

'That'll mean half an hour,' said Sophie to her mother.

‘Put a lid on it and pop it in the oven, will you, love?’

The three of them began to eat. They had almost finished when father came through to wash his hands. Sophie frowned as her mother left her lunch to get their father’s out of the oven.

‘I wish she wouldn’t do that,’ she hissed to Michael, but Michael just grinned back uninterestedly.

Their mother carefully arranged father’s plate, wiping a bit of dried gravy from the edge with her finger.

‘Ow,’ she said. ‘Hot.’

‘He could have got it himself,’ whispered Sophie. ‘I don’t see why you . . .’

‘What’s all the whispering?’ asked their father, drawing his chair up to the table.

‘Nothing.’

‘Nothing doesn’t need whispering about.’ He began to eat. There would now be a ten minute wait before sweet; their mother would never serve up the second course while their father was still eating his first.

‘What’s for afters?’ asked Sophie.

‘Spotted dick.’

‘Super,’ said Michael. ‘What sort of custard?’

‘Custard flavour,’ said his mother. Michael twitched his lip; he had recently formed a

passion for chocolate custard. 'Haven't you got any chocolate?'

'You'll have to wait until I do the shopping.'

'Aw, boo!' he said, pretending to be annoyed. Everyone but their father realised that he was only kidding. 'How rotten can you get?'

'Don't talk to your mother like that.'

'He was only mucking about,' said Sophie.

'I don't care what he was doing, your mother works damned hard to keep you well fed. I don't see either of you lending a hand . . .'

'I was joking,' said Michael sulkily. 'God almighty . . .'

'What do you mean: God almighty?'

'Nothing,' mumbled Michael.

'I don't expect that sort of language at the table . . .'

'I'll dish up afters,' said Sophie, getting up.

His father pointed his knife at Michael. 'You just watch yourself, my lad, you're getting too bloody cocky recently – think you know it all. You'll not make a monkey out of me and get away with it – you must think I just swung down out of a tree . . .'

Every now and then a gob of half-chewed food would appear on his father's bottom lip and have to be sucked back in.

‘The custard’s in the blue jug,’ called their mother.

‘I’ve found it,’ Sophie called back. She came back in, balancing four bowls. ‘Take one,’ she said. ‘Quick, they’re slipping.’ But it was too late; a bowl, teetering on her forearm, slid sideways and upended itself on her father’s plate. There was a second of dreadful silence before Sophie burst out laughing. Their father stared at meat, two veg, spotted dick and custard; drops and blobs of custard and gravy patterned the table around his plate.

‘Sophie!’ burst out their mother, but Sophie was helpless with laughter, leaning on the back of her father’s chair, her hand to her face. Their father sat like a stricken god, knife and fork clenched in stiff hands, a paralysed expression of shock on his face.

Had Michael been the culprit, or even their mother, then all hell would have broken loose, but there was something about Sophie’s laugh that was impossibly infectious. Their mother began to giggle, her whole body shaking as she plucked the bowl out of the goo. Michael was quivering with suppressed laughter.

Their father’s shoulders began to bounce up and down as he struggled to keep a straight face. ‘You bloody fool,’ he tried to say, but he only got as far as ‘you



'bl . . . before he succumbed to laughter, wiping tears from his eyes with the backs of hands that still clutched his knife and fork.

Sophie was out of breath. 'Do you . . . do you want . . . a doggie . . . bag . . .?'

'Sophie!' Her mother's attempt at being stern was absolutely useless. You can't really be stern when your whole body is wobbling with laughter.

'That'll . . . teach you . . . to come to . . . the table . . . late...' gasped Sophie, her arm around her father's neck, her face against his head.

'It'll teach me not to eat with a load of chimpanzees,' said her father.

'Would you like some salt?' asked Michael.

'I'll do you some bacon and eggs, love,' said their mother.

'I'll do it,' said Sophie.

'Get this mess out of it,' said their father.

'Not hungry?' giggled Michael. 'Mum, Dad hasn't cleared his plate.'

'I'll clear it all over you in a minute,' said their father. 'See how you look with a meat and custard rinse. Spotted Mick!'

'There's some instant mash in the cupboard,' their mother called after Sophie.

‘Next time you say I can’t take a joke I want you to remember this,’ said their father to no one in particular.

‘You’ve got some custard on your jumper,’ said their mother. ‘I’ll get a cloth.’

Michael knocked on Sophie’s bedroom door.

‘*Entrez,*’ she called. She was sitting at her dressing table, doing something with her eyebrows. ‘You didn’t go then?’

‘No. I couldn’t be bothered.’ He came in and sat on the edge of the bed. The room was a tip: clothes, magazines, books, makeup, balls of cottonwool everywhere. The bed looked as though half a dozen drunken hippos had clog-danced over it.

Their parents had gone to visit relatives in Chatham and neither Sophie nor Michael had felt like going.

Sophie continued working on her eyebrows.

‘It’s getting dark,’ said Michael, looking out of the window.

‘It tends to at night.’

‘What are you doing?’

‘Playing the saxophone.’

Michael wandered over to the dressing table. ‘Why do you do that?’ he asked, watching her in the mirror.

‘To get a good line. If I don’t keep at it I’ll end up looking like the Incredible Hulk. She

rubbed the space above her nose and set to with tweezers.

‘Doesn’t it hurt?’

‘A bit. It’s Dad’s fault. Have you seen his eyebrows?’ She made a motion with the tweezers. ‘Right across the top of his nose – I’ve inherited it from him. It’s a sign of bad temper.’

‘Is it?’ Michael examined his own eyebrows.

‘Want a tweak?’ Sophie snapped the tweezers near his face.

‘Get off,’ he said. ‘What would I look like with plucked eyebrows?’

‘Sweet.’

‘I’ll look like I’ve gone peculiar.’

Sophie pursed her lips. ‘Mm. Ducky!’ she said.

‘Do you think I look all right, though?’ he asked.

‘For a gorilla . . .’

‘. . . seriously . . .’ She regarded him in the mirror. ‘Well, now,’ she said, swivelling round and looking him up and down.

‘Seriously,’ said Michael.

‘What do you mean, though?’

‘Well . . . would you fancy me if you weren’t my sister?’

‘Nope.’

‘Why not?’

‘Cos you’re too young, you’re too scruffy, your hair’s a mess and you don’t clean your teeth often enough.’

‘Apart from that?’

‘Apart from that you haven’t got a car, you haven’t got any money and you wouldn’t know what to do . . .’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Naughties,’ said Sophie.

‘I do.’

Sophie laughed dismissively.

‘I would know what to do,’ said Michael. ‘I know all about . . . that.’

‘Knowing about it and actually coming up with the goods are two entirely different things,’ said Sophie.

‘Oh, yes?’

‘It’s not the same as in magazines, you know,’ said Sophie.

‘I know that.’

Sophie pulled out a drawer and rummaged about in it. Michael leaned against the dressing table top.

‘Out of the way,’ said Sophie, shoving him aside. ‘I can’t find anything with you draping yourself all over the place.’

‘It’s not my fault I haven’t got a girlfriend,’ said Michael. ‘How am I supposed to meet any, that’s what I want to know.’

‘Youth clubs. There’s lots about, you know. There are probably hundreds of little

dolly-birds just looking for someone like you.'

'Do you think so?'

'No.'

'Swine.'

'Well, look at you. Look at your hair. When did you last wash it?'

'Um . . . I don't know . . . last week sometime.'

'There you are – last week sometime! You ought to wash it at least three times a week.' She fluffed up her pale brown fringe with her fingers. 'I do mine every other day.'

'I can't be bothered.'

'Let's have a look at it.' She pulled his head down. 'Look at it! Yeuk! It's thick with grease. You could fry chips off it. It needs cutting too.' She wiped her fingers on his shirt front. 'Ick!' she said. 'It's horrible.'

'I'll go and wash it.'

'No you won't, I'm having a shower in a sec. You can do it afterwards.'

Michael sat at his desk with his chin in his hands, staring at the wardrobe. He decided that he would smarten himself up. He went downstairs, hearing the shower running as he went past the bathroom, and dug out his mother's mail order catalogue. He tore up an envelope and marked the pages with the pictures of clothes he liked the look of. He

added the prices on his fingers and pulled a hopeless face. There was little hope of his mother agreeing to him running up a huge bill.

He leaned his head on his hand and went lingeringly through the pages of women's underclothes. Suddenly he slapped the book closed and went back upstairs. The bathroom door was open a crack. Steam trickled out. The water had stopped running. He touched the door with his fingertips and it opened a fraction. The mirror was misted but he could see vague movements reflected in it. He chewed his lip. He took a deep breath and pushed the door open.

'Sophie?' he called. 'Have you finished?'

She was leaning over the sink, completely naked except for a towel around her head.

'Get out!' she yelled, grabbing a towel around herself as she spun round. She flung a flannel which splatted on his shirt front.

'Oh! Sorry!' He backed out and sought the safety of his room, his heart beating very hard.

Sophie hammered on his door as she went past. 'It's free now,' she called.

Michael let out a long, slow breath of relief. 'Thanks,' he called.

With dripping hair he knocked on Sophie's bedroom door. 'Can I come in?' he called. The buzz of the hairdryer sounded from within.

He knocked louder. 'Sophie!'

'What?'

'Can I come in?'

'Yes.' She was in sweater and jeans, putting the finishing touches to her hair.

'Can I borrow the dryer?'

'In a sec.' He hung around aimlessly until she switched the hairdryer off. 'I'll do it for you if you like,' she said.

'Okay.'

'Sit on the floor, here,' she said, 'then I'll be able to reach you.'

He sat cross-legged at her feet and she began to dry his hair, tugging a brush through the tangles.

'Keep your bonce still,' she said. 'Honestly, you're absolutely hopeless. Right, that's the back done, turn round.' He pivoted round to face her.

After a while she patted his head. 'That's you done,' she said.

'You've got a hole,' he said, pointing. Right at the top of the inside of her leg the seam had come unstitched, revealing a thin sliver of skin.

'They're old,' she said. 'I only wear them for loafing about in.'

Michael stood up and looked at himself in the mirror.

'Isn't that better?' she said.

'I suppose.'

‘You ungrateful twerp!’ said Sophie, hitting him with the brush.

‘Going out tonight?’ he asked.

‘No. Barry’s on extra overtime again until Wednesday. He always seems to be on overtime these days.’

‘Fancy a game of something?’

‘If you like. What?’

‘You could teach me a card game.’

‘Okay. I thought you didn’t like cards.’

Michael shrugged.

‘There’s a pack in the drawer by my bed,’ said Sophie.

Michael found them. He smoothed out the bed cover and sat on the edge.

‘What do you want to learn?’

‘Teach me strip poker,’ he said.

Sophie laughed. ‘You’ll be lucky.’

‘Go on. Scared you’ll lose?’

‘Not at all,’ she said, shrugging, ‘If you want to play strip poker we’ll play strip poker.’

Michael had not expected her to agree.

She sat cross-legged on the bed. ‘I’ll keep it simple,’ she said, ‘I know what a dummy you are about remembering rules.’

They played four hands and Michael found himself without shoes or socks.

When Sophie finally lost a hand she took off her bracelet, ‘It’s clothes isn’t it?’ she said, laughing.



Michael lost his shirt on the next hand.

‘You can give up, if you like,’ said Sophie, still fully clothed. ‘It doesn’t seem to be going your way.’

‘No. I’ll keep playing.’

‘Sophie lost again and took off her ring.

‘That’s not fair,’ said Michael.

‘It’s all clothes,’ she said.

Michael frowned. If he lost again he’d have to take off his jeans – an idea which did not appeal to him at all.

He lost.

Sophie looked at him with raised eyebrows.

‘I don’t want to play any more,’ he said sullenly.

She reached over and ruffled his hair. ‘Ahhh!’ she said. ‘Poor old bruv,’ and she laughed.

Michael retrieved his shirt and morosely buttoned it up. Sophie grabbed a nail file from her bedside table and curled herself into a tight ball at the bottom of the bed, scrutinising and manicuring like a preoccupied hedgehog. Michael looked at the curve of her jeans stretched tightly around her bottom and along her thighs. Sophie was aware of his eyes and was not feeling quite as cool as she looked.

‘What would you do if someone tried to attack you?’ he asked, his mouth strangely dry.

‘What do you mean?’ came the muffled reply at counter-point to the edgy scratching of the nail file.

‘You know, if some bloke jumped on you.’

‘I’d scratch his eyes out and scream blue murder,’ said Sophie, glancing up.

‘Oh.’

There was silence for a few minutes.

Michael ran his eyes over her, chewing his lips. His heart beat madly in his chest.

‘What if it was me?’

Sophie laughed softly, pulling the plug on the tension that had been building up. ‘There’s a word for people like you.’

‘Yes,’ said Michael. ‘Miserable.’

Sophie looked up. ‘You really are a soft lump,’ she said affectionately.

‘I know. A big, soft, useless lump.’

‘That’s what I like – a bit of self-confidence.’

‘How’m I ever going to get a girlfriend, Sophie?’

Sophie put down the nail file and reached out and took hold of his hand. ‘You know what it’s like when you lose something? Like, when you can’t find your keys, or something and you hunt all over the place

and turn everything upside down and go abso-bloody-lutely ber-serk but the swines won't turn up. You know what that's like?

'Yes,' said Michael, perplexed.

'And then you think, "sod it", and go off without them, or it, or whatever, and then later, when you're not looking any more they just turn up out of the blue?'

'Yes.'

'That's where your girlfriend will come from. Out of nowhere when you least expect it.'

'Do you really think so?'

'I know so.'

'Was it like that with Barry and you?'

'Exactly.'

'Oh.' There was a sort of muted comfort in this. Michael took his hand away from Sophie's, the touch of her skin made him feel strange and filled him with a sort of hopeless frustration; like watching someone else eating when you're hungry and can't get at any food.

'What's it like. You know . . . with Barry?'

'What? Sex, you mean?'

Michael was a bit affronted that she could use the dreaded word so casually.

'Yes.'

'It's lovely. You'll find out one day.'

'Some hope.'

‘You will. Some lucky girl will snap you up and then you won’t have to ask.’

‘Are you a virgin still?’

‘Wha-a-at?’ Sophie laughed. ‘You cheeky monkey.’

‘I’m sorry. I just wondered if you . . . if you’d . . .’

‘That’s none of your business.’

‘I’m sorry. Are you annoyed with me?’

‘No, of course not, but you can’t just expect me to tell you something like that. It’s private. How would you like it if I started asking you what you get up to in bed of a night with those magazines of yours.’

Michael went bright, burning red.

Sophie laughed again. ‘Aha!’ she said. ‘That’s caught you out, hasn’t it.’

‘How’d you know about them?’

‘Mum found them when she was cleaning.’

Michael was horrified, but he was saved further mortification by the shrill shriek of the doorbell.

‘Hello,’ said Sophie, ‘who’s that come to disturb our little chat?’ She rolled off the bed and ran to the door.

Michael took a deep breath. Who else knew about his magazines? Sophie. His mum. Surely not his father? The thought of his father knowing was too terrible even to consider.

He heard Sophie run downstairs and along the hall. He heard the front door being opened. He heard voices.

‘Michael. It’s for you,’ he heard Sophie shout.

Puzzled, he got off the bed. Sophie was already coming back up the stairs as he left her room.

‘Out of the blue,’ she said as they passed.

‘What?’

‘Nothing.’

Michael ran downstairs. Finn and Beverley stood in the doorway.

‘Hello Mole,’ said Finn, beaming. ‘It’s us.’

‘Come on in,’ said Michael, smiling.

‘Meet Beverley,’ said Finn. ‘This is my mate, Mole.’

‘Hello Mole,’ said Beverley. She looked at Finn. ‘We have met actually,’ she said. ‘I dropped a book on him.’

‘From a great height,’ said Michael.

‘Auspicious beginnings,’ said Finn.

‘Absolutely!’ said Beverley with a wide smile. ‘Always leave a deep impression, that’s what I say.’

They laughed. Michael closed the front door.

‘Would you like some coffee?’ asked Michael.

‘Rather,’ said Finn.

‘Right, go on up, I’ll be with you in a tick.’ Michael stood in the kitchen his hands pressed down on the work surface to steady himself. His legs felt weak. As he poured boiling water into the three cups he resolved that he wanted Beverley for his own – no matter what he had to do to get her.

## *Chapter 8*

‘You doing anything today?’ asked Michael.

‘Not a lot,’ said Sophie, looking up from the thick book she was reading. ‘Why?’

‘I’m going up town to get something for Beverley. There was a collection at school and I’ve been given the money to buy her something.’

‘Where from?’

‘HMV. I’m going to get her a tape.’

‘All the way up there? Isn’t there anywhere closer?’

‘Not that I’m certain of getting it from. Do you want to come?’

‘Why not? Why jolly well not?’ said Sophie, laying her book face down on the couch.

‘When?’

‘Right now.’

‘Okay. I’ll just put some feet on.’

They walked to the nearest tube station and caught a train into the centre of London. It was drizzling but the HMV shop was right

next door to Bond Street station so they only had to dive a few metres to be under cover again.

‘Where’s what you want?’ asked Sophie. The shop was crowded with people and blasted by rock music. The lead singer sounded a bit like Bryan Ferry but they weren’t sure. Michael looked around. Tapes and videos upstairs, classics and folk and specialist downstairs.

‘Well, it’s classical,’ he said, ‘but I want a tape.’

‘Upstairs,’ said Sophie. ‘Obviously.’

‘Obviously,’ said Michael.

‘I’m going to look round down here.’

