

CHAPTER 1

1994, December

I had the dream again last night. About the fish that talked.

I was wearing my red jersey. Sitting down by the canal where the wall is broken.

Red is my best colour.

The fish has eyes like a baby, eyelashes and all, two on the one side of its head. Head flat like a pancake. Grey and only a bit shiny, same as a metal bucket. It talks at me in a whisper, like it's breathing in instead of out. Like a voice from the grave. Like one of those things from Kevin's comics you can't kill that looks straight ahead.

I asked Mam could I have a little pup for my birthday and it could sleep on my bed. I would call it Zak.

My birthday came. I was ten, but there was no pup. Everyone was gone when I got up. Mam was away to the SS to ask why no giro came. Kevo my brother stayed out all night. Sometimes my Gran calls round but she had to go to

Peterhead to see her son, that's my Uncle Michael, Mikey, we call him.

There was a letter on the table with my name, Micka, writ on it. Inside was a card with happy birthday yer little toerag. That's Kevo. He writes backways because he's left-handed.

I was hungry but there wasn't anything till Mam went to the shops. There was tea but no milk. So I went down Royts Lane where the trailers are. Good things happen there. I know a boy Bluey, short for Blue Eyes, that's how gypsies call their kids; not names like we have, but how they look. Monkey, Pricky, Dilly and Nan they are called. One is called Cricket. I asked why. Bluey wouldn't say. It is for something dirty the women made up. They don't need our kind of names for where they live and what they do. Blue says never to say gypsies, only travellers. Never to say rats, you say pigs with long tails, and they all know what that is. There is bad luck in some words, and if I said the wrong one I would bring a curse on Bluey or maybe not see him again.

He told me words for wagging off school. He's never in school for more than two weeks because of the travelling. He's been to school in Scotland and all, but he can't read hardly. The words he knows are

on the wag
mitching
sagging
bunking.

I told Bluey about my dream coming again. He said to ask Babs (that's his Nan) what about it. We went to her trailer and the door was broke and swinging open. She never goes inside in the day, even if it's snowing or raining or thunder. She sleeps in there, is all.

Babs was sitting small on an old bread box and in front of her was the fire made of a white door smashed up and she had the old black kettle resting on the wood of the fire to make her tea. Her face is like it has never been washed, real old brown colour, and where the lines are I think she rubs black stuff in. If I would touch that face, it would feel stiff and warm like an old shoe.

I told Babs my dream and she spat in the fire. She pinched her eye at me and I stared back like I wasn't scared. She said, Don't be telling anyone about that dream.

- ~ Why?
- ~ Have you ever been hurt bad?
- ~ No.
- ~ Have you ever hurt anyone bad?
- ~ No.

She spit in the fire again and her spit wobbled and hissed on the white wood. Her spit was green.

- ~ Can't tell you nothing if you lie to me.
- ~ I'm no liar, Babs.
- ~ You don't give me my name, you gorgio boy.

She stood up and her plate with bread on it turned over and slid down her coat and fell in the ashy mud.

~ Bluey, take him away, he's a no-good chavvy.

We went away. Blue said I wasn't to mind her, she's mad anyway, and the muskras give her gin when she's lelled for choring in the market. I like Bluey's talk but I run behind it.

Blue goes to another trailer with a pen outside. Lying on the ground with not even a blanket, seven pups sucking, and their mother. She growls at me and shows some teeth.

~ Scared to go in, Micka?

~ No.

I climb the walls of the pen and straight off she bites me a good one on the leg. I kick her and she goes flying. Growling and snapping and all the pups tag along behind her, screaming.

~ You want a pup? says Blue. Take one.

I pick one. The maddest of the lot. Black and white with soft droppy ears the shape of pears just. When it tries to walk it gans along crooked, its leg bent wrong.

Blue bangs on the side of the trailer with his fist and a Romany man comes out. Black hair and black eyebrows. Drunk so he has to hold both hands on the side of the trailer to stand still.

~ Ey, Petey, he's taking a pup.

Blue winks at me and folds his arms like a man.

I thought the Romany would hit me but he only did a hop

to the side of the pen and grabbed the gate and stared at me, shaking all over.

~ Dem pups is worth five guineas.

~ I've no money. Bluey said I could have one.

~ Did he so?

He had no teeth in front and his tongue was black like Babs' kettle. He was rolling a fag and his hand shook and the baccy fell out and he ground it in the dirt cursing.

~ Can I have it, then?

He took the pup off me and turned it upside down and poked its belly and lifted up its tail and put his black finger into its mouth, and all the while the pup was still and quiet. Then he pulled on its bad leg, trying to straighten out the crook. Blue nodded at me. Romany man gave me back the pup.

~ Yeah. You can take the jukel.

He cuffed Bluey on the side of his head.

~ And don't you go giving no more away.

First thing when I got home, I had to find a box and put the pup under my side of the bed. In our flats pets are banned. I didn't want anyone to see him till he was trained and all, then maybe he could live outside.

In the kitchen Mam was crying. Sitting at the table with the bags of shopping still full and the tins and the bread packets spilling out on the floor and she was not seeing it.

I went round by the bins and got a good box. The pup

was quiet all the while inside my strip as good as gold. I put him in the box and shoved it under the bed. It fit all right after a bit of shoving.

~ Can I have some milk?

~ What you want milk for?

~ Mam. I'm hungry, give us some.

I went through the bags of the shopping. Bread. Tea. Milk. Biscuits. Sugar. Fags. Mam does not buy much.

~ Want some toast, Mam?

She stopped sniffing then.

~ You're a good boy, Michael. You'll see me right, won't you?

I put the milk in a cup and took it to the pup. He licked it off my fingers. Got sharp teeth. Every time he squealed or bit I tapped him on the nose. Training. This is how he has to learn his manners.

When it was night I took him up in the bed with me. Kevo never came home that night so we stretched out. The pup soft like a rubber baby toy. Smell of Royts Lane on his fur. He licked my face and I felt the velvet of his little face on my mouth.

I went to school again. If it's your birthday you get to tell about it. I wanted to tell about the present that my Mam and my brothers gave me. Zak the pup. And if I wag off too

much they will send the cruelty man around again. In school they have hot pipes by the kitchen you can lean your back on.

The pup moaned a lot when I left. I put some clothes in the box with him so he could learn my smell. Maybe when he is trained he could come to school with me. He would like the warm there. He bit the side off the box and I had to tap him a lot on the nose. He is getting trained a lot. There was no milk again so he has to learn about this.

In school after I told about my birthday it was playtime. I was cold going out. Miss Glennie said, Where is your coat, Michael?

~ Forgot it, Miss.

~ You can stay in and help me by sorting the crayons for the infants' class. Just today.

~ Okay, Miss.

The babies' class crayons. The blue wax ones are like water; they melt the easiest on the radiator. The yellow is the hardest; it never melts, only goes into little chips. The red is the best; when it melts, it mixes with all the others and you can make up new colours with it.

Then the new boy came to sort crayons too. He never asked Miss. He is bigger than me.

~ You're doing it wrong, wanker.

~ Fuck off.

~ Fuck off yourself.

~ I'll tell Miss.

New boy picked the skin inside my wrist and twisted it between his fingers and his teeth ground like he was eating aniseed balls. I shut my mouth and no noise came out. I kicked his leg on the bone bit where I know it hurts the worst; he looked murder at me but he made no sound. Hard, like. He kicked me back but I could dodge him easy. Miss Glennie saw and made us stand one each end of the table. New boy smiled and shook his head and his hair flopped over his face. He has a bad smile. He is called Lorry. Like a lorry, and his last name is Parker.

After dinner break we wagged off. He says he has a great life. He lives mostly in the park. He's made a den by the pond and he says he catches ducks and cooks them on a fire when it's dark and the keeper's locked the gates. He showed me the black stick he shoves up the ducks to roast them, and the ashes of his fire, and the hole in the fence by the pond where he can squeeze through and catch the ducks with his bare hand. I dared him to show me, catch a duck right then. He said he could but he wasn't hungry right then. I said I was. He said, If you want one so bad, you do it.

I went and squat down by the hole in the fence. The ducks are a dolly kind, smoothy brown heads with white bands around their necks. Where the brown is it looks like the velvet part of the pup's face. I would love to touch that part. Lorry said where the white band is you can squeeze them by the

neck dead. He kept saying, Go on, do it. I reached out but then Lorry punched me in the back and shouted there was an old woman coming with her dog.

We said we would wag off school the next day and go and buy chips. He has money. He showed it me. He wants to come to my house but I can't go to his. He made me tell about Bluey and the trailers and Royts Lane and the pup. It's not fair that I have told him everything (except I wouldn't tell him my dream), but he has told me nothing, like about his Mam and Dad and if he has any brothers or what. And when I tell him stuff about Kevo and Lee and the rest he laughs like he has a sore throat. When he laughs he shakes his hair and it flops in his eyes like a girl's hair.

