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opening extract from

Fish in the Sky

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Chapter 1

I am a star, a twinkling star. I'm an infant on the edge of a grave and an old man in a cradle; both a fish in the sky and a bird in the sea. I'm a boy on the outside, but a girl on the inside; innocent in body, guilty in soul.

Light seeps through my eyelids, I blink twice and glance at the alarm clock. It's exactly thirteen years and twenty-four minutes since the moment I was born into this world, on that cold February morning, when a Beatles song played for Mum on the radio. She went into labour and the midwife came running into the room, arriving almost too late because she'd got stuck in a snow drift on the way, and screamed, "You're not seriously thinking of giving birth in this weather, are you?"

Love, love me do. You know I love you. I'll always be true. So please love me do. She and Dad had danced to that song nine months earlier at some ball somewhere and it had since become their song. Then it became my song.

I'm a year closer to being considered a grown-up, as Mum likes to put it, with a shadow of apprehension in her voice. But until then I'm just as far from being considered a grown-up as I am from being a child; I'm the missing link in the evolution of *Homo sapiens*.

I sit up in my blue-striped pyjamas and look around.

My desk is still in its place under the window, the bookshelves by the wall, the fish tank on the chest of drawers in the corner. Everything is as it should be. Nothing has changed, and yet it's as if everything has changed.

Then I notice a cardboard box in the middle of the floor that wasn't there when I went to bed. It's about seventy centimetres high and forty wide, tied with string and brown tape, battered-looking with dented corners and oil stains, as if it has been stored in a ship's engine room for a long time. Which it obviously had. This could only be a gift from Dad that someone has snuck into my room after I fell asleep. Dad's parcels haven't always arrived on the right day. Sometimes they don't arrive at all. But he's always sent me a postcard, wherever he goes. Dad works on a big freighter and sails all over the world. I get cards from Rio, Hamburg, Bremen, Cuxhaven and places like that, and I put them all up on the wall over my bed. I know it's not always easy for a sailor to get to a post office on time to send a card or a parcel. I could easily understand that. But what was more difficult to figure out was why Dad seemed to be so much further away from me when he was ashore. But then when I think about that I turn into a girl inside and get tears in my eyes at the thought that Dad's gift has arrived at all, and what's more on the right day.

It'll soon be a year since I last saw him. He'd shown up with my birthday present three weeks late and was drunk and demanded coffee. Mum scolded him like a dog for turning up in such a state and setting such a terrible example, now

that he was finally making an appearance, and asked him if there was a rule against phoning from those ships, and whether he couldn't at least have tried to call me on the day of my birthday. He apologised profusely and said they couldn't, it wasn't his fault, they were at sea. Then he bent over and kissed me on both cheeks and the stench of him was so strong I could still smell it in my hair after he had gone; a powerful mixture of Old Spice and beer of course.

Then Mum closed the door and he stood there in front of it, muttering something and then staggered into the taxi that was waiting for him. That was almost a year ago.

I take my penknife out of the desk drawer and turn to face the box. It doesn't only smell of oil, but also as if it had been kept in a cold hold under stacks of oranges and soap. I stick the blade of the knife into one corner and calmly slice through the cardboard.

Two coal-black eyes stare at me from the depths of the box through a mass of hay and crumpled newspaper. A sharp curved beak looks as if it's snatching at me. I jump to my feet and my heart skips a beat and my knees wobble like they're about to fall off. I take cover behind the desk, bend a little, and try to figure out what it is. I can make out two wings from behind the straw, poised for flight.

It's a stuffed falcon with a gaping beak, beady black eyes and sharp claws firmly clutching a red piece of volcanic rock. I kneel on the floor and cautiously stretch my sweaty hands into the straw, drag the falcon out and place him up on the desk.

The falcon stares at me with his fiery eyes as I drop into my desk chair. This is the greatest birthday present anyone has ever given me.

And what's more, this isn't just any falcon, no ordinary stuffed falcon that anyone could pick up at an antique shop, covered in dust and muck. No, this is a famous falcon who's been on TV and whose picture has appeared in the press and who's squawked in interviews on the lunchtime news on the radio; this is Christian the Ninth in person. Well what was left of him.