‘Okay. See you in a mo’ or so.’ Michael went upstairs. He had almost ten pounds on him due to having raided his savings. He found the classical section. There it was, Gustav Mahler’s Second Symphony. Conducted by George Solti with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. It was more expensive than he had expected, but still within his means. As he paid for it he couldn’t help but think that a mere two months ago he wouldn’t have been seen dead with a classical tape. He crammed the bag into his pocket and went down to find Sophie.

She was flicking through the twelve-inch singles.

‘Buying anything?’



‘I don’t know. There’s not much about at the moment.’ He rested his chin on her shoulder, following the kaleidoscope of record covers.

‘I wonder what it would be like if there was a law against flashy packaging,’ he said.

‘Dead dull.’

‘Yes, but then people would have to choose records specifically on whether they liked the music – if all the record covers were the same. Black with white writing or something. See what I mean?’

‘I know what you mean, but it wouldn’t work like that unless you banned posters and tee-shirts and made sure all the groups looked the same on stage.’

‘Orchestras all look the same.’

‘Even classical records have different covers.’

‘Yes, but most of them are crappy and you don’t buy a symphony ’cos it’s got a good cover.’

‘It’s different sort of stuff,’ said Sophie. ‘It’s a waste of time trying to compare it.’

‘It’s all music, isn’t it?’

‘Yes, but most people don’t buy rock music just for what it sounds like; they buy it ’cos they like the look of the group and so on.’

‘But that’s exactly what I’m saying. Beverley doesn’t like Mahler ’cos . . .’

‘I can’t be bothered with this,’ said Sophie.

‘Ratbag.’

‘You’ve only been interested in classical music for a month. You wouldn’t have known Gustav Mahler from the cat next door a few weeks ago so it’s no good you going all . . . if Beverley told you Max Bygraves was brilliant you’d be rushing out buying his stuff . . . I can’t take your opinions seriously . . .’

‘I never said you had to,’ said Michael mildly.

‘I should . . .’ Sophie stopped dead. Michael lifted his head off her shoulder. She was staring across the crowded shop floor.

‘What?’

‘That looks like Barry . . .’ she said. Michael followed the line of her eyes. It certainly did look like Barry – but there was one problem . . . he had his arm round a girl. Barry and Sophie had been going out for about six months.

‘He said he was working today . . .’ Barry did a lot of overtime. It occurred to Michael that overtime was an excellent excuse to use if you wanted to take two girls out at the same time without having to explain where you were. I can’t see you tonight –

I'm working late. Oh dear, thought Michael, this is going to be nasty.

'Perhaps . . . ' he had been going to say: perhaps it isn't him, but at that moment he turned round. He saw Sophie immediately and Michael could almost hear him think: Oh hell! He let go of the other girl as if she had suddenly become red-hot.

Sophie and Barry moved towards each other. The other girl followed Barry, completely unaware of the imminent confrontation.

'Hello,' said Sophie, a frozen smile on her face. 'Fancy seeing you here.'

'Yes, I . . . '

Sophie stared over Barry's shoulder at the approaching girl.

'I thought you were working,' she said.

' . . . Yes . . . I was . . . I . . . '

As though to save him the effort of inventing an excuse the other girl slid her arm across his shoulders. 'I've decided what I want, honey,' she said. 'Can I have the money?' (HONEY! thought Michael, Good grief.) There was a silence. 'Barry, love?' She glanced at Sophie.

'Who's your friend?' asked Sophie. Michael was keeping well out of it. Barry disengaged himself from the other girl's arm.

'This is Gemma . . . ' said Barry.

'Hello, Gemma.' Michael knew that tone in his sister's voice. Tin hats and flak jackets.

‘Hi . . .’

She’ll kill her, thought Michael.

‘She’s . . . she’s a friend from work . . .’  
said Barry. ‘We just nipped in here . . . for a  
record . . . on the way . . .’

‘We’re seeing U2 at Hammersmith  
Palais,’ said Gemma. ‘I thought it’d be an  
idea to get their new record and give it a  
few plays this afternoon. I hate going to  
concerts and not knowing the music, don’t  
you?’

‘U2?’

‘Yes.’ Gemma was becoming noticeably  
uneasy. ‘Where do you know Barry from?’  
she asked, her smile beginning to come  
apart at the seams.

‘We’ve been going out since October last  
year,’ said Sophie coolly.

That’s my sis, thought Michael.

That finished Gemma’s smile off  
completely. ‘You what?’ Barry looked as if  
he wanted the shop floor to open up and  
swallow him whole.

‘You mean . . .’

Sophie nodded. ‘You’ve got it,’ she said.  
‘How long’s he been taking you out?’

‘Two months.’

‘Oh, of course, that explains the overtime,’  
said Sophie. ‘Around Christmas time . . . is  
that right?’

‘Is this a joke?’ asked Gemma.

‘You’d better ask him,’ said Sophie. ‘Come on, Barry, you’re always good at thinking on your feet – worm your way out of this one.’

‘I was going to tell you . . .’ said Barry.

‘Tell her?’ said Gemma. ‘Tell her? What about telling me?’

‘I meant to . . .’

‘God, you bastard, you stinking bastard.’

‘Don’t get all . . .’

‘I bet you thought you were in clover,’ said Sophie. ‘What was it, a six day week with Sundays off?’

‘It’s not like that . . .’

‘Oh,’ said Sophie, her voice like ice. ‘I’m sorry. Have I got it all wrong, then? I must be mistaking you for someone else; I thought you were Barry Carter – the bloke who wanted me to move in with him in a couple of months.’

Gemma glared at him. Michael got the impression of a blowlamp on cracked old paint. ‘Right,’ she said. ‘That’s it.’ She opened her bag and pulled out a ticket. ‘Find some other silly cow to go with you.’ She threw the ticket on the floor and stormed off.

‘Gemma . . .’

‘Drop dead!’ she called back. A lot of people looked round as she ploughed her way to the street. She shouted: ‘Barry

Carter is a two-timing bastard – and he's as sexy as a plate of cold sick.'

Michael was very impressed.

Barry picked up the ticket. 'Come to the Palais with me?' he asked Sophie.

'Get lost.'

Michael trotted in Sophie's wake. Her face was stony with anger. She started walking in the opposite direction from the tube station.

'Sophie? Where are you going?'

'Leave me alone.'

'Sophie?'

'Push off, Michael, unless you want a mouthful too.'

Michael stopped. Sophie was walking very fast and she soon vanished into the crowds. For a while he stood aimlessly in the middle of the pavement. At last he shrugged and turned to find his way home alone.

Sophie had missed her tea, giving their father the chance to complain about them using the place like a hotel. Michael had gone straight upstairs and he played the cassette through on his portable deck. It had lasted well over an hour and most of it seemed very boring to Michael, except for the end which had a choir and an organ and was rather rousing. Michael was used to Beverley's favourite music sounding boring; he was also used to the fact that once you

had actually sat down and listened to it properly a few times it started to sound much more interesting. He would have liked to discuss this phenomenon with his friends but the moment he opened his mouth they would all stampede out of earshot like spooked bison.

Michael was in the front room, idly reading the problem page of one of Sophie's magazines. People had some very strange worries in their lives. He was particularly intrigued by the girl whose left breast was larger than the other. He was justing reading that no woman had perfectly matched breasts and that the important thing was to make the most of what you had, when the front door opened.

Their mother got up. 'That'll be Sophie, I expect she'll be hungry.' But Sophie had run straight upstairs.

'Sophie love?' called their mother. She was answered by a slamming door. Her mother sat down again. 'Perhaps she ate out.'

'She should let you know,' said Father. 'She can use a phone, can't she? If she's going to miss a meal.'

'I expect she didn't think.'

'Never does – that's half her problem.'

'She's getting a lot better lately,' said their mother. Michael looked up; it wasn't often his mother made a comment that

was as close to contradicting his father as that had been. He looked at them. Twenty years of marriage and the general effect was of granite and plasticine: Father the autocrat, Mother the pliant underling. It wasn't that simple of course, nothing ever is, but it did tend to look to the children as though their mother's personality had been entirely consumed by the domination of their father.

'I'll nip up and see if she wants anything if you like,' Michael said to his mother.

'She can make it herself if she does,' said Father.

Shut up, you berk, thought Michael. Father always had to have his five pence worth no matter what was being discussed. Michael wondered if there was anything he didn't have a rock-hard, doctrinaire opinion on. If you were to start a conversation about Mongolian buttock wrestling he'd have something to say about it.

He knocked on Sophie's door.

'Yoo-hoo! You in there?'

'What do YOU want?'

'What have you got?'

'Hang on, I'm changing.'

'Into what? A werewolf? A vampire? A . . . ' The door opened. Michael stood with his mouth hanging open as though he had been poleaxed.



‘What do you think?’ asked Sophie. She had on black stilettos, black fishnet tights, a black vinyl mini-skirt, a loose black tee-shirt and . . .

‘Well?’ she asked. Her hair was jet black, cut skin short above her ears and spraying out from the top of her head like some weird, feathery plant. She had thick black makeup on her eyes and violently red lips.

Michael closed his mouth.

‘It’s my new image,’ she said.

‘Yes . . .’ gasped Michael, ‘. . . isn’t it . . .’

‘Do you like it?’

‘It’s very . . . striking . . .’

‘Good. That was the idea. It cost a fortune – my savings are absolutely blitzed.’

‘They’re not the only things . . .’ said Michael. He grinned. ‘Dad will have a fit.’

‘Let him,’ said Sophie. ‘I’m fed up with men telling me what to do.’

‘Urban warrior,’ said Michael. ‘It’s very good. Have you got black knickers as well?’

‘That’s for me to know and you to wonder about,’ she said, patting his cheek as she went downstairs. The high heels made her walk in a strange way and Michael got the strong impression of two over-fed piglets fighting in a rubbish sack as her bottom

swung and swivelled in its tight plastic sheath.

At the top of the lower flight she turned and gestured to him. Michael trotted down to join her. She put her arm round his shoulders.

‘Listen, little bruv . . .’ she looked closely into his face. ‘I love you. You know that don’t you?’

‘Yes. . .’ Michael was taken aback.

‘Don’t forget.’

‘No . . .’

‘One more thing . . .’

‘What?’

‘If the sparks start flying downstairs, you make sure you don’t get involved.’

‘What are you planning?’

‘Nothing. It depends on Dad.’

‘I’ll back you up.’

‘No. That’s just what I don’t want. You’ve got to promise not to get involved.’

‘But . . .’

‘Promise!’

‘Okay.’

He followed her into the front room.

‘What the bloody hell . . .’

‘Hello Mum, hello Dad.’

‘Sophie!’ Their mother was amazed, their father was aghast. Their mother’s soft, work-red hands were at her mouth. ‘Sophie! Sophie! Sophie!’

‘It’s my new image,’ said Sophie.

‘You bloody stupid idiot.’

‘Is there any food going, Mum?’

‘ . . . I . . . I . . . what? Oh, Sophie! How could you?’

‘I felt like a change,’ said Sophie, smiling a pillar box smile.

‘You must be raving bloody mad, girl. What sort of employer’s going to look twice at you now? You know what you’ve done now, don’t you? You’ve made yourself utterly unemployable. As soon as you . . .’

‘Good!’ shouted Sophie.

‘ . . . walk in they’ll . . . what did you say?’

‘I said good. I’m sick of spending half my time in Job Centres like some frenzied lemming. I’ve written off to about fifty jobs . . . I’ve had a dozen interviews . . . I’m sick to death of the whole affair . . .’

‘You can’t just give up,’ from Father and, ‘You must keep trying, dear,’ from Mother.

‘Why?’

‘Because, although it might come as something of a shock to someone with a head as thick as yours, everyone has to work. Or are you planning to spend your life loafing round this house collecting the dole? Because if that’s the idea in your tiny mind then you can just forget it right away. I’m having no daughter of mine . . .’

‘Do you mind?’ Sophie had to shout at the top of her voice to be heard. ‘I’m not interested in your opinions.’

Her father came up out of his seat like Zeus in wrath. ‘How dare you speak to me like that?’

Michael had tucked himself into the corner of the room, well out of it.

‘How dare YOU speak to ME like it? Who do you think you are?’

‘I’m your father,’ he shouted. Suddenly his voice changed. ‘Are you taking . . . things . . . are you on drugs?’

Sophie laughed. ‘Yeah!’ she shouted. ‘Want to look up my nostrils?’

‘Sophie,’ cried her mother. ‘You aren’t!’

Sophie rested her hand reassuringly on her mother’s arm. ‘Of course not,’ she said. ‘The chance to afford it would be a fine thing.’

‘You think you’re so bloody clever, don’t you?’

‘Yeah!’

‘Well you’re not. You’re just one of millions who’ve got to make a go of things.’ A conciliatory note crept into her father’s voice. ‘I know it’s difficult. I know you can feel like chucking it in, but you mustn’t. You’ve got to keep plugging away. Something will come along.’

‘What do you know about it? Come on: what the hell do you know about it?’

‘Now look, I’m trying to be reasonable . . .’

‘Hah!’

‘ . . . I’m trying to see it from your point of view . . .’

‘Don’t bother, Dad.’ She turned away from him. ‘Is there stuff for me to do a fry up, Mum?’

Her father came storming across the room.

‘Don’t turn your bloody back on me, my girl,’ he shouted, spinning her round.

‘Get your hands off me.’ She hit him as hard as she could across the chest with fist and forearm. He staggered back and as his hand came round she ducked and slipped out of the room.

He stood, his arms loose at his sides, shaking slightly.

‘Sophie!’ he bellowed. ‘Get back in here!’ He saw Michael. ‘Get to your room, you.’

Michael slid out and ran up the stairs. He sat on the first landing. His father charged into the kitchen and there was more shouting and a crash.

‘Get out of my sight!’

Sophie came running out of the kitchen; she leaned over the banisters, half way up the stairs. ‘I’m leaving!’ she shouted. ‘I’m getting out of this lunatic asylum while I’ve

still got a chance!’ She crashed onto her knees on the landing beside Michael; there was a look of fierce triumph on her face. She threw her arms around him and kissed him full on the mouth. ‘I’ve done it!’ she said, breathlessly, her eyes shining.

The kitchen door burst open and Sophie scrambled up the second flight of stairs and dived into her room. Michael shot into his own room and shut the door, sitting against the wall as he heard their father come crashing up the stairs.

Michael’s heart was beating very fast but his brain was quite calm, ‘Well,’ he whispered. ‘So she did have black knickers on.’

‘Sophie! Open this door!’ Hammering of fists on wood.

‘No! I’m packing.’

‘Don’t be so bloody stupid.’

‘I’m leaving.’

‘You leave this house – you’re not coming back.’

‘Good!’

‘Open this door!’

‘No!’

There was silence like nothing Michael had ever experienced. It was as though, in the middle of a huge battle, every gun had run out of bullets and every cannon out of shells at exactly the same moment, and were all being reloaded.

But there was no further explosion. Their father walked slowly back downstairs. Ten minutes later Sophie's bedroom door opened. Michael opened his own door and saw her coming downstairs with her suitcase.

'Where are you going to?' he hissed.

'Ruth's,' said Sophie.

Michael nodded. She pushed a small piece of paper into his hand. 'That's the phone number,' she said. 'But don't tell Dad, okay?'

'What about Mum?'

'I'll write to her. Give me a ring if you can, tomorrow morning, and we'll go and see Bev, okay?'

'Yes.'

He watched his sister as she went downstairs and along the hall. There was not a sound from the front room. The front door echoed hollowly as she closed it.

Michael lay on his bed, playing Beverley's cassette; one or two tunes began to stand out and he thought that the choral climax was more exciting than before.

## Chapter 9

When Michael came down to make himself some breakfast the morning after Sophie's departure he was surprised to find his mother up and cleaning the kitchen floor.

'Where's Dad?' he asked after checking the clock to make sure it actually was half past eight and not later. His parents generally listened to *The Archers* in bed and didn't usually get up until about half past eleven.

'Out looking for Sophie,' puffed his mother. 'Mind your feet.'

Michael stepped aside. 'What for?'

His mother leaned on the handle of the floor cleaner. 'To bring her back of course.'

Michael's eyebrows shot up. 'Bring her back? She won't come back if he does find her.'

'We'll see.'



Michael sat down. 'How long have you been up, then?'

'Up?' His mother gave him a strange look. 'We haven't been to bed.'

'Crumbs. Dad's been out all night, has he?'

'Yes.' She sat down. 'I sometimes think the two of you don't realise how important you are to him. He'd do anything for you and Sophie – do you know that?'

'He hides it well.'

'Michael!'

'He does. All he does is dish out orders, and when it's not orders it's opinions that are just like orders. It's like being in the army here. Why do you think Sophie walked out in the first place?'

'I know he can be difficult – but he loves you, and he's terribly proud of both of you, you know . . .'

'That's the first I've heard of it.'

'It's not easy for him to tell you, you must understand that – but you should hear the way he sings your praises when you're not there.' Michael was astounded.

'Then why is he always yelling at us?'

'It's just his way, love. You should know that by now – nothing's meant by it. He wouldn't hurt either of you for the world.'

'That's not how it comes across.'

‘Don’t you think I know?’ His mother suddenly looked very tired. ‘The times I’ve told him: you’ll lose them if you’re not careful. I’ve told him and told him till I’m blue in the face – and he knows it. As soon as it’s over he knows he was wrong, but something just triggers inside him and he can’t help himself. But it’s not all his fault – he had a rotten childhood. You know he’s ten years younger than his brother and sister – Uncle John and Auntie Philippa – and he wasn’t really wanted at all. Can you imagine what that would feel like? Imagine if your dad and I hadn’t wanted you and resented you being here at all. He was ignored by his parents and bullied by his brother. It can’t have been easy for him. And all his shouting; it’s just his way of showing that he cares – that he’s concerned about you. When he hit you the other night – he was terribly upset – he didn’t sleep all night worrying about it. You think he’s so hard, don’t you, you think he’s solid granite but he’s as soft as anything really.’

