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opening extract from

Skellig

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One

I found him in the garage on a Sunday afternoon. It was the day after we moved into Falconer Road. The winter was ending. Mum had said we'd be moving just in time for the spring. Nobody else was there. Just me. The others were inside the house with Doctor Death, worrying about the baby.

He was lying there in the darkness behind the tea chests, in the dust and dirt. It was as if he'd been there forever. He was filthy and pale and dried out and I thought he was dead. I couldn't have been more wrong. I'd soon begin to see the truth about him, that there'd never been another creature like him in the world.

We called it the garage because that's what the estate agent, Mr Stone, called it. It was more like a demolition site or a rubbish dump or like one of those ancient warehouses they keep pulling down at the quay. Stone led us down the garden, tugged the door open and shone his little torch into the gloom. We shoved our heads in at the doorway with him.

‘You have to see it with your mind’s eye,’ he said. ‘See it cleaned, with new doors and the roof repaired. See it as a wonderful two-car garage.’

He looked at me with a stupid grin on his face.

‘Or something for you, lad – a hideaway for you and your mates. What about that, eh?’

I looked away. I didn’t want anything to do with him. All the way round the house it had been the same. Just see it in your mind’s eye. Just imagine what could be done. All the way round I kept thinking of the old man, Ernie Myers, that had lived here on his own for years. He’d been dead nearly a week before they found him under the table in the kitchen. That’s what I saw when Stone told us about seeing with the mind’s eye. He even said it when we got to the dining room and there was an old cracked toilet sitting there in the corner behind a plywood screen. I just wanted him to shut up, but he whispered that towards the end Ernie couldn’t manage the stairs. His bed was brought in here and a toilet was put in so everything was easy for him. Stone looked at me like he didn’t think I should know about such things. I wanted to get out, to get back to our old house again, but Mum and Dad took it all in. They went on like it was going to be some big adventure. They bought the house. They started cleaning it and scrubbing it and painting it. Then the baby came too early. And here we were.

Two

I nearly got into the garage that Sunday morning. I took my own torch and shone it in. The outside doors to the back lane must have fallen off years ago and there were dozens of massive planks nailed across the entrance. The timbers holding the roof were rotten and the roof was sagging in. The bits of the floor you could see between the rubbish were full of cracks and holes. The people that took the rubbish out of the house were supposed to take it out of the garage as well, but they took one look at the place and said they wouldn't go in it even for danger money. There were old chests of drawers and broken wash-basins and bags of cement, ancient doors leaning against the walls, deck chairs with the cloth seats rotted away. Great rolls of rope and cable hung from nails. Heaps of water pipes and great boxes of rusty nails were scattered on the floor. Everything was covered in dust and spiders' webs. There was mortar that had fallen from the walls. There was a little window in one of the walls but it was filthy and there were rolls of cracked lino standing in front of it. The place stank of rot and dust. Even the bricks were

crumbling like they couldn't bear the weight any more. It was like the whole thing was sick of itself and would collapse in a heap and have to get bulldozed away.

I heard something scratching in one of the corners, and something scuttling about, then it all stopped and it was just dead quiet in there.

I stood daring myself to go in.

I was just going to slip inside when I heard Mum shouting at me.

'Michael! What you doing?'

She was at the back door.

'Didn't we tell you to wait till we're sure it's safe?'

I stepped back and looked at her.

'Well, didn't we?' she shouted.

'Yes,' I said.

'So keep out! All right?'

I shoved the door and it lurched half-shut on its single hinge.

'All right?' she yelled.

'All right.' I said. 'Yes. All right. All right.'

'Do you not think we've got more to worry about than stupid you getting crushed in a stupid garage?'

'Yes.'

'You just keep out, then! Right?'

'Right. Right, right, right.'

Then I went back into the wilderness we called a garden and she went back to the flaming baby.

Three

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

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

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

She touched my arm.

‘You understand, though. Don’t you, Michael? Don’t you?’

I shrugged.

‘Yes,’ I said.

She touched me again and sighed.

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

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

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

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

Something little and black scuttled across the floor. The door creaked and cracked for a moment before it was still. Dust poured through the torch beam. Something scratched and scratched in a corner. I tiptoed further in and felt spider webs breaking on my brow. Everything was packed in tight – ancient furniture, kitchen units, rolled-up carpets, pipes and crates and planks. I kept ducking down under the hose-pipes and ropes and kitbags that hung from the roof. More cobwebs snapped on my clothes and skin. The floor was broken and crumbly. I opened a cupboard an inch, shone the

torch in and saw a million woodlice scattering away. I peered down into a great stone jar and saw the bones of some little animal that had died in there. Dead bluebottles were everywhere. There were ancient newspapers and magazines. I shone the torch on to one and saw that it came from nearly fifty years ago. I moved so carefully. I was scared every moment that the whole thing was going to collapse. There was dust clogging my throat and nose. I knew they'd be yelling for me soon and I knew I'd better get out. I leaned across a heap of tea chests and shone the torch into the space behind and that's when I saw him.

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

'What do you want?' he said.

He opened his eyes and looked up at me.

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

'What do you want?'

My heart thudded and thundered.

'I said, what do you want?'

Then I heard them yelling for me from the house.

'Michael! Michael! Michael!'

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

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

'Didn't we tell you—' he started.

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘Yes. Yes.’

I started to brush the dust off myself. A spider dropped away from my chin on a long string.

He put his arm around me.

‘It’s for your own good,’ he said.

He picked a dead bluebottle out of my hair.

He thumped the side of the garage and the whole thing shuddered.

‘See?’ he said. ‘Imagine what might happen.’

I grabbed his arm to stop him thumping it again.

‘Don’t,’ I said. ‘It’s all right. I understand.’

He squeezed my shoulder and said everything would be better soon.

He laughed.

‘Get all that dust off before your mother sees, eh?’