He had tumbled onto Orca, the ship Dad works on, sometime last year and been named after a cook, called Christian the Ninth because he was the ninth cook who had worked on the ship. The bird was exhausted and more dead than alive, but Dad had nursed him back to life and fed him. And the falcon had become so fond of him that no one else but Dad was allowed to go near him. When the ship pulled into harbour, the local press were waiting for them and the falcon sat on my father's shoulder like a parrot on some fierce pirate and ate raw meat. When the time came to release him again, the bird refused to leave and flew back onto the ship and sat on the bridge. When the ship sailed back out to sea the falcon was still on board. And when Dad came up on deck he flew off the bridge and perched on his shoulder. They were inseparable. But on this trip, the bird got sick and refused to eat. By the time the ship came back to land, the falcon was in the care of his namesake, the cook, inside an icebox. And now Dad had

had him stuffed to give to me as a birthday present.

Thinking about it, I realised that it could only have been Dad who'd snuck into my room with the box. Does that mean that he's staying with Auntie Carol as he normally does when he's ashore? Or has he maybe gone to the country where Suzy, his new girlfriend, lives?

There is a piece of string tied around one of the falcon's legs with a small note attached. On it is a message written with an almost inkless ballpoint pen: 'To Mister Josh Stephenson. A very happy birthday. Your dad.'

If I were just a tiny bit older I'm sure I wouldn't have these tears in my eyes. It's the words 'your dad' that bring out the girl in me and make me weak all over again. Even though I'm thirteen years old and shouldn't be like this, I'm still not old enough to be able to pretend I don't feel anything.

The door opens behind me and Mum is standing there with open arms, in her pyjamas and dressing gown, holding a parcel that I immediately guess is a book.

"You're not seriously thinking of giving birth in this weather, are you?" she shouts, pulling me into an embrace. Then she looks at me with a scrutinising air, as if I were a new-born in her arms and she were trying to find some family trait, some proof that I'm definitely hers and no one else's.

"Is it really thirteen years? Imagine, thirteen years,"

she sighs, all misty-eyed.

It's a constant source of puzzlement to her, how the years have flown since the day of my birth. Every birthday she repeats the words of that midwife who almost came too late to deliver me, as if it had all only happened yesterday. Time seems to stand still during the other days of the year for her. Neither Christmas nor New Year seem to trigger this awareness of the passing of time, not even her own birthday. It's as if the day of my birth was the only milestone in her life that really meant anything to her.

"Happy Birthday, Josh darling, and this is for you," she says, holding out the parcel to me, stroking my hair with her palm and then my cheek with her knuckle.

I tear the wrapping away and a huge black book appears with a gilded cross on the cover. It's the Bible. The pages are thin and rustle, and the lettering is as tiny as a flyspeck. She'd warned me that she was going to give me the Bible because the time had come for me to start reading God's word, the story of creation and the New Testament, and to stop reading comics and those trivial juvenile books that were all about criminals and spies and were utter rubbish. Books like that could only give one twisted ideas about life, in worst case scenarios they could even turn you into a criminal. And this was why I'd fallen out of Sunday school and didn't want to go on the YMCA's summer camp last year and learn how to sail a boat and play football and sing about Jesus like all the other good boys. Now I could have a good read of the Bible and learn everything that needed

to be known about Genesis and Jesus Christ before my confirmation next year.

"God Almighty," she says, staring at the erect falcon scowling at her from the desk. "A stuffed bird! Is he out of his mind?"

"Did he come yesterday?" I ask.

"He's gone bananas."

"Mum," I repeat.

"Yes, he came," she says. "At about midnight and wanted to talk to you because he was on his way to the country. It took some work to get rid of him. A stuffed bird! What next?"

"I would have wanted to see him," I say, trying to fight back that shameful girlishness that's quivering inside me.

"Yes, well, he's not coming into my house drunk, that's for sure and he knows that perfectly well. He'll phone from the country, darling, if he can get signal," she adds, sitting beside me on the bed. I know what she's going to say now. She's going to tell me the story about my ear infection and the miraculous healing through the Bible.

"I didn't own a bible until I was twenty," she says. "But I didn't read it until long after that," she adds, stroking my head. "That was when I had to stay up watching over you when you had that ear infection. Then I prayed that you would be okay because you cried so hard and there was nothing I could do for you but read the Bible out loud. And then you fell asleep just like that and the next day you were fine again.

It was a miracle."