‘That makes it even worse,’ said Michael. ‘If all that’s true about his childhood, that makes the way he behaves even worse.’

‘I know,’ sighed his mother. ‘I know it seems all wrong sometimes. Don’t you think I feel like shouting back,

sometimes? The times I've had to bite my tongue.'

'Why? Why don't you just yell back?'

'Because he's doing his best. Shouting won't mend matters – you'll understand that when you're older.'

'Will I? I'll certainly know not to yell at my kids all the time – that's for sure.'

'Yes . . . well . . .'

'Why is he never wrong? Why does he always have to be right, that's what I want to know? Why can't he just admit sometimes that he's . . . I don't know . . . fallible? If he was so sorry about hitting me then why didn't he tell me?'

'It's the way he is, love. He can't help it.'

'I don't understand any of this,' said Michael. 'I don't know how you can defend him when you know he's wrong. I don't know why he should be allowed to shout at us . . . and you're saying we've just got to put up with it. Well, I don't see why, I really don't. And I wish Sophie hadn't gone.'

'We all do – that's why Dad's out looking for her.'

'She won't come back.'

'Maybe not, but at least it'll give him a chance to talk to her. Neutral ground – you know. This house – it's like his domain – he's like a male lion and we're all supposed

to be his . . . I don't know . . . he feels he must be in control. It's difficult to explain.

'It's just power,' said Michael. 'This is his power base and any attempt at challenging him gets trodden on. That isn't fair. You know it isn't fair.'

'It may not seem fair, no.'

'It isn't!'

'Maybe not – but it's how things are. Shall I do you some breakfast?'

'No. It's okay. I'll do it. You look knackered.'

'I think I am.'

'Why don't you go and lie down?'

'Yes.' His mother levered herself to her feet. 'That's not a bad idea.'

'I'll bring you some tea in.'

'Lovely.'

When Michael took the tea into his mother she was fast asleep. He stood by the bed, looking down at her. How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is to have a thankless child, he thought and smiled: how sharper than a serpent's tooth it is to have an autocratic father, more like. He quietly put the tea cup on the bedside table and stole out. As he passed the telephone table he remembered the piece of paper Sophie had given him.

The perfect time, he thought, Mum asleep and Dad out. He ran upstairs to get the number.

They met at three o'clock that afternoon at the hospital gates.

'Are you likely to come back, then?' asked Michael after he had told her all about his conversation with their mother.

'No way,' said Sophie. 'He came round to Ruth's – did you know?'

'Did he? He wasn't very chatty when he came back. He was banging around in the cellar when I left.'

'Probably making a cage for me . . .'

'What happened at Ruth's then?'

'I hid in the loo and she said she hadn't seen me. It's too late for all that. We've been clearing out her junk room all morning – I'm having it as a bedroom.'

'Staying there permanently, are you?'

'For the time being. We've had the idea for a year or so – I shelved it when Barry came along – but now that's all over . . .'

she shrugged and grinned, 'I'm a free agent. I can do what I like.'

'I wish I could leave home.'

'Wait till you finish school – you never know: me shoving off might calm Himself down a bit.'

'More likely I'll get double doses. Do you know something? I used to think that once I had a girlfriend everything would be marvellous, but . . .'

'There's always a but,' said Sophie. 'Life's full of buts.'

‘It’s like rows of goats,’ said Michael. ‘Goats with “School” written on them like those cartoons you get in newspapers, and “Home” written on them and so on.’ They went into the hospital.

Beverley lay like a broken doll, tubes taped to nose and mouth. Michael’s swimming fantasy had faded away as he had gradually come to terms with the fact that this pale image was all that there was. There was no other Beverley than the one who lay comatose in that hospital bed. She wasn’t swimming under a tropical sky. She wasn’t hiding, pixielike, behind a magic tree, waiting to pop out and make all things right. She wasn’t floating in the opaque ether of some mystic limbo – she was simply unconscious; pitifully vulnerable and plugged into a battery of scientific equipment that kept her useless body in reasonable working order until she came out of it and . . . until she came out of it . . . IF she came out of it.

Her gran was sitting by the bed. She wore glasses with a thin silver chain around her neck and was going through a pile of documents or papers of some sort.

She looked up. ‘Hello Michael.’

‘This is my sister, Sophie.’ Beverley’s gran showed no sign of shock or surprise at Sophie’s appearance.

‘Hello Sophie.’

Sophie nodded towards the bed. ‘Any change?’ she asked.

‘Not as yet.’ She tucked the papers away into a folder. She smiled in a tired sort of way. ‘We’ve got to be patient,’ she gazed at Beverley. ‘We’ve got to be patient for our little patient,’ she said. She stood up, stretching. ‘It’s not one of my strong points. I feel like giving her a good shake sometimes, as though she was asleep and had to be got up for school. It’s very hard to understand quite what’s going on. The doctors say her brain is slowly healing itself from inside and that when all’s quite right and ticketty-boo she’ll just wake up demanding a huge meal and wondering what all the fuss is about. I could make more of it if she had a bandage round her head. You know – like in those war films; there’s always a bandage with some blood on it - you could understand what it was all about if you could actually see something. Do you know what I mean?’

They nodded.

Beverley’s gran looked at her watch. ‘I should be off,’ she said. ‘I’m addressing a meeting this evening in Enfield, would you believe; “Women and Propaganda in the Second World War”.’

‘That sounds interesting,’ said Sophie.

‘Interesting? I should say so, although the word iniquitous tends to spring more readily to mind,’ said Beverley’s gran. ‘Did you know that there was a massive campaign to get women out of the home and into factories? And not just during the war either – there was a shortage of women in work for a long while afterwards as well. And now women are being quite bold-facedly told that they can’t possibly do those same jobs because the work’s too physical and because this spiteful government’s doing its best to keep women in the home . . . oh dear, don’t let me start. You didn’t come here to hear me lecturing on inequality. I’ll be going on all afternoon once I start.’

‘It’s a pity it’s in Enfield,’ said Sophie. ‘I’d like to have come.’

‘You’d be fascinated, I can tell you. And if there’s an ounce of spirit in you, you’d come out blazing mad!’ She thought for a moment. ‘I’ll tell you what – I’d be happy to drive you up with me – I need someone to help with all the leaflets and things – if you’re not doing anything?’

‘Really? Are you sure?’

‘We wouldn’t be back till late. Midnight, probably.’

‘That doesn’t matter.’

‘You’d best let your parents know.’



‘I don’t live at home any more. I moved out yesterday, so it doesn’t matter.’

‘Oh, well, that’s fine then – if you’re interested.’

‘Not half.’

Beverley’s gran looked at her watch again. ‘It’s skates-on time, I’m afraid. If I leave it any longer I’ll be behind all evening and it’s a bit of a poor show giving a lecture on how women can be at least as efficient in a work situation as men if you arrive half an hour late. Takes the wind out of your sails, a bit, I can’t help thinking.’

‘Do you mind if I go off now?’ Sophie asked Michael.

‘No, course not.’

She gave him a hug. ‘I’ll ring you during the week.’

‘What if Dad answers?’

‘I’ll use a fake voice.’

‘There was one thing,’ Michael said to Beverley’s gran. ‘It’s Beverley’s necklace thing. You know, the little moon? Do you know what happened to it?’

‘Was she wearing it when she was . . . knocked down? I hadn’t thought.’

‘She was – I remember it.’

‘Oh dear, well . . . I don’t know. Perhaps they took it off her for safety.’

‘No, I asked the other night. They hadn’t seen it.’

‘That’s a pity, it must have got broken . . . the chain . . . when . . . now that is a pity.’

‘She was very fond of it. Do you think it might still be lying around – you know, in the gutter?’

‘It might be.’ She didn’t sound very convinced.

‘Do you think it’s worth a look?’

‘It can’t hurt.’ Beverley’s gran tapped her lips with her fingertips. ‘Yes, why not? You have a look. But if you don’t find it you come round and see me and we’ll see if something can’t be worked out.’

Michael sat with Beverley for a long time, sometimes holding her hand, sometimes just looking at her – trying to picture her without the tubes. But the tubes would not go away. He tried to imagine her waking up, throwing the bedclothes back and leaping round the room. But the cold motionlessness of her body made such imaginings impossible.

‘Beverley,’ he whispered, close to her ear. ‘Wake up. Please wake up. I love you. I don’t know what to do without you.’

Michael got off the bus one stop early and walked along the stretch of road where the accident had happened. As he neared the place he grew more and more certain that the little crescent moon pendant would be there. He imagined himself bearing it home

in triumph, slightly grubby but undamaged on its silky metal chain.

He stood at the kerb. Some secret sixth sense told him that it was there. He crouched down to search. It was not obvious. He ran a forefinger through the muck that filled the gutter. It felt damp and unpleasant – but after all, this was for Beverley . . . this was something positive he could do for her.

Ten minutes later he stood up, defeated.

He walked home very slowly; if he had been younger or if he had been a girl he would have allowed himself to cry, but boys didn't cry if they could at all help it, and Michael still squirmed at the memory of his tears at school the other day.

The house was like a morgue. His father was sitting silently in the armchair, an open magazine unread on his lap, his eyes closed.

He stirred when Michael walked in, and opened his eyes. 'I couldn't find her anywhere,' he said. 'I've been to every address in that black book of hers. I don't know where she's hidden herself.' He sounded exhausted. Something of what his mother had told him must have had an effect because Michael felt himself becoming sorry for his father. It must be horrible, he thought, to be so twisted up inside that you can't show love.

‘She’s all right,’ he said softly. ‘I’ve seen her.’

His father sat upright and the magazine slid unnoticed to the floor. ‘When? Where?’

‘At the hospital. She came with me to see Beverley.’

His father let out a low gasp and rested his head in his hands. ‘Thank God!’ he murmured. He looked up, his face a strange colour. ‘I was worried sick, son. Anything could have happened to her.’

‘She’s all right,’ said Michael. The expression on his father’s face brought him close to tears again.

‘Where’s she staying? No. No. She obviously doesn’t want me to know. Do you know where she’s staying?’

Michael hesitated.

‘I don’t want you to tell me where if she doesn’t want you to. I just want to know that she’s got somewhere to stay.’

‘She’s with a friend.’

‘Oh. Good. Does she need anything? Any money or anything else?’

‘I don’t think so.’

‘Will you be seeing her again soon?’

‘We didn’t arrange anything.’ Michael was torn; the child in him loved telling secrets, but the adult in him was caught between keeping Sophie’s confidence and putting

his father out of his misery. 'She's going to phone me next week.'

'I've driven her out,' said his father. 'I didn't realise . . .'

Michael felt helpless – the more human side of his father filled him with unease. It was like the solid base of your whole world suddenly dissolving into mush.

'Did she say anything?'

'About what?'

'Does she intend to come back?'

'I don't think so.'

'She'll have to collect the rest of her things. Has she got a proper bed, do you know?'

'She didn't say.'

'Well you tell her: all that furniture in her room is hers if she wants it. She must have a proper bed. It was all bought for her – tell her that.'

'Okay.'

'I can let her have the number of a van-rental firm – you know – if she wants to shift it. That Barry of hers will be able to drive it if she gets a self-drive one, won't he?' Michael said nothing. 'Or I could, if she likes. Or, you can tell her, it can all stay here – we'll look after it for her if she hasn't got room for it. She can come and collect it whenever she likes. You tell her that, boy, you make sure she understands that she's still welcome here, okay?'

‘Yes. Of course.’

‘Perhaps it’s for the best . . .’ he looked enquiringly at Michael. ‘She probably needs . . . we were butting heads . . . she’s grown up . . . I mean . . . she’s nineteen, isn’t she? Old enough to look after herself, eh?’

‘Yes.’

‘Don’t let her know . . . you know . . . don’t let her know how anxious I was, I don’t want her to feel . . . I don’t want. . .’ his father’s voice trailed off.

Michael nodded, feeling more sorry for his father than ever.

His father stood up. ‘I’ll tell your mum. She didn’t sleep a wink all last night, you know.’ There he was again, filtering his own emotions through their mother, already pretending that all the anxiety had been on her part. If Michael had been a bit older or a bit stronger he would have confronted his father with this, but as it was he simply went up to his room.

He didn’t bother putting the light on even though it was getting dark. He could just hear the low murmur of his parents’ voices from downstairs. He stretched out on the floor, his ear pressed against the carpet, hoping to be able to hear what was being said. He could distinguish between the two voices but it was too muffled to follow, and anyway, he began to feel uncomfortable,

eavesdropping on a private conversation like that.

He lay on his bed, cuddling a pillow – he had often cuddled pillows before, pretending that they were girls, but it was hopeless now. He pressed his face into the cool softness.

‘Get better quickly,’ he mouthed into the pillow. ‘Please!’ He turned onto his back, a sudden, peculiar thought striking him. It felt very odd as he climbed off his bed and knelt at its side, his hands clasped together and his head bowed – eyes tightly shut.

‘Please God,’ he said softly. ‘I know I don’t have much to do with you and that; I’m not a proper Christian or anything, but please make Beverley better if you exist. I shan’t promise to go to church or anything ’cos you know I wouldn’t really mean it. I can’t even promise to believe in you if she gets better, but if you are there then make her better again. I don’t mind what you do to me . . . I mean, I’m not trying to bargain with you or anything, but I don’t mind even if she never wants to see me again so long as she gets better.’ This was the ultimate sacrifice that Michael could make – that she should recover even if it meant losing her. ‘I’m sorry if I’m being a pest,’ he said softly, ‘I know I’ve never bothered with any of this sort of thing before, but I can’t think

of anything else to do – so if you could help me out I promise I shan't ever ask for anything ever again. But don't worry if you can't do anything; I'll understand if you're too busy. I don't know if there's any point in any of this – I don't even know if you exist but . . . ' Michael began to feel oddly selfish. He knelt in silence for a few minutes. 'I suppose I ought to recite the Lord's Prayer or something,' he said, 'but I don't know much of it any more. I know I stopped going to Sunday school when I was eleven but . . . ' he lifted his head off his hands and stood up.

'Well,' he murmured, 'at least I tried.'



# *Chapter 10*

It was a quarter to eight on Friday night. Michael had on brand new jeans and his best jacket and he was beginning to wonder whether Finn and Beverley were coming.

The doorbell rang and he pelted downstairs.

‘Bye,’ he shouted as he ran past the front room.

‘Back at ten, Sonny-Jim,’ called his father.

‘Yes.’

The three of them walked briskly down the street, wrapped and swathed against the cold. It was dark and gloomy but Michael felt elated. He walked on Beverley’s left and Finn was on her right. He noted that neither of them seemed particularly cheerful and they were walking separately.

A girl was at the door. She obviously knew Beverley and let them in with a

friendly smile. The youth club was held in a cavernous crypt, the floor space divided by huge pillars of stone that curved up to support the roof. The music was loud but there were only a handful of people, a couple of them dancing, but most standing around chatting. There were two table-tennis tables and a scattering of chairs. The record player was in one corner, dominated by a tall, thin boy with a Rastafarian hairdo.

‘It’s all right,’ shouted Beverley to Michael above the noise, ‘it’s not all reggae.’

Michael was introduced to a few people – forgetting their names immediately. Finn wandered off. Beverley frowned. She put her hand on Michael’s arm. ‘Back in a second,’ she said.

Michael found a chair and sat aimlessly. More people came in and the boy at the record player kept the barrage of music flowing – a mixture of contemporary and old stuff – Michael even recognised ‘Lola’ by the Kinks – and that was ancient.

Michael felt very much out of things, and the more people that appeared the more lonely he felt. There were some sixth formers from his school that he recognised, but the majority of people – and all the girls – were strangers. He knew that he was not being ignored on purpose, but it was difficult

not to feel it. He became very interested in his watch as the minutes crawled away.

Someone flopped heavily into the chair next to him. He looked round. It was Beverley, a sullen, unhappy look on her face.

He looked enquiringly at her.

‘He’s a sod, sometimes,’ she shouted. The music reduced all conversation to punctuated shouting.

‘Is he?’

‘What do you do with him when he gets like this?’

‘Like what?’

‘He’s sulking in a corner.’

‘Why?’

‘I don’t know. You know him better than I do. What do you do when he’s like this?’

‘I haven’t a clue.’

‘What?’

‘I don’t know.’

Beverley leaned back and blew out her cheeks. ‘I could spiflicate him when he does this!’

‘Don’t you know what’s wrong?’

She looked sideways at him. She let out a short laugh.

‘Nothing much,’ she said.

Michael tried to look concerned.

‘Come with me, I can’t hear myself think here,’ she grabbed his arm and took him off.

A number of doors led out of the main hall. Beverley tried a couple before finding one that was open. She switched the light on and closed the noise out. The room was full of junk – old pews and boxes and sacks and lead pipes and, peculiarly, an old washing mangle, red with rust.

They sat on a pile of sacks.

‘He’s wearing me out,’ she said. ‘Is he like this with you? He’s so demanding. Do you know what I mean? He wants to see me every night and he just won’t accept that I need time to myself. I’ve got to do at least an hour’s practising every night, and then there’s homework on top of that. My gran’s very good about it – she doesn’t stand over me with a whip or anything but I can tell that it upsets her if I don’t get my work done. Crumbs, it upsets me as well. I’ve got exams in a few months and if I don’t do well I won’t get to university – but Finn won’t have it. If I won’t see him some nights he gets all sulky and hurt.’ She looked sharply at Michael. ‘Are you all like that – you boys? No wonder all my friends go out with older men.’

