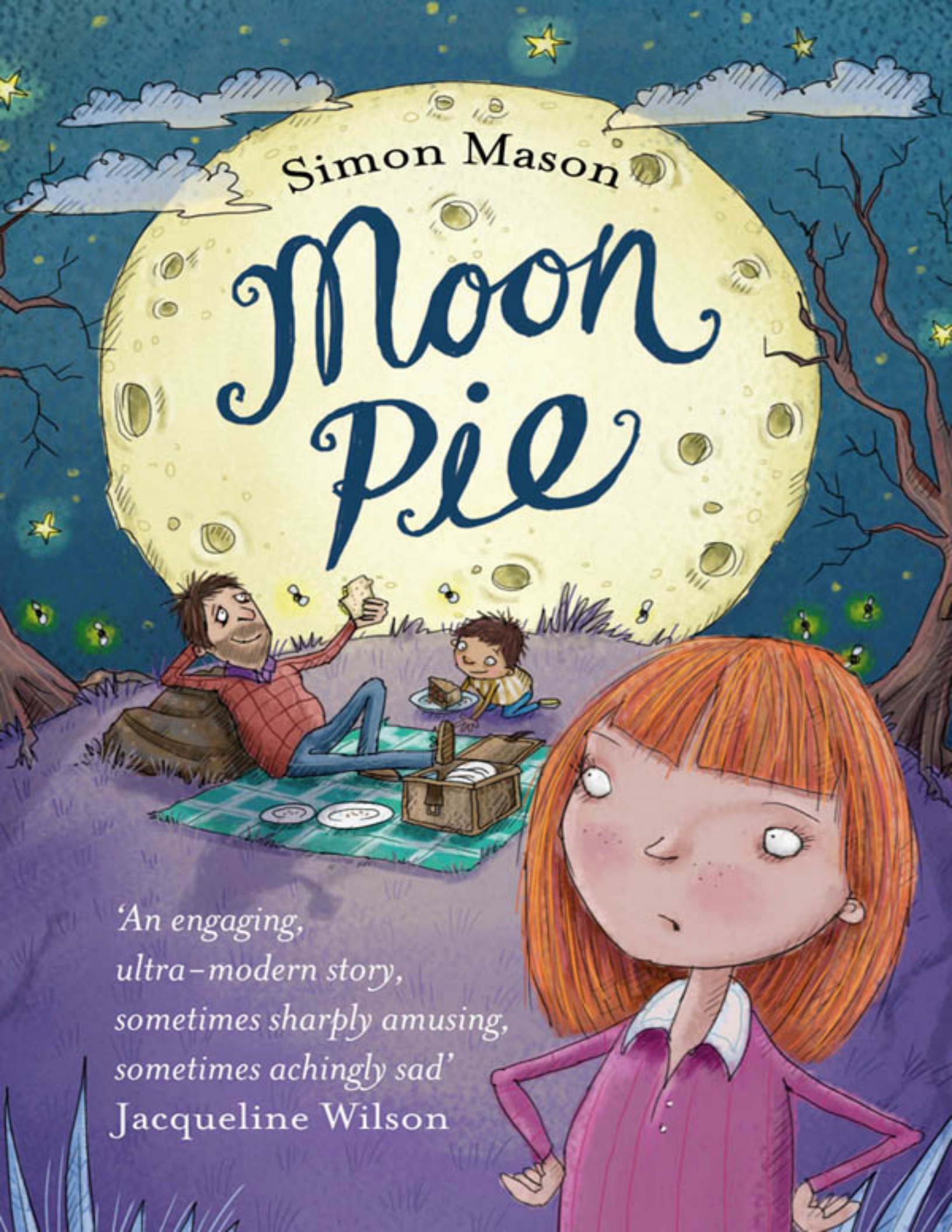
Simon Mason
Moon Pie
'An engaging, ultra-modern story, sometimes sharply amusing, sometimes achingly sad'
Jacqueline Wilson

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About the Book

Tidy the house
Make tea
Put Tug to bed

Ever since her mum died, eleven-year-old Martha has got used to being the one in charge. Her brother, Tug, is too small. Her friend, Marcus, is too obsessed with Hollywood movies. And Dad – Dad is just too strange.