Some friend I've picked.

THE SECRET LOGBOOK OF THE BOY FEARLESS FERELON.

I can call myself any name I want. I choose the name Fearless Ferelon. It is a kind of a hawk and a boy at the same time. That is only one of the amazing ideas in my head that I will put down in this book when I feel like it. I have more fun with ideas than with what I have actually done in my life so far. Ideas are as big as you want, and they do whatever you want, they grow bigger like the beanstalk in

the giant story. No one ever stands in the way of your mind. Although of course I am hoping my life will become more interesting as I try more things out.

Even the way I was born was quite interesting. It was in the street. It was a sort of accident, when my mother, who is called Josie, was knocked down by a motorbike while she crossed the road to buy some flowers, and this was so unusual it was in the papers. I have seen the papers because my mother keeps them in a box and she shows them to me on special occasions. Josie had a broken hip from the motorbike and some money compensation. She says the hip was not as unbearably painful as having the baby (that is, me). But I couldn't help that, so it is not my fault really. When I ask her what it was like being in the papers and having your photo taken, she says it was a bore and that being a five-minute wonder is pointless. They never had their pictures in the paper again. They never had any other children either, because the accident spoilt my mother's equipment. They say they don't mind. They have me.

But I mind because I would have liked some brothers and sisters. Sometimes being an only child is not like being a child. Sometimes it's like not being there at all, and sometimes you are there too much.

They argued after I was born. My father did not like the name Shane. He said it was unsuitable for me. My mother wanted that name because of a cowboy in some film. My

father liked the name Laurie, and in the end he won. But they never asked me. I know you can't exactly ask a baby, but it is still not fair. I hate my name. The other thing I hate is that we are always moving. My mother says I should blame my father because it is his job that makes us move all the time. Another thing they argue about is what kind of school I should go to. He wants me to get on with children from the area and go to the nearest school. She thinks I should go to a private school with a cap and a blazer and learn to talk more poshly. Josie was not born as posh as Brian. He uses long words a lot, and he explains them to me as he goes along, but she talks louder than him, and sometimes she sounds extremely posh. I don't care about being posh, but I hate moving all the time.

Now I am at another new school called Newlands Primary. When my father came to look round this school he brought me with him and we met the head teacher, Mr. Overson. I thought we were just going to say hallo, but suddenly Mr. Overson began testing me with questions.

~ How do you spell assassinate? How do you express two per cent as a decimal? What is the capital of Guatemala?

He thought I was backward because I couldn't answer any of these. My father sat there blinking. I wonder if even he knew the capital of Guatemala without looking in a book. When Mr. Overson said he would start me off in Miss Glennie's class with the ten-year-olds, Brian still said

nothing. Sometimes he forgets my actual age. So I started another new school with everyone thinking I am thick.

There is this boy in my class called Michael but everyone calls him Micka. He is smaller than me (well, nearly everyone is), and skinnier and his hair is a pale sickly red, like a dead leaf when it is rotting in a drain. His arm is as thin as a stick, the kind you could break by jumping on when you are making a bonfire. But his face is like an old wrinkled man's. I think it is because he is hard. One of his brothers is in prison. His uncle is a famous murderer. A girl told me this the very first day I was there.

This boy is absolutely from the area. He is lucky really that he can fit in without any trouble. He has a rough accent, rougher than all the rest of them, but they don't laugh at him.

I knew after only a few days that I didn't like this school or the other kids. Or the teachers. My father says of course I could fit in if I tried a bit harder. My mother says that being a child is just something you have to go through and it can't be worse than her childhood. She came from a big family and they all had to share bedrooms and even beds if they were the youngest. She did not come from Hertfordshire, where I was born, but from the West Country. Her family was poor but my father's family was rich. He married her because he felt sorry for her only having one coat. He has three coats and she has even more than that,

suits and jackets and hundreds of clothes, more than anyone could wear I would say, even if she wore a different thing every day of the year.

But maybe that is why they were unhappy. They had too many things to fight over; my name, and the coats and jackets and sweaters, and the car my mother crashed once, and other things they thought I could not hear or understand. Then it came to the day after I had started my new school.

I am in my bedroom trying out one of my ideas, which is to cut a lemon pip and an apple pip in two and somehow glue them together to make a new species of tree. You have to make the pips mate. I know about mating, this is one of the things my father explained very clearly when we saw some cats stuck together making weird noises which I wanted to watch, but he disagreed because he said it is not the sort of thing you should stare at in public. I was only six then and he gave me exactly the right books about human and animal biology and said I was to ask him if I had any questions or was worried about anything. There are plenty of things I worry about, but I am not such a baby as to tell him. Which is one of the reasons why I have started to write some thoughts down in this log book.

I am putting the half pips together and I am just about to carefully wrap them in toilet paper while I think how to glue them when they come into my room without even

knocking, looking serious as if I have done something terrible. They pull me to the bed and we all sit down in a row. Brian is holding my arm and Josie is squeezing my knees and we are all looking at the wall of my room where there is nothing to see because I haven't even had time to put any posters up. I wriggle, but I can't see their faces properly so I stop wriggling and wait. Brian does a kind of quiet coughing which means 'listen to me' so I listen, but at the same time Josie starts talking so I am hearing different things in both ears and it doesn't make a lot of sense – but this must be important because they are both very serious and my mother is even shaking a bit as if she is nervous, or maybe excited. I can never tell with her. They are holding me so tight it makes my skin itch and when they start talking, they go on and on like this for ages:

- ~ Mummy and I will be separating in two days' time . . .
- ~ That means Daddy will be living somewhere else . . .
- ~ Initially, in university accommodation . . .
- ~ And we'll both take you out for treats on your birthday . . .
- ~ And other occasions or seasonal celebrations, for example, Christmas . . .

Brian coughs again and looks at his shoes.

~ Your mother and I have decided, after a great deal of thought, that this is a civilised arrangement and therefore the best option for us all.

~ Laurie? Is everything okay? says Josie, trying to stroke my hair. I push her hand away.

What am I supposed to say? They are both looking at me now. If it's not okay, will that make any difference? I just want them to go away now. My lemon-apple pip tree is going to die if I don't give it some water quickly. They don't care about my experiment; all they want is to tell me their news and get it over with.

I say, Will I get two sets of presents this Christmas? Brian shakes his head and makes a tutting noise.

~ That is what is known as a mercenary attitude. Mercenary, meaning—

My mother hisses back at him like a mamba snake.

~ Don't be so stupid, Brian! He's only eleven! That was the first thing that popped into his head—

~ Take a moment, Laurie. Clear your mind. Remember to be logical and reasonable.

But I can't. I feel stupid and babyish.

~ Where will my home be now? My actual home? Do I have two bedrooms? Two beds? Two sets of clothes? Suppose they get mixed up by mistake?

My mother laughs and Brian sort of smiles. Have I made a joke?

~ Darling! What funny questions! It will be like going on holiday when you visit Daddy. You take a weekend bag.

~ We have every confidence in you, Laurence. You will soon get used to the new routine.

Now I know how serious this is, because he uses my full name. They look down at me. Waiting for what? They are still holding me so tight I breathe their breaths and I want to kick my legs free, but I can't.

~ What about mating?

They both jump at the same time as if I have stuck pins through their hands, and I feel I am going to giggle. So to stop it, I do a thing to my mouth that hurts, but they don't even know I am doing it. They are both staring at me, then over my head at each other. I wonder if this question is something they have forgotten when they decided to separate.

~ I mean, what about you two mating? Brian says you can't have marriage without it.

They both start speaking quickly at the same time, as if they are in a speaking race. My father says, That question is highly irrelevant to this discussion, at the same time as Josie is saying, Well, I think our little boy just hit the nail on the head . . .

They talk some more, but I don't remember it. They let go of me after a while and say good night and do I want a drink of water or anything? And my mother kisses me goodnight as if nothing has really happened.

I go back to my experiment. The lemon and apple pips

have gone all brown. Now I have cut them open they are never going to make a new tree. It was a stupid idea anyway.

Laurie. Is he a bully? He does not do it the same like my brother Lee. First he makes you like him then he hurts you then he says he is sorry then he buys something for you and makes you like him again. He has got long hair but he is strong. When I grab his hair and pull it he kicks my balls to death.

I can bear pain all right, but he can take more. We tested with matches on our thumbnails and said ready steady go and counted the seconds and I could bear it for seven seconds and he could bear it for ten. The others have respect for him because he is the biggest in class.

He has wrote his name for me. You don't write lorry. If you crack a joke on his name he gives you hell. Laurie is it. I have to get it right.