‘He’s very fond of you,’ said Michael, unexpectedly defending Finn. ‘He can’t help wanting to see you a lot.’

‘It’s not that,’ said Beverley. ‘It’s the sulks I can’t stand. It’s really hard work trying to be nice to someone when you can’t even see

them through the black cloud that they cart around with them. Does he get sulks when he's with you?'

'Sometimes, I suppose.'

'What do you do?'

Michael tried to think. 'I don't know – I just wait for him to recover, I suppose. You have to sort of – I don't know – sort of get down under him and push him up. It's no good being funny – you know – being cheerful to try and bring him up out of it – you have to sort of go down to his level and ease him up gradually.'

'I've tried that. I've tried everything, but I can't get through to him.'

'I know what you mean.'

Beverley stood up. 'Thanks, Mole,' she said. 'I'll try another go at him. I've calmed down a bit now. I just needed to get away from him for a bit. What do you think of it here?'

'It's okay.'

'You don't know anyone, though, do you?'

'Not really.'

'And we're leaving you all on your own as well. I'm sorry.'

'That's all right.'

They went back into the main hall. Heavy Metal music hit them like a bomb – Iron Maiden or Saxon or some-such.

'Do you like this sort of music?' yelled Michael.

‘Yes. In this sort of atmosphere. I don’t listen to it at home, though.’

‘What do you like, then?’

‘I listen to a lot of classical stuff,’ said Beverley.

‘Like what?’

‘Wagner, Bruckner, Mahler, Dvorak, Beethoven, Verdi . . .’

‘Who?’

Beverley laughed. She was obviously used to this response. Michael glimpsed Finn. He had put his coat on. He tapped Beverley’s arm and pointed.

‘Oh, God!’ she said. ‘I’ll have to go and see what’s up.’

Michael stood in the shadow of an arch, watching them talking. It didn’t seem a very happy exchange at first, but gradually Finn seemed to calm down. After a few minutes he took his coat off and they both came over to where Michael was standing.

‘Hello, Mole.’ Finn had cheered up. Beverley gave Michael a conspiratorial look as if to say, ‘I’ve done it.’

‘What do you think of it so far?’ asked Finn.

‘Loud,’ shouted Michael.

‘They like it that way,’ said Finn. ‘It’s the only chance they get to play records loud. Listen, Bev and I are thinking of going off to Box Hill tomorrow. Do you fancy coming?’

‘Yes . . . oh, sod! . . . no . . . I can’t. I’ve got to help my dad.’

‘Oh, God, what now?’

‘He’s putting down a path in the garden.’

‘Can’t you get out of it?’

‘Hardly.’

‘We could make it Sunday,’ shouted Beverley.

‘That’s no good either,’ said Michael. ‘He said it’d take all weekend.’

‘Pity,’ said Finn.

‘We could make it next week,’ said Beverley.

‘We could,’ said Finn. ‘What about next Saturday, then?’

Michael nodded eagerly. ‘Yes,’ he yelled. ‘Next week will be okay.’

‘Splendid!’ said Finn. ‘I’ll see if anyone else wants to go.’

‘Not too many,’ said Beverley. ‘We’ll be all day debating what to do if there’s too many people. It always happens.’

‘Just a couple,’ said Finn. ‘What about Jim?’

‘Oh, yes. I like Jim,’ said Beverley. ‘But no one else. Just the four of us, eh? If there’s more than that it’ll be like a school trip.’

‘Okay.’

As Michael opened his front door he felt that Saturday week would never come. But the time gradually drained away.

‘What’s up with you, little bruv?’ Sophie bounced down onto the couch next to Michael, wrapping her arms round his shoulders.

‘I wish I had more money.’

‘Don’t we all?’

‘Do you think Mum would lend me some?’

‘It would be extremely cheeky to ask,’ said Sophie. ‘Anyway, what do you need money for?’

Michael shrugged. ‘Nothing much . . .’

‘More porno mags?’

‘No. Not more porno mags,’ said Michael, affronted. The truth was that he was more or less certain that his pocket money wouldn’t cover the journey to Box Hill. He either had to find more money or not go – and he couldn’t bear the idea of not going.

‘As if you never buy them!’ said Sophie. ‘I told you the other day – we all know about your peculiar little habits.’

‘Shut up about it,’ said Michael, ‘I’ve chucked them all out.’

‘A likely story.’

‘I have. All of them. Every single one.’

‘Well, well. Why?’

Michael wrinkled his nose. ‘I got bored with them.’

Sophie breathed a long-drawn-out ‘Ohhh . . .’ with raised eyebrows.



Michael looked questioningly at her.  
'What's that supposed to mean?'

'Bored, eh?'

'Yes.'

'With photographs?'

'Yes.'

'I see,' said Sophie with a huge grin.

'What do you see?'

'Prefer the real thing, do you, now?'

'I don't know what you're talking about.'

Sophie looked at him closely. 'Don't you?'

Michael shrugged. Sophie grabbed his head, holding it between her hands. 'Have you got a girlfriend?'

'No. No. Get off.'

'You have, haven't you?'

'I haven't!' said Michael, pulling away.

'What happened, then?'

'Nothing.'

'Ahhh!' An idea dawned on Sophie.

'What?'

'Is it that girl that came round with Finn the other night?'

'What do you mean?'

'You fancy her, don't you?'

'She's Finn's girlfriend.'

'You fancy her, though, don't you?'

'No . . . get . . . off . . .' Sophie dived on him, her expert fingers searching for his most ticklish spots. He rolled on the couch,

shrieking with laughter as her fingers got to work on his ribs.

‘Tell the truth!’ she demanded. ‘I’ll tickle you to death!’

‘No . . . yes . . . arrgh! . . . get off . . . get . . . okay . . . okay . . . I do . . . I do . . . I do . . .’

Sophie perched on the arm of the couch, triumphant.

‘Does she like you?’

Michael soothed his ribs with both arms. ‘Ooh . . . oww . . . you ratbag . . .’

‘Tell me!’ She displayed crooked fingers.

‘I think so.’ Michael sat up. ‘We were . . . we were . . . ooh! Ow . . . you are a swine – I’m all bruised and battered!’

‘Get on with it. You were what?’

‘We were supposed to be going to Box Hill – me and Beverley and Finn and Jim – this Saturday. But I haven’t got enough money for the train fare.’

‘Oh, so that’s why you’ve been such a misery all week.’

‘Wouldn’t you be?’

‘What were you planning to do? Subtly woo her away from Finn or just jump on her and drag her into the bushes?’

‘Neither, twit! I’m not planning anything like that – I just like being with her. She’s . . .’ Michael felt himself going a

bit treacly inside. 'She's so . . .' he looked plaintively at Sophie.

'Hold on, drippy one, I'll be back in a second.'

She was back in a couple of minutes. 'There you are,' she said. It was a ten-pound note.

Michael took it. 'I don't know how I'm going to pay you back,' he said.

'Don't worry about it.'

'Are you sure?'

'Do you want it or not?'

'Of course,' Michael beamed. 'Thanks ever so much.'

It was a peculiarity of Michael's that he hated being late for anything. He hated it because it always made him panicky – and when he got panicky things would start to go wrong and then there would be no end of it. This was the reason for his being at Victoria Station a full half hour before he needed to be to meet the others. He had been planning to go with Jim, but Jim was only half-up when he called and was incapable of being rushed first thing in the morning.

'I won't wait.' Michael had said after a quick cup of tea. 'I'll see you up there.'

'Please yourself, dear boy.' Jim cultivated a laid-back approach to life – a sort of 'cool' that could, at times, be very irritating and at other times rather entertaining.

There were already quite a number of people around. Packs of them stood staring up at the vast electronic notice board as the times and destinations of trains whirled and fixed, whirled and vanished. More people wandered through, alone or in couples, carrying luggage. Young people with rucksacks, older people with suitcases on wheels.

They planned to meet outside W.H. Smith's as no one knew what platform they would want. Michael nosed through books, his hands in his pockets.

'Hello Mole!' It was Beverley. In his wildest dreams he had hoped Beverley would arrive ahead of the other two; that was one of the reasons why he had left Jim at home. She linked her arm through his.

'I thought I'd be first,' she said. 'You must be an early bird.'

'An early Mole, anyway,' he said, smiling.

'An early Mole,' she said. 'Yes,' She took her arm away. He stuck his bottom lip out and left his arm crooked open. She slid her arm back in and they both laughed.

They browsed among the books, but Michael was far from concentrating on them.

'Why do they call you Mole?'

'We did the play *Toad of Toad Hall* in the first form at school,' explained Michael.

'And you were Mole?'

‘That’s right. The teacher said I was a better mole than I was a human being and it sort of stuck. It used to be The Mole at first – but it’s just Mole now.’

‘I think it’s nice,’ said Beverley. ‘Reliable. I always feel safe with you . . . I mean . . . well . . . lots of boys are just shits, when you come down to it, aren’t they?’

‘Are they?’ Michael hadn’t thought of Beverley using words like that. Removal of one set of blinkers.

‘YOU’RE not – I don’t mean you. That’s what’s so nice about you. That’s what I mean by feeling safe with you. You’re one of the nicest blokes I know.’

‘Am I?’ She really did like him. He hadn’t quoted Shakespeare or anything clever at all but she liked him anyway.

‘Yes. You must KNOW you’re nice.’

‘Well . . . I . . .’ Michael couldn’t think of anything to say. He gazed straight into her eyes. It was terrifying the way she just looked right back at him and his heart was beating like mad. Her lips spread in a warm smile and suddenly she leaned forward and kissed him on the cheek.

‘Come on,’ she said. ‘Let’s go and see if we can find out what platform we want.’

They walked over to the destination signboard.

‘I can never make head or tail of this,’ she said as they looked up at the names.

‘I think Finn said it was the Epsom line.’

‘Did he? Oh, speaking of Finn, he’d better not find us arm in arm or he’ll have seventeen different coloured fits.’ Michael felt slightly sad to lose her arm.

‘Hello people!’ It was Finn. He kissed Beverley. Michael might have been imagining it but he got the distinct impression that Beverley took that kiss reluctantly. At any rate, she did not stand very close to Finn.

‘Is there time for some coffee?’ she asked. ‘I’m parched. I galloped out without any this morning.’

‘Our train’s not due for another . . . let’s see . . . oh . . . sixteen minutes.’

‘Sussed it all out, have you?’ asked Michael.

‘Yep.’

‘Epsom line?’

‘That’s right.’

Finn sat next to Beverley in the coffee bar.

‘You okay?’ he asked softly. Michael gazed out of the window.

‘Yes.’ There was something in that brief exchange that made Michael think of icebergs – nine tenths hidden.

Jim strolled along at the last minute. Michael had already suggested going

without him but Finn was sure he would be there before it was too late.

‘You took your bloody time,’ said Michael.

‘That’s because I groom myself properly before I go out,’ said Jim, looking Michael up and down. ‘I don’t just rush out like some old tramp.’

It was cold on Box Hill and all the trees were bare.

‘What we need is a drink,’ said Jim. ‘What about a whipround?’ They collected some money and Jim ran off to a row of shops in search of an off-licence.

The three of them sat huddled on a bench. Finn started shouting at cars as they went past and soon all three of them were leaning forward, yelling; but only one or two drivers looked round. A back seat gaggle of children waved and they waved back. A coach full of children rumbled by and the friendly waves of the three on the bench were greeted by grimaces, two-finger gestures and poked out tongues. One girl right at the back scrambled up on the seat and pulled up her skirt, displaying her bottom at them.

‘I see,’ said Michael.

‘Just like a female baboon,’ laughed Beverley. ‘She does that too often she’ll get a shock one day. Bang, straight up the jacksie.’

‘It wasn’t like that in my day,’ said Finn. ‘I don’t know: children today!’

Jim came running across the road. He held out a bottle of vodka.

They lay in tall grass.

‘All gone!’ shouted Jim, hurling the empty bottle into the air. It bounced down the hill.

‘We’ll have to get that back,’ said Beverley, sitting up. ‘Someone might get hurt.’

‘It didn’t break,’ said Jim.

‘All the same . . .’ Beverley stood up and sidled carefully down the slope.

‘Oh deary me,’ said Jim. ‘I’ve been a naughty boy, I have.’ He slapped his hand. ‘Wicked hand!’ he said. Michael leaned up on his elbows, watching Beverley as she picked the bottle up.

‘I’m going to find a bin,’ she shouted.

Michael was about to get up and go with her when Finn leaped up and ran down the hill. He cannoned into her in what would have been simply a playful way, but she pushed him away and said something sharply that Michael didn’t hear. He watched as they continued down the hill, Finn walking slightly behind.

‘Trouble brewing,’ said Jim wisely.

‘What?’

‘Them two,’ said Jim. ‘I’ll give it another week at most.’



‘What are you talking about?’

‘I was talking to Bev at school yesterday,’ said Jim, ‘and I got the dee-stinct impression that she’s getting rapidly sick of him.’

‘Really? What did she say?’

‘Oh, nothing much. It was just the impression I got. I could do with some more to drink. Got any more money?’

Michael went through his pockets. ‘Not a lot.’

‘Oh well,’ Jim lay back. He pulled his coat tightly round himself and tied his scarf round his head. ‘I shall have a kip, then.’

Michael sat idly tugging up tufts of grass and sprinkling them over Jim’s coat. The vodka had not had much effect on him except to make him feel slightly dreamy. He lay down but it was too cold and uncomfortable. He looked up into the watery blue sky, the edge of sight rimmed by gaunt tree-bones.

‘Sod this,’ he said, sitting up. ‘Jim?’

But Jim was either asleep or pretending to be. Michael sat hunched over, his elbows on his knees, chin in hands. Bored. He had wanted a day with Beverley; and he had been prepared to put up with Finn and Jim being there too – but now Beverley had gone off and he was stuck with a sleeping Jim.

He looked at his watch. Half an hour had crawled by. He was cold and the damp was

beginning to eat through his coat where he was sitting on it.

A movement at the foot of the hill caught his attention. It was Finn. He was walking very rapidly. It was too far for Michael to see his expression, but his hands were thrust into his pockets and his shoulders were down. There was no sign of Beverley.

Michael watched as Finn strode rapidly along, apparently unaware of being observed. As soon as Finn was out of sight Michael scrambled up and half-ran down the hill, careful not to trip over the rough mounds of grass. He walked into the bare trees, getting his breath back, making his way in the opposite direction to Finn.

He walked slowly, looking all around. He searched for five minutes without any luck. Of course, there was no way of actually knowing that Beverley was even there – she might have walked off first – but it was worth a try.

‘Beverley!’ he called.

No answer. He walked farther, deeper into the trees.

‘Beverley!’

He walked along a narrow valley of tree-thick slopes.

‘Bev-er-ley!’

‘Mo-ole!’

He looked around.

**‘Up here!’**

He saw her. She was half-way up the hill, waving. She had been sitting on an earthy bank but as he made his way up towards her she jumped up and ran down towards him. He had a split second to react before he realised that she was not going to stop. He held out his hands as she ran into him, throwing her arms around his neck and hugging him tightly.

**‘I need a friend,’ she said. ‘I need a friendly Mole!’**

**‘What’s happened?’ he asked, holding her tightly.**

**‘Don’t ask!’ There was no sign that she had been crying. Her hair was in Michael’s face. He moved his head slightly and kissed her just above the ear.**

She let go of him, sucked in a long breath and let it out with a gasp. **‘That’s better,’ she said. ‘I needed that.’**

**‘Where’s Finn gone?’**

**‘Home, I expect. I don’t know.’**

**‘Did you have a row?’**

**‘Not really,’ she gestured futilely with both hands, ‘well . . . yes . . . I suppose so.’ She ran back up the hill. ‘I don’t care!’ she shouted back. She flopped down on the mound of earth, her hands pressed between her knees. ‘We’re not going to be seeing each other anymore,’ she called.**

Michael climbed up and stood in front of her.

‘Can’t I still see you?’ he asked tentatively.

‘Of course you can.’

‘Oh, good.’

Beverley reached out her hands and Michael took them. ‘What a silly thing to ask,’ she said.

‘I am silly,’ said Michael, kneeling down. ‘I’m very silly indeed.’

‘No you’re not,’ she said. ‘You’re lovely. My friend Mole!’

They both laughed.

‘Can I kiss you?’ he asked.

‘You don’t ask,’ said Beverley. ‘You just do it.’

‘Oh, sorry!’ He didn’t move.

‘Well?’ she said.

‘What?’

‘I need a kiss!’ she said, shaking his hands. ‘If you don’t kiss me I’ll scream!’

Michael leaned forward but he was unprepared as her arms slid round him and her mouth opened on his.

It was a long kiss, and it was like nothing Michael had ever experienced before.

# Chapter 11

Michael arrived at school a quarter of an hour earlier than usual on Monday morning. He wanted to catch the headmaster first thing to show him the cassette he had bought. He had decided that if any mention was made of it costing more than was collected he would just say he put the rest to it and leave it at that. The likelihood of the school reimbursing him with the difference did not seem very high. As it was, he had to sit around outside the headmaster's study for ten minutes.

The headmaster sprang up the front steps, overcoat, hat, umbrella, briefcase, and the *Guardian* under one arm. He would have swept right past Michael.

‘Sir!’

‘Mmff?’ said the headmaster through his keys.

‘You told me to come and see you first thing today.’

He took the keys out of his mouth. 'Did I? Why?' He unlocked his study door.

'To show you what I'd bought.'

'What you'd bought? I'm not with you . . .'

'For Beverley Miller . . .'

'Ah! Yes! I am with you.' He stopped and stared at Michael. 'Byfield,' he said. 'Martin Byfield.'