Although I am eternally gratefully to have been delivered from my ear infection through a miracle from the Bible that occurred in a remote past I can no longer remember, I can't stop thinking that Dad had come and wanted to see me.

"Yes, it was definitely a miracle," she says distractedly, standing up to gather the straw and rolled-up newspapers on the floor. She squeezes them back into the box, muttering something about what an utterly ludicrous idea it was of his to give me a stuffed bird.

Could it be that I had fallen asleep out of sheer boredom? But of course I don't say that out loud. That's no way to talk about the Bible.

The majestic work of creation stands before me on my desk, frozen for eternity like a photograph; outstretched wings, swollen chest, menacing beak, claws clinging to the rock. The falcon, *Falco rusticolus*, is a wondrous sight to behold when he glides about the sky and dives at three hundred kilometres an hour to catch his prey and snatches it in his claws like a thunderbolt. The ptarmigan is his favourite victim. He himself has no enemies to fear and rules over the heavens like a king.

According to legend, the Virgin Mary once convened all the birds of the world and ordered them to walk through fire to prove their faith and devotion to her. In those days

falcons and ptarmigans were like brother and sister and loved and admired each other. But the ptarmigan was cowardly and didn't dare to cross the fire. That is why its legs are still furry, and the legs of other birds are singed to the skin. The Virgin Mary was angry with the ptarmigan and decreed that she would be the most vulnerable and defenceless of all birds, and the bird that everyone would want to hunt, particularly her brother, the falcon. This is why the falcon prefers to hunt the ptarmigan, and singles her out to kill and eat. But once he has ripped her breast open and seen her heart, he recognises his sister again. That triggers off a torrent of sorrow in him and pitiful weeping that echoes between the rocks and cliffs for a very long time afterwards. But he can't control his nature; despite the grief it causes him, he has to hunt his beloved friend.

I wonder if Dad feels like that when he thinks of Mum? Does Mum still long for him, I wonder? If I hadn't been born, Mum might have married some farmer up north, and Dad someone else too in the end. I only exist because they happened to meet at that country ball and danced together to that Beatles song. Maybe I was never supposed to exist? Maybe that was a miracle too?

My book lies on the desk: *Life and Creation by Josh Stephenson*, a thick exercise book I use to record anything of importance in life. I've come to realise that by observing nature and the animal kingdom with a scientific eye, you can actually learn to understand the things that really matter in life and creation. I open the book and start to

draw the falcon at the top of the page. First the outline with a dark pencil and then the shadows with a softer one, drawing in the detail of his fine feathers, the pride in his chest, the fierceness of his piercing gaze, the power in the sharp claws clutching the rock. Then, below, I write down absolutely everything I know about the falcon, starting off with the story of why he started to hunt the ptarmigan. It's only a folk tale, of course, but it somehow seems to contain a lot more truth than many of the other stories that are supposed to be authentic and real. And why doesn't the ptarmigan protect herself? Isn't it because deep down she wants to be caught by the falcon? Doesn't she long for his embrace even though she knows it will be her last? They're lovers that can only ever meet at the moment of her death; for a brief moment they can look each other in the eye and see themselves in their true light. Then it's all over.

And the falcon flies high up into the heavens and weeps, *Love, love me do. You know I love you. I'll always be true. So please love me do.*

Chapter 2

Peter Johnson, my friend and classmate, is on the doorstep. He puffs up his chest and gives me a stiff salute, clicking his heels and striking a stern military pose, puffy-cheeked, auburn-haired, short-fingered.

"Reporting for duty, Sir Stephenson!"

"At ease, Private Johnson."

This is how we've been greeting each other ever since we saw some comedy about the army at Peter's house, sometime when we were eleven.

And I do the same, give him a stiff salute, puff out my chest and strike the same macho military pose that Peter finds so funny and say, "Yes sir! Hello, Peter Johnson."

Then his face cracks into a smile and he laughs because he still thinks it's a really funny routine. And that's the only way we ever greet each other.

"Happy Birthday!" he says, handing me a parcel.

Sometimes Peter and I are like brothers, because we share the same interests, natural history and zoology, but other times we're about as alike as chalk and cheese. Unlike me, there's nothing that can knock him off-balance; he's always the same, never too sulky but never too happy either, more kind of even-keeled. Maybe it's a good job he's that way because he's got five sisters, two older, three younger,