The pup Zak is a bad pup. He bites every time. When I give him the milk or some bread he bites my hand good and deep with his teeth like needles. He has to learn to bite soft when it is me. I have tried to train him gently like, but he won't obey his master. And he shits on my clothes and Mam will belt me if she finds out. But if you squeeze his face up he stops making his noise. You have to squeeze real hard, till your hands are hurting.

So it was nearly Christmas. I went to look at the shops in Walker Street. It is like being a ghost and treading in the streets of heaven. There is white everywhere, pretend snow on the starry lights and cotton stuff stuck on the windows and white spray stuff with glitter in it and all this white makes you forget to see the dirty bits of the street.

I watched the window with Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs moving. It is only machines but it looks more like real if you shut your eyes a bit. Snow White looks dead real. Her smile is all soft like Mam when she drinks whiskey and we have the fire on and she sits by it with the orange of the gas flames shining over her. Snow White with a blue dress and black plum hair, spun out from her face, stiff like black candy floss. And she keeps on waving to the dwarfs, and a tinny voice sings hello, come in. And they move in and shove presents in her arms, all done up smart in boxes with paper and silver stars and bows and all. All the boxes the same shape. Different colours of paper on.

Laurie says there is nothing inside the boxes but that is a lie. How does he know so much anyway? Laurie doesn't think much to Walker Street shops so we went to Findlay Street Shopping Centre and we went right inside the best shop. Galloways, it is called. Saw the little kids like, with their Mams in a line to see Santa. Some crying. Scared of Santa in the Grotto, in the dark, and he sits in there with a beard and he pulls you on his lap and he is whispering all the time. Mams

and Dads making them go in and then they came out with boxes all the same, wrapped like the dwarfs' boxes. They were smiling after they got their presents, and the Mams wiped their faces and said brave boy, good girl.

I would not cry in the Grotto even if it was pitch black and if Santa asked what do I want, I would say a kennel for the pup. The shitty pup has wrecked the box and chewed my clothes and still Mam and Kevo don't know he is there. But the stink is getting so bad I have to do something. He is getting quieter with the training and all; he does not bite so much but lies still. He is a skinny pup and he sleeps a lot. This will build his strength for when he gets bigger. He is a dirty pup and this is bad. But I have trained him as good as I can.

I asked Mam could I see Santa but she said I am too big for that. She has got a job in a pub. Maybe she will get me a present this year. Kevo says he will get me an airgun and teach me how to aim it at next door's telly.

Yesterday Mam was sick in the toilet. I heard her when I was in bed. Sometimes when she is sick I hold her hand but there is no room in the toilet to stand next to her. I made her some tea but she let it get cold. She said I was a good boy. Now Gran is away she hardly talks. Even with the whiskey it is just drink and sit and cry sometimes. She does the same if I am there or not there.

I want to give her a real good present for Christmas so

maybe I will go back to school this week to make something in the craft lesson. It is all free because they give you the card and the paints and they even have goldy stuff for angels and the teacher will help you if you can't decide. If I go back I will get in trouble because of wagging off but I can tell them Mam is sick. This time it is true.

Laurie showed me a thing to do with the pup. He got the pup outside and tied him to the fence. Pup trying to bite all the time. Laurie got a safety pin and stuck it through the pup's skin at his neck, in a little bit then out again. Did up the pin. Laurie said, Your pup's body pierced, he's real cool. Laughed.

The pup did not squeal. He turned round and round with his head to try and see what was in his neck. Laurie gave me a pin and showed me what to do. If it hurt bad the pup would growl. He said I could do the pup a nose ring with another pin if I wasn't scared.

I untied the pup and he was growling then. Laurie says I am feeding him wrong. Milk is no good because he is not a baby any more. He says to call him Brock. It is a good name. Laurie says Brock needs meat. Maybe I should ask Mam.

The pup, I mean Brock, would not go in the flat any more so I tied him up under the stairs. It is dark there and okay for him not to be seen if we are lucky. He is better there because of the shit.

Mam does not want Christmas. But I have made her a

card with a gold angel on. It says Happy Christmas from your little angel. The words were Miss Glennie's idea. I will give it to Mam on Christmas Day after Santa comes.

Lee has sent a card with a skull and bones on it to Kevo. He says to tell Mam he is coming home soon. He is in Strangeways. Sometimes he says he is coming back and he stays away. Maybe it will be a long time before he comes. Maybe something will happen and he won't come.

Kevo has got a job with Christmas trees. I asked would he take me to the shop with him. But they aren't in a shop, only by the road. He says he will bring us a tree on Christmas Eve. I don't remember if we had one before. Last year in the hostel there was one but it wasn't ours. Barbara and Denise the hostel ladies put presents on but they weren't real. We got wrong if we touched it. I broke the lights and Mam slapped me and she had to pay the hostel for the lights mending. But it was okay on Christmas Day when we got a good dinner and all of us kids played games and some presents were under the tree and this time they were real ones. I got a plastic car transformer from Santa. Mam got bath cubes and soap. Kevo got a pen with a mermaid on it; when you shake it her shells and tail comes on and off. Lee never stayed in that hostel, he was away.

Maybe Gran will come back. She is a good cook. She says you must always have a good dinner and a good breakfast. Mam is shite for cooking, she always sends me for chips.

I asked her about a turkey and gravy and she said, we'll see.

I know what that means.

At last there has been something quite good happening at my babyish new school. We had a social history lesson, and Miss Glennie told us about boy chimney sweeps. She has got a book like the books in my father's study (only his are thicker and the writing is much much smaller), and I think books like that are probably about a hundred years old. She reads a bit out of this book and then we talk about it. She was reading today about the way of training a climbing boy, which is what they used to call the sweeps' boys; how to wash their knees in salty water and scrub their knees with a hard brush every day, so no matter how much they scrape inside the chimney it will not hurt. It does at first, of course. In those days their trousers went into rags quite quickly, so they cut themselves on the stones of the chimneys.

When it was the time for the whole class to discuss this, I was the first one to ask things.

~ Did they bleed a lot? How did the sweep find the boys when they had finished? Did the boys die? Were they my size? Why did they climb if it hurt?

Miss Glennie said other people should have a chance to ask questions. Micka said he would have run away.

~ But, Michael, Miss Glennie said in her kind and soft voice, these poor boys had no choice. For them, it was work or starve. Sometimes it was their own fathers who were the sweeps and they beat them to make them climb higher.

I asked again, Why did they climb if it hurt and their knees were bleeding like you said? Why didn't they come down again?

Miss Glennie opened her eyes wide.

~ The sweeps would *light a fire in the grate of the chimney* when the boys were up, to make them go faster. They would breathe the smoke and get scared of choking. So the boys would climb quickly to the top so they could breathe the fresh air. Sometimes the smoke made them too dizzy to hold on any longer, and they let go and fell into the fire.

~ Why didn't their mothers come and save them? Lisa Carmichael asked that. What a stupid question to ask; such a girl question. All the other girls looked as if they were going to be sick. Miss Glennie's voice got very sad and she said, Very often they were orphans. They didn't have mothers.

Now, that is what I call a good lesson. If every day was like that I would be at school more often. But it was ruined by Miss Glennie making us do some writing about 'I am a climbing boy (or girl, even though girls did not do it but at school we must always say girls can do anything boys can do, even if it is something cruel that hurts, like climbing

chimneys) and what are *my feelings* about chimney sweeping.' This could have ruined a brilliant lesson, except I didn't do the writing, just a kind of a cartoon picture of a sweep lighting a huge fire with a most evil grin on his wicked face, and in the next picture a little skinny boy climbing up and up, with a balloon coming out of his mouth saying, 'Can't breathe, choking, cough cough.' The boy looked like Micka. I showed it to him but he said my drawing was shite. Miss Glennie gave me a green star for the picture (of course), but she put underneath, 'Where is your writing, Laurie?' She is way too soft. A proper teacher would have torn up the picture and kept me in as a punishment.

Times I don't like Laurie like when his eyes go funny, they did this in the lesson about sweeps. He was breathing fast like after running a race. His mouth opens, it is all red inside like a fox. I don't say this, or he would say poof and girly, and fuck off. I did a drawing of him that was a fox body with a Laurie face. He likes this picture so I gave it him to keep.

At Christmas he is going away with his Dad. They are going to a five-star hotel. His Dad will let him drink vodka and champagne. On Christmas Day he is going to get a cigar.

My brother Lee is back. He has got a new belt. Kevo

brought home the Christmas tree and Mam got some snow stuff to put on it. I think she is not sick any more.

The pup is dead. Its paws were all chewed off. It did not last as long as the kitten. I think pups are more hard work than cats. And they stink a lot worse. Mam smelt the smell by the stairs and she found the box out there but it was empty. I put the pup in the bins real fast so she would not know. The box was wet and shitty but Mam saw my clothes in it. She pulled my arm behind my back and dragged me out to the stairs.

~ Is this yours?

~ No.