'Michael.'

'Yes, Michael. Follow me in, lad, I'll be with you in just a moment. There was a flurry of activity culminating in the headmaster flinging himself in his chair.

'Now then. Show!'

Michael took out the cassette and handed it across the desk.

The headmaster looked at him with a curious expression on his face. 'Your choice or hers?' he asked.

'Mine, sir. But I know she'll like it. I'm going to ask if it can be played to her in hospital. I saw somewhere that people sometimes come out of comas when their favourite music is being played. It gets through into their brains even though they're really deeply unconscious and sort of wakes them up.'

'Yes, I've heard of that.' He leaned back in his chair. 'Mahler's "Resurrection" Symphony,' he said thoughtfully. 'Well, if

that doesn't do it nothing will. Well done, Michael Byfield. Top marks.'

Michael beamed.

'Did you get a card?'

'Yessir.' Michael got it out.

'Excellent.' The headmaster signed it with a flourish. 'Now,' he said, 'Mrs Fielding has a list of all the boys who contributed to the present. I want you to get it from her and make sure everyone on the list gets to sign the card – okay?'

Michael was half way across the lobby before it struck him that there might well be one name on that list the owner of which he would prefer not to see. Sure enough, there it was: Thomas Fraser. Finn had put in fifty pence. His name was just below James Spiggot so he and Jim must have come together.

Michael found over half the people in the common room. The rest would be in their form rooms for ten or so minutes for registration. Michael left Finn's form to last. He went straight up to the teacher and explained what he wanted.

'Any boy who paid into the collection for Beverley Miller and who wants his monicker on this here card which I am currently waving in the air, step one pace forward, puh-lease.'

Michael had to go through the process of showing everyone what he'd bought.

‘What’s this?’ said Wolf.

‘Mahler’s Second Symphony,’ said Michael, becoming bored with the question. ‘It says it clear enough on the box.’

‘What a load of old crap,’ said Wolf.

‘You ignorant peasant,’ said the teacher, reaching over Wolf’s shoulder and plucking it out of his hand. ‘Why aren’t you in my form?’ he asked Michael. ‘Why can’t I have a couple of real, honest music lovers in my form instead of this bunch of moronic head-bangers.’

‘I’m not moronic, sir,’ said Wolf. ‘There’s nothing moronic about Heavy Metal sir. It’s ree-ly good.’

‘Bugger off and drown yourself, Smiff. You’ve got no soul.’

‘No what, sir?’

‘No soul, Smiff – and I’ve heard the arsehole joke so don’t bother.’ The teacher handed the tape back to Michael. ‘Any more for the skylark?’ he shouted. ‘Come on, you lot, we haven’t got all day, as the actress said to the archbishop’s conclave.’

Finn signed the card, his signature trailing over several that were already there. As he walked past Michael he hissed. ‘Bastard.’

‘You’re a messy sod, Fraser,’ said the teacher, examining the card. ‘You write like an arthritic oran-utang. Well . . .’ he handed the card to Michael, ‘. . . there it is, for what



it's worth – crosses and pawprints courtesy of Six B. Cut that out, Jenkins, or I'll rip your arm out and stick the wet end in your ear.'

Michael left the room, a cold feeling in his stomach.

It was a couple of hours before Michael recovered from the venom in Finn's voice. It had got round that Beverley was his girlfriend – this elicited no sympathy, except from Cumbers, but at least it meant he was left alone. Probably the tale of his scuffle with Cutler, which grew in the telling, ensured that he was kept at arm's length by most of the boys.

Michael sat with Cumbers on the back steps of the quadrangle, eating chicken sandwiches.

'How do they feed her?' asked Cumbers.

'Through tubes,' said Michael. 'They do everything through tubes.'

'Yuk!' said Cumbers. 'That must be really nasty.'

'She can't feel it.'

'Wouldn't it be weird if she wasn't actually unconscious at all – if she was just sort of paralysed and she could hear everything that people were saying around her?'

'I can do without ideas like that,' said Michael. 'Thanks very much.'

'What about . . . you know . . . what about pissing and so on?'

‘Do you mind!’

‘I just wondered.’

‘They use a catheter . . . it just sort of . . . oh God! What am I talking about?’ He stared at the sandwich. ‘I don’t feel like this any more.’

‘Give it back, then.’

‘I’ll shove it up your nose, you swine.’

‘How long do you think it’ll be – you know – before she wakes up?’

‘I don’t know. The doctors don’t know. Nobody bloody knows.’

‘Isn’t it driving you crackers? I know it would me.’

‘It’s driven me so far crackers that I’m half way back,’ said Michael. ‘And as if that wasn’t enough: my sister’s left home and my dad seems to be going through a personality crisis. It’s like Monty Python’s Flying Circus at home at the moment.’

‘Excuse me, miss,’ said Cumbers, ‘I purchased this father not ’alf an hour ago – from this very boo-tique, and ’e appears to ’ave malfunctioned . . .’

‘You wouldn’t chuckle!’ said Michael.

‘Are you eating that sandwich or not?’

‘Take it!’ Michael slapped it down in Cumbers’ palm.

‘Intravenous chickensarnies,’ said Cumbers thoughtfully. ‘That’d be a breakthrough.’

That evening, Michael went straight to Beverley’s house and it was with the

feeling of entering a realm immune from the problems of the rest of the world that he rang the bell.

Beverley's gran appeared at the front door in Wellington boots and a plastic mac.

'If I promise to make you a really top-notch dinner will you donate your muscles to a worthy cause?' she said.

'Of course,' said Michael, greatly puzzled. The hall was stacked with books and folders, topped by huddled masses of ornaments.

'The tank's gone,' explained Beverley's gran.

'The tank?'

'The water tank in the loft. I'd just got in and gone to bed; it was about half past one – we had a great time, by the way, your sister and I – I was just about to clock up a few pages of *Jude the Obscure* when crash! wallop! swoosh! and I was given a freezing shower by five hundred gallons of water straight through the bedroom ceiling. It was no joke, I can tell you. I thought the end of the world had come.'

'Crumbs. Was there much damage?'

'Come and see for yourself.' The old lady's study was in an appalling mess. The ceiling was half-down and the walls were streaked with darkness. The carpet was squishy underfoot. 'I phoned up a twenty-four-hour plumber who didn't work

nights – it appears that twenty-four-hours means the answer-phone is hooked up all night – and they've been banging around up in the loft all day. Apparently these tanks have been taken out of all the other houses in this road because they're old and dangerous. Old and dangerous. I said, I'll give 'em old and dangerous when I find out who forgot to take mine out. It was something to do with the house once being owned by the church – different rules or something – I couldn't make it out. Anyway these tanks are supported by girders which pass through the adjoining walls of the houses and when they're full the tanks counter-balance one another. Ever since the one next door was emptied the weight of my full tank has been gradually pulling the girder out of the wall.' She began to laugh. 'There's one consolation though . . .' she said, supporting herself on the door frame, one hand to her chest. 'When the girders finally gave way . . .' she wheezed with laughter ' . . . the empty tank next door . . . Hee, hee, hee . . .' Michael waited, smiling. ' . . . the empty tank next door went straight down through all three floors like a bomb . . . hee, hee, hee . . . into . . . into . . . it's . . . it's in the middle of their dining room . . . hee, hee, hee . . . shouldn't laugh but . . . hee,

hee, hee . . . she's the . . . oh dear . . . she's the chairperson of the local Conservative Club . . . hee, hee, hee. . .'

It was some while before Beverley's gran regained control of herself, after which Michael helped her move the furniture out of the room.

'Fortunately, I can sleep in Beverley's room for the time being,' she said as they worked. 'That wasn't touched, thank God – it's my bedroom and the study that were hit the worst.'

Later in the evening Beverley's gran produced a moussaka from the oven and they took themselves off to the dining room.

'Clear yourself a space,' she said. The table was covered with flotsam from the wrecked study.

'You're taking it very calmly,' said Michael.

Beverley's gran shrugged. 'What else can you do?' she said.

'Have you lost anything important?'

'Oh, a few things, but funnily enough without this disaster I might not have found something VERY important.'

'What?'

'Hold on,' she said, getting up and rummaging in the sideboard. 'I put it . . . ah! Here we are. You see I knew it existed but

I'd probably never have thought of where to look if my dressing table upstairs hadn't had to be emptied out. It was right at the back of one of the drawers.'

She handed him a small black velvet box.

'Open it, then,' she said.

It opened on a small hinge. Lying on the black lining was a silver crescent moon – an exact duplicate of the one that Beverley had worn.

'They were earrings,' said her gran. 'Originally.'

Michael picked it up. 'I did look for the other one,' he said, 'but I suppose it must have been swept up or something. But this is exactly the same.'

'I didn't think you'd find the one Bev was wearing,' said the old lady. 'But that'll do instead, won't it?'

'Yes.'

'I've got a chain as well. Give it over and I'll fix it on.'

'Can I take it to her tonight?'

'That was the idea, what with that and Mahler's "Resurrection" Symphony we'll have her up out of that bed before you can say knife.' The cassette and the card were in a plastic bag in the hall, along with Michael's own tape deck which he hoped to convince the nurse to use in Beverley's room.

‘There you are,’ said her gran, handing back the necklace complete with its pendant. ‘Good as the original.’

‘Better,’ said Michael. ‘It’s a lot shinier.’

‘I gave it a bit of a polish this afternoon. Shall we away to the hospital, if you’ve finished?’

Michael nodded, clutching the pendant tightly in his hand.

The usual nurse was off duty and the replacement – who was not half so friendly to Michael – said that she would have to ask the sister whether the cassette recorder could be used: and so it was half an hour before Michael was finally told that it was all right.

‘We don’t want to be able to hear it outside this room,’ said the sister.

After she had gone Beverley’s gran leaned towards him. ‘Only two types of people can speak of themselves in the plural: royalty and people with fleas.’

‘I don’t think she’s royalty,’ said Michael.

‘I think I agree with you.’

The recorder was plugged in and Michael inserted the cassette.

‘Here goes,’ he said.

The dramatic, opening chords of the symphony filled the room.

‘Too loud,’ said the nurse. Michael turned it down. She nodded and left the room.

Michael drew the necklace out of his pocket. He realised that the vision he had of himself slipping the necklace around Beverley's neck could not be put into practice. He gazed at her, the necklace hanging from his fingers.

'Just put it by the bed,' said Beverley's gran. 'She can put it on as soon as she wakes up.'

Michael sat down as the solemn, funeral music of the first movement of the symphony swirled around them. This symphony was about the death and resurrection of a mythical hero. During the final movement, Michael pictured Beverley waking up, just as the chorus sang:

You will rise again, yes rise again, my heart in a trice. Your beating will suffice to carry you to God.

As the moment came, Michael leaned stiffly forward, all his hopes and thoughts and desires blazing out through his eyes as though wishing alone could conquer the coma that held her immobile. He had been unaware, throughout the playing of the cassette, of the coming and going of the nurse and of a doctor – Beverley's gran made sure he was not disturbed, somehow



understanding his need as he stared fixedly into Beverley's cold face.

The tape ended. Nothing had happened.

Beverley's gran rested her hand on Michael's shoulder. 'It's getting late,' she said gently.

He looked up at her. 'She didn't wake up,' he said blankly.

'Not this time, no.'

'I was certain she would.' He began to cry hopelessly. 'She'll never wake up.'

'Come along, I'll take you home.'

'She's never going to wake up!' Michael allowed himself to be led away.

By the time they reached the car he had regained sufficient control of himself to feel embarrassed and angered by his behaviour.

'I prayed, you know – the other night. I actually knelt by my bed and prayed.' He stared out of the car window as they drove along through the night.

'People do,' said Beverley's gran. 'You'd be surprised at the people who do that when all else has failed.'

'It hasn't worked, though,' said Michael. 'I shan't bother again. There isn't anyone there. I never really thought there was anyway – and now I'm sure of it.'

'You could be right.'

Michael looked at her. 'Do you believe in him?'

**‘I don’t know. I certainly don’t believe it’s a “him” anyway, and Christianity is a pretty unpleasant religion for a woman.’**

**‘Is it?’**

**‘Any religion that starts off from a standpoint of women being naturally evil and subordinate to men just has to be wrong.’**

**‘I never thought . . .’**

**‘Look at Eve – the worst betrayal of women that could possibly have happened. Do you know that Adam was supposed to have had a first wife before her?’**

**‘No.’**

**‘Lilith, her name was. She was born out of dust alongside Adam but she was supposed to have been thrown out of Eden because she wouldn’t obey him. I’ll have nothing to do with any religion that insists on women’s inferiority to men. It’s iniquitous! If there is a God then he, she, or it is either stupid or mad – there’s no other way of looking at it.’**

**‘My stomach hurts.’**

**She looked across at him. ‘So does mine,’ she said. ‘So does mine.’**

# *Chapter 12*

**‘Go on up, I’ll make some coffee,’ said Jim.**

**Michael led Beverley up the stairs to Jim’s bedroom. It was only a small room, its walls covered by huge advertising posters that served as wallpaper.**

**Beverley climbed onto the bed and looked out of the window. The sky was a weak grey-blue and the garden looked neglected.**

**‘Spring soon,’ she said. ‘I like spring best of all. What about you?’ Michael knelt beside her on the bed, his elbows on the windowsill.**

**‘I don’t mind. I like all the seasons.’**

**‘Oh, yes,’ said Beverley, ‘but spring’s nicest, because that’s when everything starts again.’**

**Michael leaned his forehead on her shoulder. She reached out and stroked his hair with her fingertips.**

**‘I wonder what happened to Finn?’ he said.**

‘I’ll have to phone him,’ Beverley said vaguely.

‘He’ll probably put the phone down on you.’

‘I can’t help that.’

‘Shall I put a record on?’

‘Yes. Where are they?’ She looked round. ‘Aha!’ she bounced off the bed and sat on the floor, flicking through Jim’s unruly collection of albums.

‘No classical, I’m afraid,’ said Michael.

‘That isn’t all I listen to, you know. There, that’ll do!’ She pulled a record out and handed it to Michael. ‘You put it on,’ she said, ‘I’m not fiddling about with other people’s record players – I’m bound to break it. Other people’s machines always fall to bits as soon as I set eyes on them.’

Michael got the music going. Beverley was by the mantel-piece, looking through Jim’s piles of paperbacks.

There was a knock on the door. ‘Are you decent?’ from outside.

Michael scrambled up and opened the door.

‘Do make yourselves at home,’ said Jim.

He put the two mugs on the dressing table. ‘Are you hungry, either of you?’

‘Me!’ said Beverley, raising a hand.

‘And me.’

‘Right. There’s no one in downstairs so I’ll go and cook something for us. You won’t mind me leaving you on your own, will you?’

‘Not at all,’ said Michael. ‘You don’t mind us playing records, do you?’

‘Yes. I certainly do. Take it off at once!’ He smiled at Beverley. ‘Keep him under control, will you?’

‘I’ll try, but he’s bigger than me.’

Jim went downstairs. Michael took Beverley’s coffee over and sat down in front of her.

She sipped, holding the mug in both hands.

‘Isn’t it too hot?’

She shook her head. ‘Just right.’

‘My mum drinks things red hot, too,’ said Michael. ‘It must be a peculiar female attribute: asbestos insides.’

‘Probably.’

‘Beverley?’

‘Mm?’

‘Will you go out with me?’

She looked at him over the rim of her mug. ‘What do you want – a written contract, signed in blood?’

‘Sorry?’

‘Why are blokes so thick?’

He pulled a face. ‘Cos girls are so clever, I suppose.’

‘I’m not especially clever, I don’t think.’

‘I think you are.’

‘You’re too kind,’ she said softly, ‘too, too kind.’

‘Yes,’ he said, reaching out and stroking her knee. ‘I am. I’m very nice indeed, if you get to know me.’

She smiled. ‘I know.’

‘If you do go out with me I shan’t get all possessive or anything,’ he said.

‘No?’

‘Not at all.’

Beverley laid her hand over his on her knee. It was hot and damp from the coffee mug. She picked his hand up and kissed his fingertips.

‘I think you will be,’ she said, looking at him through her eyelashes. ‘But I don’t mind.’

‘Oh. Good.’ He stroked her cheek. She put down the mug and reached out her arms for him. After a long kiss he gazed into her face. ‘You are very beautiful,’ he whispered.

‘Am I?’

He nodded. ‘Very.’

‘I’m very uncomfortable,’ she said. She stood up and stretched. Michael knelt, looking up at her. She stood by the bed, looking out of the window. ‘It’s beginning to get dark,’ she said. She counted on her fingers. ‘Four months to

Midsummer's Day. Doesn't that seem like a long time? And I've got millions of exams.'

'I hate exams.'

'Do you? Oh. I don't know. Most of it's just remembering things – regurgitating what you've been told. That's easy, except for the music exam . . . and I like practising so that doesn't bother me either.'

'I've got a rotten memory.'

She turned round and sat on the edge of the bed. 'Have you?'

'Terrible!' He turned round so he could see her. 'I spent ages trying to learn Shakespeare so I could recite it to you.'

'What on earth for?'

'Finn said you could quote massive chunks of Shakespeare. I suppose I wanted to impress you, that's all.'

'Why?'

'So you'd think I was interesting and fascinating.'

'I did anyway.'

'Did you?'

'Of course. You ARE interesting and fascinating.'

'I feel very thick with you, sometimes.'

'You're not thick. You're just . . .' she paused, thinking, ' . . . untutored in the finer arts of social intercourse.'

'What?'

'SOCIAL, I said.'

‘Oh.’ He stood up. ‘What’s that mean?’

‘It means,’ said Beverley, ‘that you fill the air with words when they aren’t needed.’

