

Three

The garden was another place that was supposed to be wonderful. There were going to be benches and a table and a swing. There were going to be goalposts painted on one of the walls by the house. There was going to be a pond with fish and frogs in it. But there was none of that. There were just nettles and thistles and weeds and half-bricks and lumps of stone. I stood there kicking the heads off a million dandelions.

After a while, Mum shouted was I coming in for lunch and I said no, I was staying out in the garden. She brought me a sandwich and a can of Coke.

'Sorry it's all so rotten and we're all in such rotten moods,' she said.

She touched my arm.

'You understand, though. Don't you, Michael? Don't you?'

I shrugged.

'Yes,' I said.

She touched me again and sighed.

'It'll be great again when everything's sorted out,' she said.

I sat on a pile of bricks against the house wall. I ate the sandwich and drank the Coke. I thought of Random Road where we'd come from, and all my old mates like Leakey and Coot. They'd be up on the top field now, playing a match that'd last all day.

Then I heard the doorbell ringing, and heard Doctor Death coming in. I called him Doctor Death because his face was grey and there were black spots on his hands and he didn't know how to smile. I'd seen him lighting up a fag in his car one day as he drove away from our door. They told me to call him Doctor Dan, and I did when I had to speak to him, but inside he was Doctor Death to me, and it fitted him much better.

I finished the Coke, waited a minute, then I went down to the garage again. I didn't have time to dare myself or to stand there listening to the scratching. I switched the torch on, took a deep breath, and tiptoed straight inside.

Something little and black scuttled across the floor. The door creaked and cracked for a moment before it was still. Dust poured through the torch beam. Something scratched and scratched in a corner. I tiptoed further in and felt spider webs breaking on my brow. Everything was

packed in tight – ancient furniture, kitchen units, rolled-up carpets, pipes and crates and planks. I kept ducking down under the hosepipes and ropes and kitbags that hung from the roof. More cobwebs snapped on my clothes and skin. The floor was broken and crumbly. I opened a cupboard an inch, shone the torch in and saw a million woodlice scattering away. I peered down into a great stone jar and saw the bones of some little animal that had died in there. Dead bluebottles were everywhere. There were ancient newspapers and magazines. I shone the torch on to one and saw that it came from nearly fifty years ago. I moved so carefully. I was scared every moment that the whole thing was going to collapse. There was dust clogging my throat and nose. I knew they'd be yelling for me soon and I knew I'd better get out. I leaned across a heap of tea chests and shone the torch into the space behind and that's when I saw him.

I thought he was dead. He was sitting with his legs stretched out, and his head tipped back against the wall. He was covered in dust and webs like everything else and his face was thin and pale. Dead bluebottles were scattered on his hair and shoulders. I shone the torch on his white face and his black suit.

'What do you want?' he said.

He opened his eyes and looked up at me.

His voice squeaked like he hadn't used it in years.

'What do you want?'

My heart thudded and thundered.

'I said, what do you want?'

Then I heard them yelling for me from the house.

'Michael! Michael! Michael!'

I shuffled out again. I backed out through the door.

It was Dad. He came down the path to me.

'Didn't we tell you—' he started.

'Yes,' I said. 'Yes. Yes.'