She clouted me, she kicked the box and she yelled.

~ It's not mine, it's Saeed's.

Saeed lives in the next flat. They don't have a Christmas tree but they get presents. His dad has a shop.

~ You pigging little liar, he's not allowed to have pets. What in Jesus' name was in here, it smells like dead rats

I got away from her and ran up the stairs and shouted down at her.

~ You should know what dead rats smells like . . .

She tried to catch me but I was way too quick, up the stairs along the landing then I could hear her moaning again. She stopped and went away to have a fag and get sick maybe.

I went out. I went to Walker Street and when I got to the Snow White window, I stood for a bit leaning up against the

glass. Didn't look in the window; it was too white and frosty glitter everywhere. Even the street was too white to look. I was leaning against the glass with my eyes shut, thinking colours. Dark ones, dull like when the drain is clogging with dead leaves all slimy and black and green. Then a hand was shaking my shoulder, and I thought it was the shop man come to see me off for leaning on his window. I opened my eyes. There was this woman holding my sleeve. I shoved her off. She held out her hand to me. Didn't say nothing. A note was in her hand. She held it to me. Touched it to my hand. I grabbed the note and ran off. I ran and ran until I hurt to breathe. The money in a bunch in my hand. Then I took a good look at it and it was a fucking five pound note. I never had five pounds in my hand of my own before.

I smelt it good. It smelled like shit and metal.

I spit on it for luck. Kissed it like they do in the movies.

I wished Laurie was there to see, but not to tell me what to get. Buying is better than nicking. You can take your time buying. I could buy a thing for Mam now, for her Christmas.

I looked for ladies' things. In Galloways. Handbags. Gloves. Tights. Softy big scarves. Hats. Perfume. By the perfume counter, the smell was so heavy I felt it pressing on my clothes, going through to my skin. I looked for someone to ask, someone like Mam. But they all looked away; they closed their blue makeup eyelids and folded up their arms. Their

nails were all sharp painted tiger claws red with blood. Their lips red like they had been dipped in wet blood.

I stayed too long in the one place, touched too many things. They called a man to throw me out, I showed him the money and he laughed.

~ Know what that is? Real leather that is, twenty pounds that purse is, nothing under a tenner here, nothing for the likes of you. Haway, piss off.

What is the point of five pounds? I looked at guns outside the gun shop. Kevo wants a gun. Five pounds is only worth shit.

What would Laurie do?

He would not get presents. He would buy a plane ticket and escape. He would buy fags for himself.

I bought sweets. You can get a load of sweets all right for five pounds. I stuffed them inside my shirt and they made a fat belly. I went back to the Snow White window in Walker Street and I watched people and I ate sweets. People pushed and shoved past. A little kid stopped and stared at me eating sweets. I chewed at her. Her dad pulled at her arm, pulled her away. I ate some more. It was late. I got sick.

I went out of Walker Street and found a quiet place down an alley and sat on a step. Waited to be sick. I thought about my dream of the fish with its blue eyes and the look it gave me always in the dream and the voice of it. The sick came easier then. I was cold after. I shook. I wiped the stuff off my

face and some tears came. I never cry. The tears slid out by themselves.

I want some things for Christmas. Like I see on telly or in the shops or anything.

I don't care though. So long as Lee and Kevo don't fight and they don't belt me and Mam doesn't cry and we have a good dinner, not chips and burgers.

When I came back home the pup's box was gone. That was Christmas Eve. The electric was off. Mam had lit a candle. With the tree and all it was okay, but tomorrow there'll be fights and we won't have a good dinner. At the hostel we had turkey and crackers.

Kevo was home and he had a few cans and he sang Christmas carols, but not like Miss Glennie's singing. Like carols were dirty. He was in a good mood though. Then he went out.

Then Mam said to me, Michael, come here while I tell you. We're going to have a new baby . . .

~ What for, like?

How can she have a baby and her so old and sick all the time? Her face tries a smile for me, but all that's there is sadness and being tired.

~ Maybe a little sister for you . . .

~ Is Daddy coming back then?

The smile goes from her face. Don't ask me questions. Get to bed now. Be a good boy.

In bed I am cold. If I was to punch her belly she would talk. Lee would do that. He doesn't take shit from her. Kevo shouts till she cries and he slams the door and her hand shakes. All I do is fetch her fags and make her tea. Good boy. Go to bed. Once I kicked her chair and she slapped me. Only the once. Not hard either.

She looks different now. The baby makes her look like that.

A baby brother, crying in my bedroom.

Like the pup, shitting and squealing.

Not like Baby Jesus. Not like Christmas.

Mam will be in bed and no more shopping. Lee will cash her giro. It will all get spent the same day.

Later, I am asleep and Kevo falls in the bed and breaks my sleep. Breathing loud and a smell coming off him like when I got sick in the alley, a sweet smell of the drink coming off him; he always lays all over the bed with his clothes still on. He pushes me to the wall and I feel the cold wall pressing my side. Kevo sticks his knees up and pulls the covers off me. He is not asleep. He lies tight, bunched up to jump if the door is hammered. He can be out the window and drop two floors down before I even wake up.

~ Kevo?

~ Merry bollocking Christmas, now shut it . . .

~ Did you know about Mam's baby?

~ Yeh, stupid cow.

~ I didn't know. No one said.

~ Did you not notice the size of her? Fucking elephant.
~ But when's it coming? Soon?
~ Don't think about it. Most likely it'll end up like the other one.

~ What one?

Kevo turned over and over in the bed and punched the pillow and pushed me to the wall.

~ Before you, like. It died, poor little cunt.

~ What was it called?

~ Kevo got up and threw open the window.

~ Some Irish saint's name. Jesus Christ, it stinks in here.

~ A girl, was she? How did she die? How old was she?

~ You're a nosy little fucker. Why don't you shut it?

~ But, Kevo—

~ Stupid cow, at her fucking age . . . And he lays down again and soon he will be asleep with no cares about anything.

~ Is Daddy coming back?

~ What?

~ Where did the baby come from? Who's the daddy?

He grabs my leg and pinches hard.

~ How should I know? Go to sleep.

He pinches again, high up my leg by my balls. He pushes me to the wall. Cold against my side.

Kevo is asleep.

*

Black would be the colour if I would paint my Christmas, not black soft like velvet or shiny like Snow White's hair, but dry black, flat black like the soot stuff on old Babs' kettle.

When I woke up there was nothing from Santy. I looked around and around the room for a present. Even under the bed and under Kevo.

Lee was in the kitchen and when he sees me he starts. The belt is off and he's wrapping it around his hand. First thing, before we even sit down to breakfast. Mam says, Lads, let's have a bit of peace round here now. Remember the day that's in it.

Lee lets the belt slowly swing from his hand backwards and forwards and the buckle is a head of a wolf with fangs and it drops on the table by me.

~ Fucking Merry Christmas one and fucking all.

I say, real quiet like, Why did you come back?

He says to me dead soft, None of your fucking cheek, my son.

~ I'm never your son.

Mam shouts at me to shut up. Lee hits the belt buckle on the table and sends the milk flying, Mam screams, Kevo wakes up and comes in the kitchen. Sees Lee.

~ Home for Christmas are ye, you daft bugger?

Lee whispers to Kevo and they laugh. Mam makes toast and she gives me a present. It is a square flat thing wrapped in blue paper with stars.

~ Sorry, son, it isn't much; best I could do. She holds out her arms to me. I go to kiss her but Lee pulls my hair.

~ Soft as shite.

~ Why man, let him go, he's only ten, Kevo says. He is in a good mood, he has some cans opened already. I kiss Mam and she holds me to her and I feel her heart beating fast and she catches her breath and lets me go.

They all watch me opening my present. It is a book. Lee laughs.

~ New and all! Where d'ye nick that, Maureen?

Mam says he is not to call her Maureen. Kevo does not laugh. He lights a fag.

~ Come here and show us, Micka. Is it good?

It is a book for how to bring up a pup. It has pictures, good boys and girls brushing their pups. The pups are fluffy and they do not bite or shit like Brock. I wish Brock was not dead.

~ This is shite, Lee shouts out of nowhere, teaching him to rear pups from a fucking book. Real life is how you learn. *Real life*. He shouts it in my face. Kevo never says nothing. He does not stand up to Lee.

I go to the bedroom and Kevo follows me, comes in. I look for the thing I made Mam at school. Kevo waits, standing looking out the window.

~ That's a nice thing there.

~ It's for Mam.

~ Very nice. Here.

He gives me a new watch. Straps it on.

~ Happy Christmas.

I am not to tell Lee about the watch. Kevo does not say this but I am not to tell.

We go back to the room. I give Mam her present. It is a gold crown with all glitter and stars on it, as many as I could stick. Most have stayed on. Miss Glennie said it was good. Mam stares and stares at the crown. Lee says, Put it on then, you're the only queen here. Mam slowly, slowly puts it on. It is too big but she holds it with one hand.