‘I always talk too much,’ said Michael. ‘Everyone says so. I keep getting moved in lessons for rabbiting. I shall endeavour to keep silent from now on.’

‘Silly sod.’ She reached out a hand and he took it, sitting on the bed beside her.

‘I talk too much because I’m afraid that I’m not saying what I mean to say. And then when I’ve said it I’m afraid that people won’t understand what I meant . . .’ She stopped him with a kiss.

‘Shut up,’ she said gently. They lay back on the bed. Michael kept his eyes open all the time, greedily taking in the contours of her face and hair. He noticed that her eyebrows did not meet above her nose and that her cheeks were downy with tiny pale hairs. It was slightly uncomfortable to have his legs hanging over the side of the bed – Beverley was on her back so she was all right, her feet still on the floor – but Michael was half-turned and he couldn’t think of where to put his legs so that they didn’t stick out awkwardly into thin air. He had not expected to be able to think of such things at a moment like that and it surprised him that, even while kissing her, his brain was still working on ways of dealing with



the problem. It also came as something of a revelation that the situation seemed so natural. The fantasy he had held inside his head of this moment was so intense that he had almost expected a heavenly choir to burst into song and the ceiling to roll away to reveal seraphim-scattered steps of gold leading up to pearly gates. But there they were, kissing and holding each other and all that happened was that the sky grew steadily darker and the record ended.

‘I’ll turn it over,’ he said. ‘Don’t go away.’

He came back and lay beside her. She had her arm behind her head. He didn’t want to touch her for a moment – he wanted somehow to extend the shivery feeling of anticipation, that magic moment between the movement of heads and the meeting of lips.

‘I love you,’ he said, finally sliding his arm round her.

She smiled. ‘I don’t know if I love you or not, yet,’ she said. ‘I’ve still got bits of Finn in my head. It’s not easy just to change that quickly.’

‘No. I suppose not. Did you love him?’

‘For a while, I think. I’m not really sure . . . I was very fond of him. I don’t want to talk about Finn, anyway.’

‘No. Yuk!’ He pretended to spit. ‘Certainly not!’

They kissed. In the gathering darkness her face was becoming a pale blur.

‘Shall I put the light on?’ he asked after a while.

‘No.’

‘Yoo-hoo! Chaps! Food! Foo-ood!’

Beverley stirred. Their kisses had dwindled to a soft nuzzling and she seemed half asleep.

‘Mole?’ she whispered. ‘Did you hear?’

‘Mm.’

She stroked his face. ‘Aren’t you hungry?’

‘Not particularly.’

‘We can’t stay up here all night.’

‘Why not?’

She sniffed. ‘Can’t you smell it? It smells like chips.’ Michael leaned on one elbow, his fingers still tucked possessively in her clothes, stroking her with little sideways movements.

He looked at her in the gloom. ‘I suppose we’d better go down.’

‘I suppose so,’ she said.

‘Drat!’

‘Can I have myself back now?’

‘I could stay up here all night with you.’

‘I’m hungry.’ She sat up. ‘I’ll start eating YOU if I don’t get some nosh in me soon.’ Michael rolled onto his back.

‘Ready?’ he asked.

Beverley heaved herself off the bed. He caught a tantalising glimpse of pale thighs in the dark before her skirt came down over them.

‘I’m all dishevelled,’ she said, buttoning her blouse.

‘You’re beautiful.’

‘Where’s the bathroom – I’m dying for a wee.’

He put his arm round her. She gave him a long kiss.

‘Now,’ she said, pulling away. ‘I’m hungry and I need to go to the loo.’ He groped his way across the room, feeling slightly dizzy, and opened the door. The landing light was as fierce as acid in his eyes.

‘It’s upstairs, on the left,’ he told her.

‘Ta,’ she ran upstairs.

He sat on the landing, waiting for her, light-headed and very happy.

They went down to the dining room together. Jim stood grinning at the end of the table. The main lights were off and he had lit candles.

‘You’re there,’ he said, ‘and you’re there, opposite each other. I hope you’re hungry.’

‘Not half,’ said Beverley, sitting down.

‘Good. ’Cos there’s tons of it. Sit down, Mole, you look as if you’re about to fall over.’ Michael took his place. Beverley smiled at

him across the table and they reached out to hold hands.

‘Are we going out together now?’ he asked while Jim was out getting the first course.

‘Yes,’ she said. ‘If you want to.’

Michael laughed. ‘If I WANT to?’ She squeezed his fingers and he let out a long happy sigh. ‘I could eat a horse!’ he said. ‘A shire horse, at that!’

‘What a coincidence!’ said Jim, bearing plates. ‘That’s just what I’ve cooked!’

# *Chapter 13*

Michael survived the school day by ignoring it – but he dreaded the long, blank evening that lay ahead. Some school friends of Beverley's were visiting her this evening so he would not be going to the hospital. On the way home from school he stopped off at the Post Office and drew out five pounds from his account.

He went to the local off-licence and chose a two litre bottle of beer.

'I can't sell you that.'

'Why not?'

'Look at you. How old are you?'

'What's that got to do with anything?'

'It's illegal to sell intoxicating liquors to minors. You might have got away with it if you'd had the brains to take your school uniform off.'

Michael left the bottle on the counter.

He bought some cans of lager at the local supermarket. Nobody commented on his

age or his uniform as he handed the cash over. As he walked back past the off-licence he waved the cans at the salesman through the window.

He ran straight upstairs and hid the cans under his bed. After having something to eat, he strolled to Jim's house. Jim wasn't in. Feeling betrayed by Jim's absence, he sat alone in his room, drinking can after can. He tried putting records on but nothing suited his mood and so, as the evening dawdled by, he sat in the middle of the floor with the empty cans around him.

He heard the front door bell ring and wondered if it might be Jim to see him. Feet on the stairs to his room made him sure that it must be.

A knock.

'Come in.'

It was Finn. Michael stared at him in surprise.

'Hello Mole.'

'Hello.' Finn shut the door behind himself.

'I thought I'd come and see how you were.'

'Oh.'

'I'll go away again if you like.'

'No. That's all right.'

Finn glanced at the debris. 'Drinking on your own?'

‘Yes. There’s none left, I’m afraid.’

‘That’s okay.’ Finn sat on the floor.

‘I was trying to get drunk but it doesn’t seem to have worked.’

‘It never does when you’re trying,’ said Finn.

‘I’ve had all this lot in the last hour and it hasn’t had any effect at all.’

‘Poor old Mole. Is it because of Bev?’

‘Yes.’

‘How is she?’

‘Exactly the same.’

‘It must be horrible . . . just waiting and waiting.’

Michael drew patterns on the carpet with his forefinger.

‘I came to say I’m sorry,’ said Finn.

Michael looked up. ‘For what?’

‘For what I called you yesterday.’

‘Forget it.’

‘I tried, but I was lying awake all last night thinking what a shit I must be. As if you haven’t got enough without that. I am sorry, Mole, really.’

‘It doesn’t matter.’

‘Now look here, young Mole, it’s my conscience I’m trying to soothe. What’s the point of me coming round here all abject and apologetic if you say it doesn’t matter?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Well then. Do you accept my apology?’

‘Yes.’

‘Good.’ Finn chewed his lip. ‘I want to set the record straight about something else as well.’

‘What?’

‘You know . . . oh dear, this is difficult . . . you know what I told you about Bev . . . just after you’d started going out with her?’

Michael remembered. He remembered quite clearly. He had been sitting in the common room. Finn had stood over him.

‘So you’re going out with her, are you?’ he had said.

‘Yes,’ Michael had replied.

Finn had sneered in an ugly way. ‘You know what they say about her, don’t you?’

‘What who say?’

Finn had laughed coldly. ‘Perhaps you don’t know, then.’

‘What are you talking about?’

‘There was a party,’ Finn had said. ‘She spent the entire evening in bed with Mickey Cannon. She’s known for it.’

‘I don’t want to know about that.’

‘I’m only telling you for your own good. I don’t want you going around thinking she’s a cute little virgin. Has she let you yet? She let me on our first date. She’s dead easy. I thought I ought to warn you.’

‘Thanks,’ Michael had said icily. ‘Thanks very much.’



Finn had walked off, laughing. That had been the last time they had spoken together until now.

‘Yes,’ said Michael, ‘I remember.’

‘It wasn’t true, you know,’ said Finn.

‘I know,’ said Michael. ‘I asked her.’

‘Oh, Christ. What did she say?’

‘She said you’d made it up. She said you’d never . . . slept with her at all. And she said that she was ON a bed with Mickey Cannon and not in it, and that they were just snogging – nothing else.’

‘I was trying to put you off her.’

‘I know.’

‘We didn’t sleep together.’

‘No. She said.’

‘I don’t half feel like a creep,’ said Finn.

‘It doesn’t matter. I didn’t believe you anyway.’

There was a short pause.

‘Do you go down the youth club much now – I mean – before . . . before the accident?’ asked Finn.

‘About once a week.’

‘Do you remember a girl there called Rose? Quite thin with long black hair.’

‘Not really, why?’

‘We’re going out together.’

‘Oh!’ Michael was surprised to find himself feeling pleased for Finn. ‘I don’t remember her.’

‘She only went down there a couple of times. I actually started talking to her at the bus stop on the way home one night. She only lives a couple of streets away from me. She’s ever so nice.’

‘No reputation?’ said Michael with a smile.

Finn laughed. ‘Not that I know of. Still, I wouldn’t care if she had.’

‘That’s how I felt about Beverley.’

‘I should have known better,’ said Finn.

‘Never mind.’

‘It was just that I was feeling really depressed at losing her – Bev – and I wanted to get my own back, somehow.’

‘I can understand that.’

‘It was shitty, what I did.’

‘Don’t go on about it.’

‘No,’ Finn grinned. ‘Rose is lovely though.’

‘Good. I’m glad.’

‘We’ll have to go out as a foursome when Bev gets better. You’ll like Rose, I’m sure you will.’

‘I’m sure I will.’

‘Do you fancy going out for a drink, or have you had enough?’

‘I haven’t got any money.’

‘I have. Come on. I’ll take you for a drink.’

They went to a local pub where they knew the landlord wasn’t too fussy about the age limit.

‘We’re still friends, aren’t we?’ asked Finn after a couple of pints.

‘Yes, of course.’

‘Oh, good. Only . . .’

If you keep going on about what you said about Beverley I’ll chuck this drink over you,’ warned Michael.

‘I shan’t. I hope she gets better soon.’

‘So do I.’

‘I suppose you must really miss her. Do you love her?’

‘Enormously,’ said Michael.

Finn looked round the pub. ‘Look at them all,’ he said. ‘Like a load of stupid sheep. They don’t care . . .’

‘They don’t know,’ said Michael.

‘They wouldn’t give a toss if they did know,’ said Finn. Don’t you think it’s weird? The way . . .’ he paused, seeming to have trouble finding the correct words for what he was thinking. ‘ . . . the way that something can . . . something really traumatic can happen to you . . . like Bev being hurt . . . something that really screws you up . . . and yet, at the same time most of the people you meet either don’t even know it’s happened or don’t much care if they do. Oh, they say, how tragic, I am sorry, but they’re not really – ’cos they’re not involved. It’s like the Second World War . . .’ Michael was getting a bit lost, but he let Finn ramble

on, ' . . . they talk about the Second World War as if everybody in the world was involved, but there were places where people didn't even know it was happening – and the nuclear bomb . . . they talk about nuclear bombs as though they've changed the lives of everyone in the world – but there are tribes in South America who've never heard of them . . . who've never seen anyone outside . . . it's . . . it's incredible.'

'You're pissed, aren't you?' said Michael.

'A bit,' said Finn. 'But you know what I mean, even if what I meant to say wasn't what I said. I've been smoking some dope, that's what's making me all fuzzy-brained.'

'Oh, I thought it couldn't be two pints of beer.' Michael felt stone-cold sober still.

'Do you want some? I can get you some . . . easily . . .'

'No thanks. Smoking chokes me to death.'

'Rose has always got some.'

'Good for Rose.'

'Haven't you tried it?'

'Yes. Of course I have.'

'Didn't you like it?'

'It didn't have any effect. Besides I'd rather spend my money on other things. It's too expensive.'

'No more than beer.'

‘I can’t afford that either. I prefer buying records and books. I like to have something concrete at the end of my money.’

‘Sex is really good after you’ve smoked dope,’ said Finn eagerly. ‘Me and Rose . . .’

‘I don’t want to know about you and Rose,’ said Michael.

‘You used to want to talk about sex all the time,’ said Finn. ‘You were always buying porno mags and asking me what I’d been up to.’

‘Yes, and if you remember, you never told me.’

‘Didn’t I?’

‘No, you always said that it was unfair on the girl to tell other people about what you did together.’

‘Did I? Yes, that’s right, isn’t it?’ Finn took a swig of beer. ‘It must be the dope,’ he said, ‘it’s making me too talkative. Good old Mole, keeping me on the straight and narrow.’ He put his arm round Michael. ‘And to think it should be you that stops me . . .’ he laughed, ‘. . . who’d have thought it?’

Michael finished his beer. ‘Shall we away?’ he asked.

He waited with Finn at the bus stop. Finn was swaying slightly.

‘We’re still friends?’ he asked.

‘Yes.’

Finn nodded thoughtfully. 'That's good.'  
The bus came into sight. 'That's very good.'

'Here's your bus.'

'Okay. I'll give you a ring, shall I?'

'Yes.' He bundled Finn onto the bus.  
'Cheerio.'

Finn stood on the platform, hanging onto the pole. 'Cheerio, Mole,' he shouted as the bus drew away. 'Good old Mole! Good old Mole!'

Michael walked home, chuckling to himself. So the evening had not been the barren wasteland that he had feared. He went to bed thinking that Beverley might wake up at any time. The thought comforted him and he fell quickly into a deep sleep.

## *Chapter 14*

Beverley woke from a contented half-doze, in Michael's arms and in the usual tangle of half-shed clothes. His eyes were open and he was gazing at her, smiling slightly. She felt his hand still gently nuzzling at her under the bed covers.

She was about to curl closer when she glanced at the clock.

She sat up, the spell of his fingers snapped like thread. 'For heaven's sake, look at the time!' she said.

'Is it late?' asked Michael drowsily.

She started to do up her jeans then changed her mind. 'I'll wear a skirt,' she said. 'You can't really listen to posh music in jeans.' Michael watched her appreciatively from the bed as she moved around the room, dressed only in her open blouse, green and white striped pants and orange socks.

'You've got a lovely bum,' he said.

‘We haven’t got time for that,’ she said, scrabbling through her wardrobe. ‘I knew this would happen once we started . . .’

They had been going out together for a month, adapting to each other with surprising ease. Michael had anticipated Beverley’s need to be alone to practise her flute-playing and to do her homework. No schoolwork appeared to pose the slightest difficulties for her and Michael, for whom digesting facts was a lengthy and arduous business, found himself having to suppress a growing jealousy of her intellect. The worst part of it was that she did not understand the problem – she found the work easy and was unable to appreciate that Michael found it hard going. Fortunately though, this potential source of friction was made less important by the fact that she obviously thought the world of Michael.

Beverley’s returned affection overwhelmed Michael – never once had he thought of love being returned – his fantasies about Beverley had always involved her as a passive vessel into which he poured his love, and to discover that, far from being content to lie back and be loved, as it were, Beverley’s emotions were, if anything, stronger than his own, was a startling revelation.



Finn's reaction to his break-up with Beverley had been very bad – he had said some cruel things about her and Beverley had been livid when Michael had told her about it. Fortunately Michael could avoid Finn at school with reasonable ease, but their occasional meetings were very cold and awkward.

Michael's mother had taken to Beverley immediately, but his father regarded the relationship with a sort of patronising amusement.

Michael knew this attitude of old. It was similar to the one his father had shown when, a year before, Michael had mentioned that he and Finn were thinking of getting a flat together after they left school. Michael wished his father could come to terms with the fact that he was growing up and that he should be allowed to have silly or naive ambitions without them being trodden on. Sophie's attitude had puzzled Michael – she had almost behaved as if he was bringing a rival into the house. For the first couple of weeks she seemed determined to try and trip Beverley up, and it took Michael a while to realise that Sophie was envious of Beverley's quick intelligence, and envious too, of the fact that Beverley seemed destined to pass all her exams smoothly and glide effortlessly

into university. Beverley talked about it with the same certainty which Sophie felt about the fact that she would be signing on at the dole office for as far into the future as she could see.

But that had only been for the first couple of weeks and now Sophie, finding that Beverley had cracks in her armour, had taken her on as though she was a long-lost sister and needed looking after.

All these problems, though, had paled into insignificance against one major stumbling block – provided, of course, by Michael's father.

'Can I take Beverley up to my room?' Michael had asked innocently.

'No, you can not.'

'Mum?' But his mother had not been willing to go against his father.

'Sophie isn't allowed to take boys up to her room,' his father had said, 'and I don't see why you should be treated any differently.'

Michael was horrified – how could he explain to Beverley that his bedroom was out of bounds? All his records were up there, and his record player – the best one in the house – was in there too. He had always thought of his bedroom as his one real refuge, and to find it barred to him when he wanted privacy more than ever

seemed a particularly spiteful move of his father's.

Michael pondered this problem for a long time. 'Supposing,' he asked, 'supposing Beverley's gran doesn't mind her being in my room, would it be all right then?'

Michael's father had been so certain that Beverley's gran would come firmly down on his side that he had agreed. If she wasn't opposed to Beverley and him being allowed to be alone up in his bedroom then it was all right as far as he was concerned as well. His father had not expected to hear any more of it, and when, a couple of days later, Michael told him that he had asked Beverley's gran and that she said that it was perfectly all right with her, he refused to believe it.