~ Michael. That's a lovely thing you made me. Thanks, son.

Mam grabs me and squeezes me to her so I smell her face and her powdery smell under her nightie. She kisses me, then I get away and she rolls a fag still with the crown on her head and we laugh. Maybe that was not so black that time. But just after it got black all right. Lee put his can on the floor and I kicked it over. I never saw it there, I never meant to do it.

Lee is worst when he doesn't shout. I see him take the belt off and start to wrap it around his hand, still with the fag in his mouth. He says dead soft, Stand still, my son.

Mam is up out of her chair, and pushing me out of the room.

~ Get in the toilet, son, lock the door, we'll sort this out, it'll be all right, you'll see. Her crown is falling off and she lets it fall.

Lee is roaring. Kevo goes out. He won't stand up to Lee. Mam calls him not to go. But he goes.

I hear the slap of the belt on the kitchen table. Mam talking, pleading like. Lee laughing. I hate this time. I hate Lee. I hate Mam. And the baby that's coming.

Lee kicks the toilet door. Whacks at the handle with the belt buckle and the noise is so quick and loud I feel the piss jump out of my prick all by itself.

~ Come on out of there.

~ Fuck off.

~ You are fucking dead, my son.

~ Mam!

~ She's gone.

~ Mam, are you there?

~ Come out before I break the fucking door in . . .

He will too. Lee doesn't care this is our home, he doesn't care they told us at the hostel we are on our last chance. He is going to kill me. Mam is a long way away, sobbing. I am so scared I even wish our Da was back.

Then there is hammering at the front door. Police. Lee has his face pushed up against the toilet door. He whispers to me, If Kevo called them bastards he's dead, after I've done with you.

~ Open up!

I think Lee grabs Mam. He likes to twist arms, maybe that

is what he does. Mam is dead quiet. I put my ear to the door for Lee's whisper.

~ Open up in there!

~ Maureen, I'm warning you—

~ Let me go! I'm not one of your slags, I'm your mother, for God's sake; have you no respect at all?

~ If you don't open this door we'll break it down . . .

Lee is beaten. He hates that the worst thing. I hear Mam opening the front door. He says to me through the locked door, If you get me in shite for this, you'll pay for it. If she shops me, I'll cut out her fucking tongue.

I put my hand over my face and squeeze like with the pup. It is hard to breathe. I am not crying, there is water coming out of my eyes, but it is not crying if you keep quiet.

Then the police is in and Mam is telling them something like I am locked in the toilet. They knock on the door.

~ What's his name, Michael? Come on out of there, Michael. Come on, lad.

I open the door. Lee's belt has disappeared by magic. He has a greasy smile on, he pats me on the head. Mam does a fake laugh for the police. There are two there. One looks at me. One looks at Lee, up and down, up and down.

~ I'll check this lock for you.

The police is checking the lock. Lee is looking at me, Mam is looking at me. I have this lump of stuff in my chest, this hard thing hurts all the way up to my throat. My jeans are

wet. I am crying. Mam holds me. Lee folds his arms and stares at me. Warning me.

~ We had a complaint of noise ...

~ Sorry, officer, Mam says, stroking my hair, Christmas and all, we might have got a bit merry ...

The police stops looking at the door lock.

~ Said it sounded like someone was being hit. Did anyone hit you, Michael?

~ No.

I see Lee nod. Saying no is the right thing. We must not shop Lee, he is family.

~ We're grand, thanks be to God, Mam says.

Old cop gives me a paper tissue to wipe my face.

~ They must have made a mistake, Mam says.

~ We're in the neighbourhood. If we hear any more complaints we'll be round again, he says to Lee. Lee is grinning back. Not a care in the world now.

They go away down the corridor. Mam says, Show the officers out, Michael.

By the door the young one stops.

~ Here.

He gets a shiny thing from his uniform pocket and gives it me.

~ It's a harmonica. You can play canny tunes on it.

The older one shakes his head: Haway, man, don't waste your breath.

Young one bends down and whispers.
~ Happy Christmas, bonny lad.
They are gone.
Inside me is something tearing. It tears as easy as wet
paper.

My mother has an unusual method with the answer
machine. I did not know you could use it to stop people
talking to you when you are home. Sometimes she lets it
ring and ring, and if it was me I would pick it up and at
least say I don't want to speak to you, but she has no fear
of anyone or anything. Sometimes she is not even doing
anything important, maybe painting her fingernails or
watching telly or just staring into the air and she waves her
hand at me when I go to pick it up and waves me down
into my chair again. Of course I am not scared of her, and
I could pick it up if I wanted to, but at the moment it is
an interesting experiment to leave people, like she says,
stewing in their own juice.

And anyway, when she is asleep or not there I can listen
to all the messages. And if I feel like it I can even erase
them. She does not know I know how to do this, but it's
actually simple. Easier than working the video, but she
thinks that's difficult too. She would not learn when my
father wanted to teach us, so only I learnt.

My father is the one who most often leaves messages on the machine. Some of them are funny, because he has no idea we are sitting there listening to him. Josie makes rude faces while he is talking. If she was at school she would be getting into big trouble for her behaviour. Some messages seem sort of sad. But she says it is ridiculous to feel sorry for him, he is not sad at all, he just sounds sad because he has drunk some vodka first, to give himself Dutch courage to phone. She seems to know all about how he is getting on, even though she does not live with him any more. Sometimes he calls and leaves a message when he is irritated. He never ever gets angry, only irritated. He told me this himself, so it must be true. He said that people like him don't get angry, it shows a lack of self-control. I think he is absolutely right and I will try to be like him, because I think fearless people never get angry.

I think I am adjusting very well to the new way things are. It is really easier when people do not talk to each other. I have questions sometimes, but if I am really clever I am sure I won't need Brian and Josie to work out the answers.

Do they ever talk about me? Maybe I am one of the reasons why they had to separate. What do they really think about the new arrangements? Do they ever wish they could go back to how things were? What does the left out one do with themselves when I am not there?

My father's messages are never about me. They are usu-

ally about collecting things he has left in our house. Or about how he is kept waiting when my mother forgets the arrangements she has made. And financial settlements.

My mother does not seem to need anything. Sometimes when I come in from school she is sitting just where she was when I went out, and she has not done any shopping or anything, and she does not mind how untidy things are. I suppose she is showing self-control.

Soon my father will collect me for his part of the holiday. His suits used to hang in the cupboard. My mother has left the empty spaces where his things used to be. Who made the rule that she stays in this house and he goes? Who made the rule that I must have half Christmas Day with her and half with him? Will they ask me one day what I think about these civilised arrangements?

CHAPTER 2

1995, January

I put the telephone down in the hotel room. My father was pouring more vodka into his glass.

~ Can I have some?

~ How was your mother?

~ Can I taste some of your vodka?

He looked at me as if I was a bad dream. Then he shook his head more than once. When he stopped shaking, I was still there though.

~ Ten years of age is too young to begin—

~ Just a taste. It's Christmas. And I'm eleven. Go on, just a bit from your glass?

~ Did your mother give you any message for me?

~ Yes, she said to let me have some vodka.

He breathed in and out a few times extra loudly, looking up at the ceiling. This is a way of showing he is irritated without him having to say anything. Sometimes my mother does an imitation of this to make me laugh, which is what I was remembering. He stood up suddenly.

~ I think we had better open our presents now.

He got on a wobbly hotel chair very slowly and still holding his glass. He reached up with one hand and took a parcel off the top of the wardrobe.

~ Stand here, Laurence, and I will pass it down to you.

I knew it was up there, ever since we unpacked, even though he had pushed it to the back. I could have opened it millions of times since we arrived. He has got no idea about secrets. She is way better at secrets; when she hides things I have no idea where to look.

I got his present out of my bag which I had put under my bed. Josie had bought it for me to give him. She forgot to tell me what it was, but I know it was not expensive. It was a small present, not like the huge thing my father gave me. We opened them at the same time. His present from me was a cartridge pen. My present was a set of encyclopaedias, with long words and small writing. Grownup books, because he says I have an adult reading age.

~ Did you choose this? Extremely useful. Thank you.

He tried the pen out on the hotel fire regulations. It didn't work, but he said it probably would once the ink had come through. He bent over me and breathed vodka and orange on my cheek. Then he pushed out his lips without moving his head, to kiss my cheek. His lips were watery and they left a trail on my skin, like being kissed by a giant slug. I suppose he does not get any practice at kissing

now. At least I only have to be kissed by him twice a year.
(The other time is on my birthday.)

~ Dad, it isn't working because of the plastic stuff on that card.

He wasn't interested in the pen. He started opening the encyclopaedias and showing me how to look things up in the index. (Volume 10. A whole big book just for the index of the other nine!)