Michael's mother came unexpectedly to his rescue. She suggested they telephone Beverley's gran for confirmation. The brief conversation between his mother and her gran proved, against his father's doubt, that the old lady not only considered it reasonable for them to be allowed to be alone together, but went so far as to state that she saw it as quite unreasonable for them not to be allowed to.

Father had not been convinced, but the promise had held. Michael had been foolish enough to grin triumphantly in his father's face and there had been a lot of tension.

‘What could we get up to in my room that we couldn’t do in the front room?’

‘Don’t come it,’ his father had said. ‘You think you’ve got one over on me, but don’t push it or I’ll stop you seeing her altogether. You shouldn’t have time for girls, anyway. What about your exams? I suppose you’re too busy to bother about them now. I tell you, if you don’t get some work done you’ll end up like your sister, on the dole for months and ending up in some dead-end job slogging your guts out for nothing.’

That had been about a week ago and as Michael sat on the edge of Beverley’s bed, buttoning his shirt and watching her choose a skirt for their evening out, he couldn’t help comparing her crazy, easy-going home life with the emotional mine-field of his own. Her gran, a sort of peripatetic lecturer, was in her sixties (and wasn’t really her gran at all, but a great aunt, apparently), but behaved as though she was in her twenties – a contemporary attitude that made Michael’s parents seem so incredibly ancient with their blind bigotries and their obsession with the mundane.

Michael crept up behind Beverley and slid his hands up inside her blouse. For a few seconds she stood still, enjoying his caresses, but then she turned and pushed him away.

‘Don’t!’ she said. ‘Please don’t. We’ve got to get ready and you know I go all legless when you do that.’

‘I’m ready,’ said Michael, cramming his feet into his trainers.

‘Then get out of my way. Go downstairs or something,’ said Beverley, trying hard to be practical.

‘I want to watch you getting dressed.’

‘I can’t concentrate with you ogling me.’

‘But you’re so oglable.’

‘Out!’ Beverley opened her bedroom door. ‘Come on, I haven’t got time to muck about. Go into the lounge and molest some cushions if you can’t keep your hands to yourself.’

‘I love you,’ shouted Michael through the keyhole.

‘I love you. Go away,’ called Beverley.

Michael ran downstairs. The lounge was scattered, as usual, with Beverley’s gran’s papers. The old lady was lecturing in Kent somewhere. Michael envied Beverley’s independence. He sat at the table and idly read an open page of the *Guardian*. The *Sun* was delivered to Michael’s house and he was unused to closely printed and dense newspaper journalism.

Ten minutes later Beverley appeared transformed.

‘Will I do?’

‘You look lovely.’

‘Good. Come on.’ She checked her purse for the tickets. She was taking Michael to his first classical concert.

‘Are we late, then?’

‘Not yet, but we want to give ourselves plenty of time in case the buses are playing up. They don’t let us in if we arrive after it’s started.’

Michael was not convinced that he was going to enjoy himself. They were going to hear Mahler’s *Das Lied von der Erde* – a complicated song-cycle that Michael knew lasted an hour or more. Appreciating his ignorance, Beverley had played him a record of the piece a number of times. Apart from the fanfare-like beginning, a gallopy bit in the middle and a quite attractively wistful ending, Michael could make little of the music. When he said that some of it reminded him of Mike Oldfield with words, she had hit him with a pillow.

A bus came along almost immediately and they tucked themselves into the upstairs back seat.

‘I’m going to the clinic next week,’ said Beverley.

Michael looked at her blankly.

‘The Family Planning Clinic.’

Michael almost panicked. ‘You’re not . . . not . . .’

‘Of course I’m not! How could I be?’  
Beverley leaned close and hissed in his ear, ‘You don’t get pregnant without penetration.’

‘Phew! Thank God for that.’

‘You are a twit, sometimes.’

‘Well I didn’t know. What will they do at the clinic?’

‘I don’t know. I haven’t been there yet, have I?’

‘Will we . . . are you . . . are you going to go on the pill?’

‘I don’t know yet.’

‘It’d be nice if you did. It’s the safest method, isn’t it?’

‘Oh yes, perfectly safe for you. It’ll be me that will be filling myself up with chemicals.’

‘Is it dangerous then?’

‘Will you stop asking silly questions? I don’t know until I’ve been there. I’ll tell you one thing, though – if it was men that got pregnant they’d have made sure the thing was safe, that’s for certain. Why is it always the woman who has to take these things?’

‘Because it’s women who get pregnant.’

‘Not on their own, they don’t. Why hasn’t someone invented a pill for men, that’s what I want to know.’

They arrived in plenty of time and browsed in the book-shop. Alongside the books were classical records and cassettes.

‘I’d like that one,’ she said, pointing to a tape of Mahler’s Second Symphony.

‘I’ll get it for your birthday.’

‘That’s ages yet.’

A slow gonging sound echoed round the hall.

‘That means five minutes,’ said Beverley. ‘Come on.’ Beverley had bought two of the cheapest tickets – the posh seats out front were a long way beyond her means – and they were shown to the choir bench behind the orchestra. It was almost like being on stage; the whole audience seemed to be watching them as they took their places.

‘We could do them a bit of Shakespeare,’ whispered Michael.

‘I don’t think they’d be impressed,’ said Beverley.

‘You could do that Cleopatra bit, remember? I’ll be the asp, clutch me to your bosom.’

‘I’ll clutch your bum with my foot in a minute.’

The auditorium was rapidly filling up. Just below them, over the low wooden banister, was arranged the percussion section.

‘What a fantastic drum,’ said Michael. It was about two metres tall, on its side,



black with mottled brown skin. 'Once he starts hitting that we won't be able to hear anything else.'

Michael was almost right. The orchestra began to file in and the hall filled with sounds of tuning up. An old man came and perched on a stool just beneath where Beverley was sitting. He looked round and winked at her and she wriggled her fingers back.

She looked longingly at the flautists. 'I'd love to play in an orchestra like this,' she sighed.

'Why can't you?'

'I'm just not good enough.'

'I thought you were very good.'

'Oh, yes, I can knock out "Annie's Song" and "Amazing Grace" all right, but this stuff is really difficult. I couldn't play this in a million years. You've got to be incredibly dedicated. Gran says I'm too flighty – she doesn't really mean that, but it's true in a way. I couldn't go over and over a piece like these people do. If I haven't got a tune in a few plays I usually forget it. And I don't practise nearly enough to be a professional. You have to practise for hours every single day.'

'Don't start doing that,' said Michael. 'I'd never get to see you.'

'Don't worry. I couldn't if I wanted to. It'd drive me . . . hold on, here comes the leader.'

The audience applauded a man who stepped onto the platform with a violin.

‘Is that the conductor?’ hissed Michael.

‘No. Here he comes now.’ More rapturous applause as a surprisingly young man came on, followed by a stocky man and a round, black woman.

‘The singers,’ whispered Beverley.

‘Oh.’

Michael was pleased at how much of the music he remembered. He began to think it wasn’t, perhaps, quite as elusive as he had thought. He and Beverley held hands throughout the performance. The balance was a bit strange, what with the singers facing away from them and the percussion being right under their noses, but as the last plaintive notes of the finale drifted over them Michael found himself wishing he could hear it all again.

They walked elatedly to the bus stop.

‘Wonderful, wasn’t it?’ sighed Beverley. She hummed a snatch of melody. ‘I love the ending.’

‘Yes.’ Michael put his arms round her. ‘But I love you more.’

They held each other tightly, warming each other against the chilly night; waiting for their bus and happy just to be together.

# *Chapter 15*

On the way home from school the day after Finn's visit, Michael called on Beverley's gran. He wasn't sure why: he didn't know whether he wanted to talk about it or not, but he knew she would lend a sympathetic ear if called for. And he also knew that if he didn't want to say anything about anything then it would only be a matter of dropping a single word about women or the government or inequality and he could happily sit back, drowned in words for as long as he liked.

Much to his surprise, Sophie opened the door.

'Wotcher, bruv.'

'What are you doing here?'

'Oh, and hello to you too!' Her hair was in a scarf and she wore a pair of baggy and stained dungarees.

'What are you doing?'

'Ballet lessons, what's it look like?'

'Is it Michael?' From the study.

‘Yes,’ called Sophie. ‘Another volunteer.’

‘Get him kitted out, then.’

‘What are you doing?’

‘Decorating. Well, un-decorating at the moment. Stripping.’

‘Whatever turns you on, dear.’

‘The wallpaper, sewer-brain.’ Michael poked his head round the open study door. Beverley’s gran was beside a pair of step ladders, hacking at the wall with a scraper. Half the paper was already off and the bare boards of the floor were heaped with soggy debris.

‘Come to help?’ asked the old lady. ‘I’m knackered, I can tell you.’ She was dressed in a huge pair of jeans and a vast shirt. She looked most odd, with her elegant old face streaked with dirt and her hair all dishevelled. He couldn’t imagine his mother getting stuck in like that, and she was half the old lady’s age.

‘I didn’t,’ said Michael, ‘but I will.’

Sophie pointed to a large heap of rags at the foot of the stairs.

‘Togs,’ she said, ‘get changed.’

Beverley’s gran leaned heavily on the step ladder. ‘I’ll make some coffee,’ she said, puffing. ‘I’m out of breath.’

Michael pulled a reeking boiler suit over his own clothes.

‘You go up the ladder,’ said Sophie. ‘You know what I’m like about heights.’ Michael climbed.

‘Have you got vertigo?’ he asked.

‘No, I only live round the corner.’

They both groaned.

‘Don’t work directly under me; you’ll get covered,’ said Michael.

‘I know.’

They began scraping.

‘How are things *chez toi*?’ asked Sophie.

‘Quiet,’ said Michael.

‘How’s Dad?’

‘All right. He hasn’t bellowed at me for days. It’s quite strange.’

‘Perhaps he’s turned over a new leaf.’

‘You gave him something to think about, anyway. I think he misses you more than Mum does, even.’

‘You can never tell with Mum,’ said Sophie. ‘She doesn’t say much, but it’s all going on in there,’ she tapped her forehead with her scraper. ‘Do you know what she told me once? I was complaining about the way she lets Dad dominate her, and she just smiled and said I didn’t know the half of it.’

‘She told me about Dad’s childhood,’ said Michael.

‘Oh, yes, but that wasn’t what she meant. She told me that it only *looked* like Dad made all the decisions. Did you

know that they have long conversations – debates – about everything. He consults her about everything they do, did you know that?’

‘No.’

‘Oh yes, apparently, once they get into their bedroom, away from us, it’s quite different. She said it was important for him that he appears to be the boss, but really they both decide. Mum said that if she ever really wants something done a particular way, even if he disapproves, he’ll go along with her.’

‘Then why the macho bit in front of us?’

‘Social conditioning.’

‘Whatter?’

‘Men rule,’ said Sophie. ‘Or, at least, men must appear to rule. I was talking to Vivien earlier, she’s got the line on it.’

‘Vivien?’

‘Bev’s gran.’

Vivien? Michael had never thought of her as having any other name than Beverley’s gran. Or perhaps Mrs Harker, as that was the name on the doorbell. Vivien? Well!

‘She’s amazingly clever,’ said Sophie.

‘I know. I’d noticed.’

‘I don’t mean . . . I don’t mean just intellectual – you know, book learning. I’m talking about CLEVER – you know, really sharp. She can put things into . . . she says the sort of things that make you think

**WOW! that's right – why didn't I think of that?'**

**'She's had plenty of time to learn.'** A long strip of wallpaper eased away. Michael gave it a little flick of the wrist so that it would peel away sideways and fall over his sister's head like a shroud.

**'Thank you!'** she said, pulling it off.

**'Sor-ry!'**

**'Like hell.'** She rattled the steps.

**'Careful. You'll have me off.'**

**'I'll jam this up an orifice!'** she threatened, waving the scraper at him.

**'Ouch!'** said Michael. **'You could damage a lad's potential that way.'**

Beverley's gran came in with a tray. Michael climbed off the ladder and took a cup of coffee off the tray.

**'Are you visiting the hospital tonight?'** asked the old lady.

**'Yes, I think so.'**

**'I'll come too, if you like,'** said Sophie.

**'Good, that's okay then,'** said Beverley's gran. **'Only I ought to do some work this evening. I've got to be off to . . . oh, I don't remember – somewhere silly, first thing in the morning and I haven't done a stroke of work for it.'** She looked at her watch, having to push the loose shirt-sleeve up her arm to find it. **'Shall we give this another half an**

hour or so? I've got some casserole in the oven for afterwards.'

They worked on, finishing one more wall then cleaning themselves up before eating.

The visit to the hospital was as depressing as always – except that Michael was pleased to see that the nice nurse was back on duty and that his cassette was playing. Beverley was just the same. Michael had stopped hoping for her to look any different – it was too agonising to walk along the hall with that feeling in his stomach that this time he might push the door open to find her sitting up in bed, wide awake and eating fish and chips or whatever – because as soon as he did actually open the door she was always the same. Unconscious. Pale and immobile. He began to find it impossible to imagine animation returning to that slack form and it upset him that his last memories of her should be so cruel.

'I sometimes wish she had just died,' he told Sophie afterwards.

'You don't mean that.'

'I do. It's horrible like this. I want to remember her running about and laughing and playing her flute and talking and being . . . and being Beverley. But I can hardly remember her like that any more. It's all being overlaid by how she is now. If she'd just been killed . . .'



‘Don’t talk like that,’ said Sophie angrily. ‘Just don’t.’

They walked on into the cold, dark evening.

‘I was thinking of coming back home with you,’ said Sophie.

‘What?’

‘Not to stay,’ she said quickly. ‘Just for a visit. I left with only one suitcase, remember. There’s tons of my stuff still there. I’ve got to pick it up some time.’ She shrugged. ‘I thought tonight would be as good a time as any.’

‘How are you going to move it all?’

‘Vivien said she’d help me – with the car. But I’ve got to sort things out and pack them up first.’

‘Are you taking any big stuff? Any furniture?’

‘Not at the moment. I don’t need it until I find somewhere of my own – there’s no room for it at Ruth’s.’

If Sophie felt awkward as she walked into the front room she showed no sign of it.

‘Hello, Mum. Hello, Dad.’

They both sprang up, but her father, being thinner and more agile, got to her first. He caught her up in a fierce embrace.

‘It’s good to see you, love,’ he said. ‘It’s good to see you.’

‘It’s only a visit,’ said Sophie breathlessly. ‘I’m not coming back.’

‘Michael, put the kettle on,’ said his mother.

As he left the room he heard his father say, ‘No, of course not, I didn’t expect that,’ and his mother say, ‘Are you hungry, dear?’

By the time Michael got back with the tea things, they were all sitting down chatting as though nothing unusual had happened.

‘Your room will always be there,’ Father was saying. ‘Just in case, you know, just in case things don’t work out and you need a refuge.’

‘Thanks,’ said Sophie. ‘But it’ll be fine.’

‘I haven’t touched anything,’ said her mother. ‘I thought it would be best just to leave it for you to come back and sort out.’

‘Is my gear still in the bathroom?’

‘Yes. Where it’s always been.’ Michael was amazed by the huge grin on both his parents’ faces. The return of the prodigal daughter, he thought. It almost seemed worth leaving home if you were welcomed back like that.

‘I didn’t even have a toothbrush,’ said Sophie.

‘What about towels and things?’ asked her mother.

‘You must have things like that,’ said her father. ‘We’ll sort something out in a minute. Finish your tea first.’

Michael sat quietly in a corner, listening. His father was talking to her the way he would talk to any other adult guest – the way he talked to Uncle John. It was as though he knew he no longer had any power over her behaviour – no longer had cause to tell her to do this or that: tidy your room and clean out the bath – get your clothes off the kitchen table. And all by the simple move of leaving the house. Michael knew he was in no position to follow his sister's example, but it was there all the same – a sort of light at the end of the tunnel – a light that he could close his eyes and see when his father ranted and raved about exams and getting home early and being lazy.

'You can borrow the cases,' said their father. 'If you feel like packing some stuff this evening I'll drive you over with it later. That'll save Bev's grandmother a job.'

Why wasn't it always like this, thought Michael. Why couldn't things always be so civilised?

After tea, Sophie stood up. 'I'll have a prod through my stuff, then,' she said.

'I'll get the cases,' said her mother.

'I'll do it,' said Michael. 'I know where they are.'

He lumbered the three empty cases into Sophie's room. 'Where do you want them?'

‘Oh, um . . .’ she looked round, her arms full of underclothes, ‘ . . . down there. On the floor. That’s it. Open the top one. I’ll dump this lot in first. There, that’s done.’ She went through her drawers. ‘Knickers and socks,’ she hummed happily. ‘Knickers and socks and bras and tights, dresses and woollies, sweaters and . . .’ she looked round, ‘ . . . sweaters and shoes, la dee da dum dum, la dee da doo, tiddley-umpty-pum.’

‘You look like someone finishing a ten year stretch in Pentonville,’ said Michael.

‘Do I?’ said Sophie. ‘I suppose it is a bit like that.’ She crawled into the wardrobe and a cascade of shoes began to splash out over the carpet. ‘But it isn’t really. God! It’s dusty in here.’ She sneezed and backed out. ‘It’s better.’ She gathered up the shoes and filled a case with them. ‘It’s better because now I know I can come back to visit whenever I feel like it. I know I’m not disinherited or anything. That’s what makes the difference.’ She closed the case and opened the next one. ‘I’m free to do what I like but . . .’ she smiled. ‘ . . . it was too stifling . . . me being here . . . too stifling for all of us. It should give you a bit more room to move, too.’