~ I considered whether to buy you an encyclopaedia on disc but all those programmes are designed by Americans and they are for much younger children. This is an adult encyclopaedia; an invaluable resource in years to come. Never forget that books are the only lasting way to store knowledge. Computer discs are ephemeral, which means they will deteriorate after a certain number of years. Books last several lifetimes.

He opened the index.

~ Look here, under 'A' you find aborigines, they are Australian indigenous peoples. Volume One.

I looked up aborigines in Volume One. I wanted to see if there were pictures of women with no clothes on. But it was actually better than that. There was a description of a ceremony . . .

~ This would appear to be an initiation ceremony for the young men . . .

They cut their pricks. It said it in the book. My father

let me read it. They make a cut down to the root, almost, and it changes the way you piss from a stream into a sprinkler. It did not say that in the book; I made that up.

~ Does it hurt?

~ I can only imagine the sensation would be excruciating.

We had a long talk about this. My father actually knows a lot if you ask him the right kind of questions. He is a professor, so he likes talking about stuff you only find in books. He said that one day we might go to Australia and even meet some of the tribes in the book and see some ceremonies for ourselves. When he talks about these kinds of things he is very calm and has no fear, which is the right way to be.

After we had gone to bed I could not sleep for hours. I wished we had things like that ceremony in this country. Things that test your endurance. I could think of some excellent tests. I have plenty of ideas.

My Gran is back from Aberdeen. She brought me a present, called Edinburgh Rock. She says my Uncle Mikey will be home soon so she has come back. Mam talked with her when Kevo and Lee were down the pub. Gran wants Mikey to live with us while he is out on sick leave. It won't be for long, she says. Mam does not want him here but he is very sick with the AIDS and we are his only family now. Mam is his sister.

My Gran is okay. She does not curse or get in a rage when Mam cries. The baby is coming in April. Gran had twelve babies but some died and one is in the navy. I never met them, only Uncle Mikey and Bernie and another auntie I can't remember her name, only her hair in brown ringlets the colour of a horse's mane. My Gran is Irish, like Mam but more Irish even. She sings the songs, but not when Lee is there. And she can talk in the language of it.

I told Gran about the pup. She said I should live in Clare and have a farm. When she was nine she had a donkey all her own and three chickens. And in the country the hills are all different colours and there was green moss on the roof of her house. She loves her whiskey. She and Mam drank the whole bottle down while Lee was out signing on. Kevo is signing on too; there is no work for him now Christmas is over. Mam needs things for the baby. Gran says she can tell it will be a girl.

I drew a picture for Gran; it was mostly green and blue, like her life. She wears a blue coat that smells of another country. She spilt some whiskey on the picture and she said, God forgive me. She gave me a kiss before I went to bed. She sleeps with Mam, in her bed. Uncle Mikey will sleep in Lee's room. Lee will sleep on the floor in the living room. If he stays.

*

It came to the third of January, which was the day my father had agreed to hand me back to my mother for the last part of the Christmas holiday. We had to get the train back from where the hotel was, in the country. I had had enough of the hotel and the country. I prefer towns because you can do more things on your own in towns.

We were supposed to meet her on the platform and my mother did not see us at first; she was looking past us to another man and boy. Even though it was cold enough to snow she was not wearing a coat. My father did not say hello or anything, just, Josie? You are under-dressed. Putting your health at risk.

~ What do you care, Brian?

~ Ssh, not in front of— Brian shielded one hand with the other so he could point at me without me seeing. But who else could he be talking about?

~ I never see you except with him so what else can I do?

~ Whose fault is that?

~ I thought you didn't want a scene.

~ And which of us sabotages the arrangements every time? Not me, *my dear*.

~ Laurie! Darling! Lovely to see you, did you have a good Christmas? I want to hear all about it.

She was ignoring my father. She bent down and squeezed me into her, and I felt how cold she was. My father watched

and after a while he went away. He forgot to say goodbye to me.

~ Let's go home, darling. I have a *wonderful* surprise for you!

We took a taxi. The driver called me 'squire'. My mother thought that was funny.

Home had got a bit different. I suppose it started getting different after my father moved out, but I didn't notice it when I was there every day. Now I noticed. All the rooms were full of stuff. Some of it was in piles on the floor. There were a lot of newspapers in piles. My room was just the same as I left it, though. I have told Josie never to go in my room. There was a different kind of smell around the house. In the kitchen were stacks and stacks of dirty plates. My mother hates doing washing up. She was always asking my father for a dishwasher.

We went in the sitting room. There was an enormous shape in there with a blanket over it. My mother did a kind of a dance around it. She was very interested in this present.

~ Lift it up, darling. It's from me. Happy Christmas!

I lifted up the blanket. There was a huge glass tank. Lying in the bottom of it was a snake.

~ It's a reticulated python. Isn't he a magnificent brute?

The snake was asleep. I tapped on the glass to wake it up.

~ Are you pleased? I thought he would be just perfect for you.

My mother was staring at me as if I was the snake myself. She put her lips to my ear and hissed, You know what we eat? *We eat live rats!*

~ Where will I get live rats from?

She knew. She had done some research about this. She licked her lips and smiled at the sleeping snake in its cage.

~ We can buy live food at the shop where I bought him.

I think I would have enjoyed this if I had thought of it myself. It is the kind of idea I often have. Having a pet snake to obey my every command is good. But I don't think this is my snake; I think it is hers.

~ What are you going to call it? Look at his markings. What about Kaa, like the python in *The Jungle Book*?

~ *The Jungle Book* is crap.

~ You used to love it.

~ When I was six.

~ Well, what then?

~ He's my snake, isn't he? I don't want him to have a name.

~ I think you are being very childish, Laurie, she said rather loudly.

The snake woke up. Its eyes were yellow and it saw me and knew I was not scared of it at all. It stretched itself along the edge of the glass. First I thought about taking it out and holding it. There was quite a lot of it. So then I thought I would wait until it knew me better.

~ Feeding time, said Josie. She was looking at me and smiling in a rather infuriating way. She stroked her hand along the glass where the snake was. I was absolutely certain she had already taken the snake out of the cage and held it. I knew she wanted to do it again, showing off to me. I knew that if I let her, she would take over the snake and the live rats and the power of it.

~ Do you want to feed your nameless snake, Laurie, or shall I do it for you?

~ I'll do it. Have you got any . . . food here already?

My mother put her cold hand on my shoulder and pulled me with her.

~ Oh yes. Come and see what's in the kitchen.

Later on I was reading about boy chimney sweeps in my encyclopaedia, but it is not as well done as the aborigine things. I was in bed and the telephone rang downstairs. It must have rung about twenty times. My mother did not answer it. Then it started ringing again straight away. I got up and went downstairs to find her. She was in the sitting room watching the snake. She was wearing her dressing gown.

~ Shall I answer it?

~ No. Leave it.

~ I can't leave it; it's keeping me awake.

~ Oh, don't fuss, Laurie. It's only your father.

~ Maybe he wants to speak to me.

~ What, at half-past eleven at night?

~ Why won't you answer it?

~ There. It's stopped now.

She put on the answer machine.

~ Are you happy now? He can leave a message for you and you can ring him tomorrow.

She put her hand into the snake cage and stroked the snake. It was not asleep. My mother has no fear of anything, which of course is good. But sometimes I wish she would do ordinary things like wearing coats when it's cold and answering the telephone. Now my father has gone, I can see how many ordinary things he used to do to save her the bother. Maybe she should get a job. That would make her more ordinary.

~ How many more days till school starts?

She suddenly pulled her hand out of the cage. She actually looked surprised.

~ I felt him squeeze my hand.

~ How many more days?

~ Put your hand in just here and feel him squeeze; it's a very strange sensation.

~ You remember about my school, don't you? Newlands Primary, with Miss Glennie, where I have to learn to get on with children from the area, like you said . . .

~ Oh, Laurie, don't fuss. It's only a school. Sometimes
you—

~ I what?

~ You sound horribly like Brian. Fussing. Just relax.

I put my hand inside the cage. The snake bit me.

It's good that the holidays are over. Mam is real big now; she needs to lean on me when she gets up the stairs to our flat. If I stand next to her she leans on me with all her weight. Her legs are blue and knobby. Gran is always sending me back to the shops to buy fags and stuff Mam forgot. Gran is great on meals, she hates burgers; she buys proper butcher meat and makes stew like we get for school dinner. She says burgers and chips is not a good dinner for growing lads. They have dinners at school but sometimes Mam forgets to tell them and they take me off the free list. Mam does not write so good so she has to call down to the school and tell them. But now with the baby and all she can't walk to the school so easy, so she says she will make a pack lunch. It is okay while Gran is here, she turns on the fire real early and we can easy get warm. Kevo has robbed a load of carpet and nailed it to all the floors so it is warmer. That was Gran's idea. Lee has not been around much.

Some men came to mend the lift after New Year's Day. There was a fire in the lift New Year's Eve but it did not work

before that. They left their tools in a bag on the fifth floor (not our floor). When they came back from buying fags their tools were gone. They said they wouldn't fix the lift. Gran went to the lift doors and screamed at them that there was a baby coming. Lee was reading a paper in the kitchen. He said he would do them over. Gran came back in the kitchen but Lee did not move. The men drove off. Maybe Lee robbed the tools. Him and Kevo had a big row over some money the next day; maybe that was the money for the tools. Lee is best at robbing but Kevo has the friends to sell things on.

If the police come round asking, it will be good if I am at school. Gran helped me make some New Year's resolutions, which are:

Get another pup, a good one this time.

Go to school every day.

Stand up to Laurie.

Help with the baby (Gran's idea). But I will if everything else goes right.

Get back at Lee for what he did on Christmas. That one I did not tell Gran. Why is it all the good people are tired and old and the bad ones are strong?

Last day of the holidays I went to Royts Lane to see were there any more pups, but not from the same old bitch as last time. This time I have the pup book and it will be different. Maybe Kevo will help me train the pup and Gran will give me proper meat to feed it.

I went looking around the site for Bluey. There was a Christmas tree with all the Christmas stuff still on it and the little kids were burning it. They have no coats. There was one girl called Minty gave me a thing off the tree. It was a sparkly bit of a moon. She had a smile and her snot was running into her mouth and she sucked it in. I asked how old she was but they did not know. She was sucking on the titty of a bottle. But they did not call her a baby like they do in our world.

I saw the back of Babs' old coat and she was walking to her trailer and I ran calling her. She turned and frowned and made strange with me. I asked for Blue and she squinched up her eye and looked out toward the road. She said he was away with the men buying a lorry.

She walked on and I went behind her and at her trailer she turned sudden, catching me with her eye.

~ Still there, gorgio boy?

She went in her trailer and I went after. She did not shout at me so I sat down. She put a plate on the table with bread and butter. She did not say I was to have it but I took a bit and she looked at me eating and let me eat. All the while she stood by the stove. She never sits in the trailer; Blue says she chokes in a place with a roof.

Then she showed me the present he gave her for Christmas, it was a big gold cage with a parrot in it. Even if you look right close up, it looks like real. Its feathers are green, real mad green with bits of red that makes the green look more

green. And it has a big beak, crooked and shiny black, and the eyes are black too, black glass. You can open the cage and put your hand in. Babs put it hanging outside her trailer. It looks more alive even in the outside light. The parrot's name is Geordie. She says she had a husband called Geordie once upon a time. When Babs laughs, I see all her black teeth at the back.

She said that Bluey goes around all the time with the men now, calling for scrap with the cart and the pony, and him only the same age I am. Babs said he is real good at coaxing the stuff from people, for all he's so young. That's how he got the parrot. Babs doesn't care it wasn't new. I wish there was good scrap around our flats, I am always looking by the rubbish bins but if there is ever anything, it goes as soon as you blink.

Babs was in a good mood then and I told her about the woman giving me a fiver on Christmas Eve. She said I should sing in Walker Street, she used to sing when she was young and it worked real good, better than straight monging, which is begging. I said I wasn't begging anyway, the woman just gave it me. She pinched her eye at me like I was a liar. Told me to sing her a song. I ran off then into the field next to the trailer site. I hid by a bush and from a long way off I saw her come into the field. I thought she was looking for me so I kept dead quiet. She squinched her eyes around and looked quick behind her, then she backed up to the hedge.

I had no time to move. It was like my eyes was glued open and stuck on the one place. She pulled up her dirty skirt and pulled down her knickers and squat down with her head twisted on one side. Her face was all screwed-up like, and she was sucking through her teeth like my Gran when she tries to thread a needle. I saw her shit come out of her saggy old bum and she went on groaning like it was hurting. I couldn't look away, it all happened too quick. She put her hand behind her back and down and wiped her bum with her hand. After, she drew that hand across the wet grass a few times and sniffed her fingers. She stood up, staggered like she might faint or fall and I prayed she wouldn't. I didn't want to pick her up out of her shit. She rubbed her face with the same hand she wiped her bum with. Then she took a long time to pull up her knickers and I could see her old legs with all their blotchings, blue and green and brown like a map of the world printed on her legs. She shook her skirt down to the ground and turned around and looked at her shit for a while, shaking her head.

After she was gone, I went to look. I never thought about how they do it. Living in trailers, that is what they have to do. They are free to come and go and wag off school, but they have to shit in a field.

Bluey as well. I will never eat anything from here again ever. If he has sweets he always gives me some. And once he made me a slice of bread and jam and held the slice in

his hand out to me. Then when I thought of the bread and butter from Babs still in my belly I felt sick. I ran out of the field and along by the canal and the mud smelled like shit. Every time I shut my eyes I saw Babs' face all pinched up, and after, her shitty hand rubbing more black lines in her face.

I will go to school tomorrow. See Miss Glennie. She told us once she has a shower and a bath in her house. And when she wears a white dress, it is still white when she goes home.

So I went to school. Laurie says he had a great time at Christmas. His Dad let him get drunk. Vodka is no colour so his Dad did not know how much Laurie was putting in his Coke. And in the Coke you can hardly taste it, which Laurie says is good because it burns your mouth. He says he will give me some one day when I come to his Dad's. His Dad has just got a new flat in Barras Square, in the middle of town and at night you can watch out of the window, there are drunks roaring and falling over and getting kicked or nicked. It is better than his old house because his Dad has no carpets or chairs so they have their dinner on the floor. I asked what about his Mam. But he walked away.

I stayed in school all day today; it was better than hanging round outside McDonalds in the cold. Laurie wants me to go with him to Royts Lane. He does not know how to get to

it because it is not on any map written down. I don't want him to go there. Royts Lane is my place. He has enough places of his own. He says if I don't take him he will find his own way there. And he gives me such a look that I have to kick him under the table on the flat part of his knee and I make his cheeks blow out and his eyes go bulging like when you blow up a balloon. Miss Glennie sees us.

~ What's the matter, Laurie?

~ Nothing, Miss.

Laurie is cool. He never cries. He never tells. I wonder is he a real human sometimes.

I told Laurie about Mam's baby coming. He said it was gross. I asked why is it gross? He said having a baby is a punishment for doing sex when you are not married, which is gross. I said my Mam was married. He said how did I know. He said sex was gross anyway. He knows because he has a huge book that tells him everything about sex with pictures and all. I asked could I see it. He said the same as always, One day. One day.

At break time Miss Glennie touched my sleeve of my shirt as I was going out.

~ Sorry, Miss, forgot my coat again . . .

~ No, it isn't about that, Michael. I want to have a word with you.

~ Miss, I've done nothing.

She laughed.

~ It's something nice. Something you would like.

I stood by her desk. Everyone else was in the playground. She was smiling at me. Talking to *me*. All her face so smooth, like she never went out in the rain, and her lipstick was gentle pink, like the colour lips should be, but not shiny wet like Lee's slags.

~ You know there's going to be a class outing this term?

~ No, Miss.

~ Well, there is. Are you pleased?

~ Yes, Miss.

I closed my ears then. I couldn't go, not in a million years would Mam let me go.

~ I would especially like *you* to come this year. Michael?

~ Okay, Miss.

I wished I was not there. I wished Miss Glennie was not talking to me specially. I wished I had wagged off.

~ I am taking our class to see a play called *The Little Prince*. It is a play with a ballet and music. The designer is a very famous man and the set and the costumes will be . . . heavenly. You would love to see the colours and - oh, it will be just magical.

~ Okay, Miss.

~ Michael, don't look so miserable. I wanted to talk to you about this quietly, just the two of us, because I know things

are not easy at home. About the money . . . it won't cost you anything, you can tell your mother.

~ Okay, Miss.

~ And I will bring you back to your house afterwards, tell her. There isn't anything she has to do except say yes. Will you tell her?

~ Yes, Miss.

Miss Glennie's face went sad and she breathed out sadness.

~ Your art work is the best in the class. Does she know that?

~ Don't know, Miss.

~ Someone who has the ability you have . . . don't you see, you should have this opportunity, however tough things are at home. How are things? At home.

~ Okay, Miss.

~ We are going to read the book about the Little Prince in class this term. It is a beautiful story. Sad, but beautiful.

~ Can I go now, Miss?

~ All right. No - wait. I'm going to write your mother a note. Please make sure she gets it.

Miss Glennie wrote a note in turquoise ink with a nib pen. I have just learnt that word, turquoise. The ink from those pens comes out shiny and wet and when it dries the colour goes paler, but it is still shiny. Teachers have things no other people have. Where is their world, I wonder.