‘Yes, I was just thinking,’ Michael looked round the room. ‘This room’s bigger than mine.’

Sophie put her hands on her hips. 'I see,' she said. 'You might at least wait until I've got my things out before you start bringing yours in.'

'I didn't say a word!'

'I know you, Michael Byfield, I know how your little mind works. Coo, you're thinking, I can have a bigger room now.' She laughed. 'And it's not directly over the front room, so you can play records louder, too.'

'I hadn't thought of that.'

'You will.'

'I wonder if Dad would let me decorate it. Here, that's a point – what WERE you doing round at Beverley's this afternoon?'

Sophie pointed to the middle of her face. 'Nose!' she said.

'Secrets?'

'Not necessarily.'

'What, then?'

'I'm not going to tell you.' She grinned toothily. 'Not just yet.'

'You're not moving in there, are you?'

'No.'

'Well, what?'

'Patience, little bruv. All will be revealed in the fullness of time. Suffice it to say I had a reason for being there.'

'You swine, tell me.'

'Nope.'

'I'll give you my *Beano* collection.'

‘I’ve read them all. It’s no good. I’m not telling.’

‘Ratbag.’

Michael went downstairs.

‘Dad?’

‘What’s that, my lad?’ He was in a good mood.

‘I was just wondering . . .’

‘. . . if you could move into Sophie’s room,’ said his father.

‘Oh. Well . . . yes.’ Michael was surprised.

‘I don’t see why not. You decorate it yourself, though, I’m not doing it.’

‘Thanks Dad.’ Everyone was smiling. Now why couldn’t it be like that all the time?

## *Chapter 16*

It was the first sunny day of the year. The first Sunday in March. Michael let the brightness into his room with mixed emotions. He had nothing against sunshine as such – it was just that once the really deadly chill of winter had passed, his father, like some strange breed of hibernating handyman, would scent jobs in the air. Jobs such as tinkering with the car or refurbishing the garden; jobs like mending the roof – there was a pile of slates in the garden for this purpose and Michael dreaded seeing his father, like some raving lunatic, standing across the road, scanning the roof for missing slates with a pair of binoculars. The worst of it was that Michael was always relegated to the role of tool-fetcher, ladder-holder and torch-bearer when jobs went on into the night. Oh yes, once his father got going, a job was seen through to its end even if it meant working in the freezing cold darkness for half the night.

Michael had to have a good excuse to get out of helping on such jobs, excuses like an audience with the queen or terminal malaria. Friends coming to visit never normally cut any ice, but Michael hoped that the fact that Beverley was coming round that afternoon might work a miracle.

Anyway, thought Michael, he was off the hook until well after midday – his parents always spent Sunday mornings lying in bed, listening to *The Archers*. Years ago Sophie and he had snuggled up with them – four in a bed – but one Sunday when he had rushed into Sophie's room to drag her into their parents' bedroom she had said she couldn't do things like that anymore, although she had not explained why. It was about the time that Michael's requests for games of doctors and nurses began to fall on deaf ears. Sophie had reached puberty. When, a few months later, Michael found out some of the things that happened to girls when they reached puberty, he felt very hard done by that Sophie should become out of bounds just when things were getting interesting.

Michael dressed and went downstairs to make himself some breakfast. It was quite early, but he liked the few hours of a Sunday morning when he virtually had the house to himself. Sophie could sleep all day if she was allowed to, and she had been out until



very late with Barry last night so there was no danger of her taking over the kitchen.

He stretched himself out on the couch in the front room and read a few chapters of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. Beverley had lent it to him. He was enjoying it but he had to read it in very small bursts or found that he forgot who was who and why they were doing things.

As the morning drew on he relinquished his position on the couch and went up to his room: there was always the danger that his father might get up early, see him doing 'nothing' and enlist his aid. He needn't have feared. The house became noisy but there were no tell-tale footsteps on the stairs and no dreaded knock. He was safe.

Beverley arrived at about half past twelve.

She had come on her bike, her top half in a quilted anorak, her jeans hidden to the knee by rainbow-coloured leg-warmers. She smelt of icy air as he kissed her hello.

'I've got some stuff,' she said to him, once they were in his bedroom.

'What's that?'

She unzipped her anorak and pulled out a bag. 'This,' she said. A thick paperback book called *Your Body – A Guide for Women*. 'And all this lot.' She emptied the paper bag onto the bed. Leaflets and

a little cardboard box. 'Most of it isn't relevant,' said Beverley. 'But I thought I'd get it for you to have a read.'

Michael looked through the leaflets. They were about different methods of contraception.

'What did they actually do at the clinic? I mean – do you just say – I want to go on the pill – and they dish them out?'

'Hardly. They asked me about my medical history – heart attacks and so on – and whether I had a steady relationship.'

'What did you say?'

'I said yes, of course.'

'Oh, good.'

'Then they took my blood pressure and weighed me. I'm overweight, you know, according to them.'

'You don't look it.'

'I don't care anyway. It says in that book that obsessive interest in weight is psychologically damaging. It more or less says that you should learn to like your body the way it is and forget about trying to look like a model.'

'You already do.'

'I don't know about that. I've got a very thick waist, really, and my legs are probably too fat, especially right up at the top.'

'My favourite bit,' said Michael.

‘There are other bits of me as well, you know . . .’

‘I love your other bits too . . .’

‘I was actually thinking of my brain, as it happened.’

‘I love your brain.’ He kissed her hair. ‘Let me at it,’ he said, ‘let me at that gorgeous brain.’

She giggled and squirmed away as he licked her ear.

‘You’re potty,’ she said.

‘Would you like to marry me?’ asked Michael. ‘I don’t mean if you got pregnant. I mean anyway.’

‘I don’t know. I haven’t thought about it. Maybe, one day.’ She suddenly looked at him. ‘Was that a proposal?’

‘No, not particularly – just a thought.’

‘You know I’m going to university if I pass my exams. Lots of things can happen in three years.’

‘Don’t talk about it. I don’t want to think of you going away.’

‘You’ll have to face it one day.’

‘Yes . . . well . . . one day.’

‘Anyway,’ said Beverley, scooping all the stuff up and putting it back into the paper bag. ‘That’s what it’s all about. What do you think?’

‘I’m glad I’m not a girl.’

‘I’m glad you’re not a girl. Put a record on, I don’t like this silence.’

While Michael was choosing a record Beverley went to the window.

‘I don’t want to worry you,’ she said, ‘but I think your father’s gone potty.’

‘Why? What’s he done?’

‘He’s standing at the bottom of the garden looking up here with binoculars. Do you think he’s checking that I’ve still got all my clothes on?’

Michael joined her at the window. ‘No,’ he said miserably, ‘he’s checking the roof.’

‘What on earth for?’

‘Missing slates,’ said Michael. ‘I knew this was going to happen. He’ll probably be up here soon for me to hold the ladder.’

‘What for?’

‘So it doesn’t slip.’ Michael turned away and sat on the bed.

‘I seem to have spent half my life standing on the bottom rung of a ladder while he’s up at the top scratching about with the roof.’

‘Isn’t it boring?’

‘Boring? It’s absolutely deadly.’

‘Poor thing.’ She turned from the window. ‘Can I have a cuddle now?’

Michael held his arms out. Beverley sat on his lap and he wrapped his arms tightly round her, enjoying the weight of her against him. ‘That’s it,’ said Beverley, ‘a nice squeezy one to make me feel loved.’

He looked up at her.

‘Bev?’

‘Mm?’

‘What’s it about me . . . I mean . . . what is it you like about me? I mean, you’re so strong and independent, and so clever and so . . . so . . . so sure of yourself. You’re not like anyone I’ve ever, ever met before.’

‘I should hope not, indeed.’

‘But why me? What is it about me that you like?’

She looked thoughtfully at him. She was slightly surprised by the anxious wrinkles on his forehead. ‘Why do I love you?’ she said slowly. ‘Well . . . for a start, you’re very pretty . . .’

‘Pretty . . .?’

She laughed. ‘You are,’ she said. ‘I could sit and look at you all day. You’ve got the most beautiful eyes I’ve ever seen. And you’re gentle, and you’re thoughtful and kind and selfless, and you make me feel safe and loved and wanted . . .’

‘What about sexy . . . you forgot sexy.’

‘Oh yes, very sexy. I love the feel of our skin touching. That’s the nicest thing in the world: skin contact.’

Michael swivelled on the bed so that Beverley suddenly found herself lying on her back with him leaning over her. They kissed. He felt her fingers pressing into his back. He still always kissed with open eyes.

She might still vanish if he closed them. He slid his hand up and, with a recently perfected flick of his fingers, released the hook and eye catch in the middle of her back.

‘You’re getting just a little too good at that,’ she said as his hand smoothed round inside her clothes.

‘I’ve got to go soon,’ said Beverley, a fleeting hour or so later. ‘Gran’s expecting me back earlyish to help with some stuff.’

‘And the moment you go there’ll be a ladder waiting for me, I bet.’

‘Sorry, but I promised.’

‘Yes . . . okay . . . in a little while . . .’

Half an hour later.

‘I really ought to go.’

‘In a minute.’

‘No,’ she said, gently pushing him away. ‘Now, I’m late already. Don’t be difficult. I did promise.’

She zipped up, tucking the paper bag inside her anorak.

‘Don’t forget your book,’ said Michael, retrieving it from where it had fallen under the bed.

They went downstairs. The hall was deserted.

‘Last kiss,’ he said. She put the book down on the hall stand. They kissed. The front room door opened. Sophie coughed.

‘Scuse me,’ she said, sidling past them. ‘I didn’t mean to interrupt anything.’

‘That’s okay,’ said Beverley. ‘I’m off.’ Sophie went upstairs.

‘I’ll miss you,’ said Michael, opening the front door.

‘I’ll miss you,’ said Beverley. They had a final lingering kiss on the front path.

‘Goodbye.’

‘Bye.’ Michael leaned on the gatepost, watching as Beverley adjusted her leg-warmers and wheeled her bike to the kerb. He licked the wetness of her last kiss off his top lip.

‘Take your time,’ he said, as she leaned away over the machine, screwing the safety lock into place on the frame.

‘You’re rude,’ she said.

‘True.’

He gazed after her as she rode away. She waved once without looking round. She turned the corner and Michael walked back up the path. He halted on the doorstep, frowning. I never told her to mind how she went, he thought. The omission nagged at him as he closed the front door. Oh, well, he thought, it’s only once. Once won’t hurt.

As he passed the hall stand he saw the book, left where she had laid it to free her arm for their parting embrace. Silly sausage, he thought affectionately.

Father stood at the kitchen door, toolbox in hand and woolly hat on head. There was no time for Michael to make a run for his room.

‘Just the very lad.’

Michael stared hollowly at him; rat under the cobra’s stare. A cobra with a woolly hat and a tool box, a rat with no excuse on a Sunday afternoon in March.

‘Busy?’ asked Michael.

‘Yes, we are. It’ll only take half an hour. It’s nothing energetic, I only want you to hold the ladder while I scrape out the gutter.’ Of all the boring jobs in the world holding the ladder was the most deadly: cold, monotonous, endless – and half an hour meant all afternoon in his father’s workspeak.

‘I’ll get my coat.’

‘Get away with you. Coat!’ Michael was propelled to the front door. The two things hit Michael simultaneously: a blast of chill air and the distant scream of brakes on the main road.

‘That sounds grim,’ said his father. There was the slamming of an upstairs door and the clatter of feet on the stairs.



‘Did you hear that?’ called his sister. ‘That noise always makes me cringe.’ Michael looked round, seeing Beverley’s book lying like a silent confirmation on the hall stand. He ran, pushing his father sideways, wrenching open the gate, pounding down towards the main road and a silence more frozen than his fear.

## *Chapter 17*

Michael dreamed that he was riding a giant whale down a concrete canal towards his school. He was armed – there were helicopters – he knew it was some kind of local war – one school against another. He ducked and weaved through the cycle sheds, crouching low to make himself a difficult target. He pounced into a doorway. Dinosaurs were roaming the horizon and suddenly a brontosaurus was towering above him. The telephone rang. Michael opened a door in the brontosaurus's front leg and picked up the receiver. But the telephone kept on ringing.

Michael woke up. The telephone was ringing. It was still dark. He was half out of bed when he heard someone answer it, but by then his body was on post-sleep automatic and he opened his bedroom door and blearily stuck his head out.

He heard a whoop of joy. It was his mother. 'Oh! I'm so glad! That's wonderful! Wonderful!' Michael tottered across the landing and as quickly dashed back into his room remembering that he had no clothes on. He hadn't worn pyjamas since he had been twelve or thirteen.

He pulled his dressing gown around himself and stepped out onto the landing again, hearing: 'No. Okay. Yes. Yes, that's a good idea. Yes, I'm sure. No, I won't.' He heard the telephone being put down.

'Who dat?' he called.

His mother came to the foot of the stairs. She clutched her dressing gown to her chest. She was beaming.

'Hello,' she said. 'Did it wake you up?'

'Yes. What was it?'

'Oh . . .' his mother paused as though she was thinking. '. . . it was Auntie Philippa . . .'

'Who?'

'Auntie Philippa. Go back to bed, I'll tell you about it in the morning.'

'What's the time?'

'Early,' said his mother. She shivered. 'I'm perishing!' She scuttled back into their bedroom.

Michael stood swaying slightly at the head of the stairs. 'Auntie Philippa?' he said to himself.

He collapsed back into bed. He had hoped that the call might have been from the hospital to let them know that Beverley had regained consciousness. It never for one moment occurred to him that his mother was not telling the truth.

There was a strange atmosphere at breakfast which Michael couldn't quite put his finger on. It wasn't negative, but then again there was nothing positive about it either – but it was definitely something.

‘What did Auntie Philippa want?’

He saw his father look at his mother in a strange way.

‘It was about Jean's wedding.’

‘We already knew about it,’ said Michael.

‘Last minute preparations,’ said his mother. Afterwards Michael wondered at himself for having accepted such a feeble story. As if anyone would phone up in the middle of the night about wedding preparations.

It was a Monday morning like any other. The school was full of people who didn't much care that Beverley was in a coma, but Michael had got used to that. His initial feeling that he should be treated specially – as though it was he who was sick – had given way to a realisation that life went on regardless. Noisily, uncaringly, trivially, uncompromisingly life rumbled

and rattled on its merry way. You kept up or . . . well . . . or nothing. You just kept up, that was all.

For the past week Michael had been spending at least an hour or so at Beverley's house, helping her gran with redecorating the flooded study. Professionals had come in and fixed the ceiling. Twice Beverley's gran had been away on business, but on those occasions Michael was let in by Sophie, who had a key and who seemed to be round there a lot. Tonight Michael had his own key – Sophie was coming over later, so she said.

'Gustav!' called Michael, but there was no clatter of claws from the kitchen in response. Beverley's gran must have left him next door again.

The house seemed very empty. Misery engulfed Michael and he ran up to Beverley's room. He stood in the middle of the floor, slightly out of breath. Beverley's personal things were all around him: the bookcase with its black mass of Thomas Hardy paperbacks. One was missing: *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. Michael had not read any of it since the accident but it was on the table by his bed. Waiting. Poetry books, Chaucer, Spenser, a mass of Shakespeare and a long row of thick modern novels with lurid titles which Beverley described as her trash shelf.

Her flute. Michael opened the box and touched the silver keys, remembering how they had laughed as he had tried unsuccessfully to get a note out of it – and how she had been laughing too much to do it either. He sat on the edge of the bed with his head in his hands. He didn't feel miserable any more – just empty.

He heard the front door open.

'Yoo-hoo!'

'Coming,' he called.

'Want the good news or the t'riffic news?' shouted Sophie.

Michael walked downstairs.

'Go on then.'

'I've got a job!'

'Really? Crumbs! Where?'

'I'm working for a Women's Collective – filing and typing letters and so on. Good, eh?'

'Are you getting paid?'

'Of course I am. It's an official group, funded by the local council. Vivien swung it for me. I'm on the phone, too. Answering queries.'

'Splendid.'

'This means money,' said Sophie. 'Lots of loot. I'll be able to get my own flat and . . . and . . . oh, lots of things. I start next Monday.'

'That's great.' Michael picked up the boiler suit from its heap at the foot of the stairs.

‘Don’t bother with that,’ said Sophie.  
‘We’re going straight to the hospital.’

‘Are we? Why?’ They didn’t usually go visiting until half past seven.

‘No reason. Come on.’

He really should have guessed by then, but he didn’t.

‘Was that about your job the good news or the t’riffic news?’ he asked as they sat on the bus.

‘That was the good news.’

‘So what’s the t’riffic news?’

‘I’ll tell you later, after we’ve seen Bev.’

‘You’re always doing this,’ said Michael.  
‘Does it give you some sort of perverse pleasure to keep me in suspenders all the time?’

‘Yes.’

‘Oh. I see.’

Sophie gave him a powerful hug.

‘What was that for?’

‘Nothing. I’m happy. Can’t I even be happy?’ The hospital came into view. Sophie jumped up. ‘Come ON!’ she said. ‘Slowcoach.’

‘All right,’ Michael didn’t like being grabbed, ‘I’m coming.’

They walked towards the small side ward.

‘Are you happy, little bruv?’

It seemed a very peculiar question in the circumstances. 'I'm all right.' Sophie laughed – an alien sound in those blank corridors.

'You will be,' she said.

As they approached the door Sophie stopped.

Michael looked round. 'What?' he said.

'Nothing, go ahead,' she said. 'I'll be with you in a sec.' She was grinning. Michael frowned at her and opened the door. The sound of Mahler's 'Resurrection' Symphony floated out.

Beverley was sitting up in bed smiling.

'Hello Mole,' she said, 'I love you.'