~ There you are; put it in your schoolbag. If I haven't had an answer from her in a week's time, I will come round after school and ask her to sign the permission form. That's all she has to do, tell her.

~ Okay, Miss.

Miss Glennie in my house. Sitting in the kitchen with Mam and Lee and the cans and the belt and the whiskey. And the smell of the flat and the shouting and roaring and the lift broken and all. Miss Glennie cannot come in our world.

I gave Mam the note when she was on her own. Before I could even open my mouth to read it to her, she threw it in the bin.

~ Interfering cow.

~ It was only about the school trip. Can I go, Mam?

~ Can you in your dreams go? What with? We've no money.

~ Miss Glennie said it was free. Everyone else is going. It was in the note.

~ There'll be a catch; there always is. Don't trust them people, son. Kevo'll take you to the pictures if you want to go out.

~ I want to go, Mam. Can I go? She said it costs nothing and I have a star for my art work and I should go.

~ What's drawing pictures got to do with her? You can draw without her sending me letters. Does she think I don't know you can draw pictures?

- ~ Just sign a piece of paper. Anything. Please, Mam?
- ~ I'm tired. I'm going to bed. Here's 50p. Get yourself some chips.
- ~ That's not enough. Chips cost 75p.
- ~ Always wanting, always needing. You're driving me into an early grave.

Slowly she got up and went out the door, holding on to the table like she was drunk, but she had taken no drink. It was the baby making her so heavy she could not stand right. The baby driving her into an early grave. The baby coming.

I got Miss Glennie's note out of the bin. It was wet from the tea bags. The ink was pale and watery. A little frill of the turquoise writing at the edge. Turquoise, Mam doesn't know that colour. She can't read the words and she can't draw the pictures and she can't make good dinners but she can tell me can I go or can't I go.

I will go. Drive her to an early grave. I will go anyway.

Next day at school, it was playtime. Miss Glennie called me back.

- ~ Well, Michael?
- ~ Yes, she says I can go.
- ~ Oh, I'm so pleased. Did she sign the note I gave you? Have you brought it for me?

~ Shite - oh sorry, Miss. I left it at home, I'll bring it tomorrow.

I ran out the class and into the playground with the burning lump of stuff that comes in my chest sometimes. Right up to my neck and when I swallowed I felt it pressing my throat. I had to kick something real quick. There is a tree in the playground, an ugly dirty old tree with black branches and there is a cut in the side of it and it bleeds kind of a glue stuff. And when it has finished bleeding the tree will be dead.

I was kicking the tree. Mr. Overson the head caught hold of my shirt and he pulled me back, away from the tree and shouted I must come to his office. He kept hold of me and pulled me with him and slammed the door and stood tall over me and folded his arms. If I moved away even a little, his long arm shot out and pulled me back near him.

~ Look at you. Look at the state of you.

~ Yes, sir.

~ What do you think you were up to? *Answer me.*

~ Don't know, sir.

~ I saw you. Are we not to have any beauty in our lives - are we to live surrounded only by concrete and metal because it can't be torn or burnt or smashed or *kicked*? Are we?

~ Don't know, sir.

~ Come here.

Mr. Overson dragged me to the window and there was a good view of the tree all right.

~ I don't know why you were doing it, Michael, but you were kicking that tree. That is a live thing; that is a bloody sight more alive than you are. And it's more beautiful than you and I like it more than you. So that is why, if I find you kicking it again, you will be suspended for a week and I will personally come round and tell your mother why.

He held my face right up against the glass and made me look at the tree. Out of his window the branches rose up in the shape of a drop of water. I could not see that when I was down in the playground.

Mr. Overson gave me a shake and let go.

~ Have you anything to say?

~ No, sir.

~ Did you hear what I said?

~ Yes, sir.

I was nearly out the door and he turned from the window sudden like, and said, If there's any more trouble from you, you'll be barred from the outing. I'm warning you.

Laurie was not at school that day; he must have money. Then he goes to the machines in the arcade, not Findlay Street but the Penny Robbers in the alleys. He says there are men there give him money and he doesn't have to do anything for it. He has a life all right.

*

I have not kept my secret logbook enough this year. The reason is, it is much harder now I live in two places. Packing and getting on trains all the time means I don't have any time to think about ideas or experiments. On the train I usually think what I am going to say about one of them to the other one. I have to remember what I've said that's a lie, what one parent told me to tell the other parent that's a lie, and what I am not going to tell either of them at all, ever. I have found out that I am really excellent at lying. I did not know this before. I try to think like a soldier or a spy in France in the Second World War. I have been reading about the War a lot in my encyclopaedia. I have got bored with aborigines but I am looking around for a pointing bone. A pointing bone is what the aborigines used to kill people without having to touch them and there is no blood or any struggle. If you find the right bone and put the magic in, it will do everything for you and no one will know it is you who did the killing. It only works if you believe in it one hundred per cent. I will not make up my mind until I see that the bone has definitely worked. Then of course I will believe. And the more deaths it does, the more I will believe in it.

Micka's gypsy site must be a good place to find my pointing bone. They probably have some human bones stashed away somewhere.

Micka has got to be persuaded to take me there. He says

it's his place, not mine, and the gypsies don't want to have strangers coming on their territory. How come he is suddenly an expert? He has got a cold at the moment and he seems to be sniffing all the time and he wipes his snot on his sleeve or even his hand, and he never has any ideas for things to do when we wag off school, except for drawing. Glennie is madly in love with him; she calls him up to her desk all the time and he stands so close his snot nearly drips on her shoulder.

I never get colds and I am trying to become impervious to winter. This is what Brian says my mother is. How I do it is by taking off my coat and not wearing a vest, and if it rains I keep the hood of my jacket down and leave it open.

This morning it was raining. That cold kind of rain that should be snow. The wind was lashing it into my face, and after a while my forehead started to ache. The ache started on the outside, on my skin, and when that had got really frozen, the ache moved inside and went deeper into my head and my brain. It felt like the wind was whipping at me whatever direction I walked. My hair was soaking wet and it dripped down inside my shirt and the drips were like steel daggers sliding down my back. There is a Chinese torture with slow drips of water on your forehead, constantly and without ever stopping, until you go raving mad. If the water was ice cold, I think the torture would be even better. Thinking about Chinese torture was not enough to

stop me thinking about the thing that keeps dripping into my brain like those water drops.

What is going on with Brian? Josie doesn't answer the messages he leaves for her. She still does not know I listen on the answer machine and then I press rewind so the message is all fresh for her to hear it, if she was bothered to. I think she often is not bothered at all. I don't blame her. If you have split up with your husband, you don't want to listen to his voice moaning on all the time. But I am sure he is trying to plot something and he needs her to agree. I don't know what it is, but it must be something to do with me.

His message last night said, The present arrangement has become entirely unsatisfactory. You must communicate. He has been kept down a year because of your neglect. If you would only agree on a compromise . . .

What is a compromise? Has she promised him something?

Then I got to school. I looked at my face in the mirror in the girls' toilet to see if it was blue. It felt cold enough to be blue. It felt so cold I was sure that bit of me was dead. I wanted to see what a dead person's forehead would look like. I pushed my hair back and looked. The light in the girls' toilet is not very bright; it has a kind of metal cage thing over it. Even so, I did not look any different. Only my hair looked wet, that was all. My forehead was not even the slightest bit blue.

Suppose I ran away, would they get back together? Or what if I was dead, would Brian and Josie cry? Would they both come to my funeral, or would they have a row about who should be there? Perhaps they would not even feel anything. Impervious. How do you get to be like that? It would be good to be like that.

When I was in the bath last night, Josie came into the bathroom. She never even knocked or said can I come in. She was looking for her hair spray. Then she saw I was there and in the bath and she said, Sorry, darling. Have I embarrassed you?

~ I wish you'd knock. How would you like it if I came in when you were in the bath?

~ I wouldn't mind.

~ Yes, you would.

~ I wouldn't give a toss. When you were a baby we used to bath together. Don't you remember?

She came over to me and sat on the edge of the bath and she was smiling and kind of half-looking to see what she could see. I know I have never seen her in the bath. Or Brian.

I got the sponge and threw it at her full of water and it hit her in the chest. If she had been an ordinary mother she would have got angry and shouted, but she didn't. She started laughing and she was still looking at me under the water and she threw the sponge at me. She knew just where

to throw it. It did not hurt, but all the time she was looking at me down there and laughing.

~ Have I made you angry?

~ Fuck off, Josie.

It was the first time I had said it to her out loud. But still she did not get angry. She stretched out her hand and she stroked my hair away from my face, and she licked her lips and her lipstick was all shiny.

~ What a man you'll be soon, Laurie.

Then she went away, and I didn't know if she was being serious or winding me up. It gave me a funny feeling, not knowing. I think mothers shouldn't make you feel like that.