When Dad falls off the roof, it's Martha who takes him to the doctor. And when Dad doesn't come home at night, it's Martha who cooks Tug his favourite pie.

But Martha's to-do list keeps getting harder.

Tidy the house
Find out what's wrong with Dad
Make us a family again

This is a funny, tender novel about families, dreams, being yourself – and pies.

Moon Pie

Simon Mason

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This book is in memory of Gary Conway (1961–2009) and Philip Atkins (1950–2009).

1

‘COME DOWN AT once!’ Martha called. ‘You’ll fall and hurt yourself.’

Dad took no notice. He went further up the drainpipe, grunting noisily, and grabbed the guttering of the bay window roof. With a sudden, wild effort he hoicked a leg over, and hung there like a gibbon, grinning fiercely down at them over his shoulder.

He panted something.

‘What did he say, Martha?’ Tug said.

‘Pardon?’ Martha called up.

‘Piece of,’ Dad said. ‘Cake.’

He spoke like that, in short gasps. ‘Done this. Before. No need. To worry.’

He took his hand off the guttering and began to wave, and quickly put it back again.

‘Dad’s strange, isn’t he, Martha?’ Tug said.

‘He’s very badly behaved. Dad, I want you to come down now. I’m going to go and get the spare key from Mrs Wilkinson.’

But Dad was already crouching on the steeply sloping bay window roof.

‘Be careful!’ Martha called.

He rose slowly to his feet, skittered suddenly on the tiles, waved his arms wildly once, and clung to the brickwork in front of him, laughing.

‘Easy does it,’ he said.

He shuffled sideways, face squashed against the brick, and blindly reached up an arm until he could feel the

window sill of Martha's bedroom above him.

'Watch this, Tug,' he said over his shoulder. 'Any second now you're going to see me give a little jump. And grab hold of that sill. Pull myself up. Jimmy the sash. Ease open the window. And hey presto.'

Tug let go of Martha's hand. 'Do it, Dad!' he shouted. He began to dance with excitement.

Martha took back Tug's hand. 'Dad! You're to come down now. This minute!' She used her strictest voice.

'First, a little jump,' Dad said. He gave a little jump and missed the sill.

'Oh!' he said, as he fell.

He fell, crumpling onto the bay window roof, slithered crossways, scrabbling at the tiles, and skidded over the edge. He fell with a crunch into the hawthorn, which he had been promising to prune for months, and fell out of the hawthorn onto the wheelie bin which at once tipped over and flung him sideways along the gravel to where Martha and Tug stood holding hands and shouting.

Dad groaned, and there was a sudden silence, as if all the noise had been sucked out of the air. He lay there quietly on his back, eyes shut, bleeding from the nose. 'Well,' he said without opening his eyes. 'I think my cat-burglar days are over.'

Tug fell on him with a sob.

Lights came on in the windows of neighbours' houses and Martha took charge.

'Yes, a slight accident,' she was saying. 'No thank you, Mrs Wilkinson, I think he's OK. But may we use our spare key for a minute?'

Dad sat in the kitchen in his boxer shorts, with his left hand in a bowl of warm water and a large sticking plaster on his forehead. Martha was putting an ice pack round his right knee. The kitchen was small and square, with terracotta floor tiles, cracked here and there, and pine cupboards, a

little shabby, and a much-repaired wooden table. There wasn't quite enough room for things, but it didn't matter because they could always be left on the counter or piled up in the corners or pushed behind the door.

'You'll need to see the doctor in the morning,' Martha said.

'I'm OK. Surface wounds. Nothing compared to the damage done to my pride. What do you think, Tug? Am I OK?'

'You bashed the tree,' Tug said. 'You broke the bin. The bin won't work now. Why did you break the bin?'

'I've been meaning to break that bin for weeks. I don't like that bin.'

'Why don't you like that bin?'

'It's rude and unhelpful. Ow!'

'Hold still,' Martha said. 'Don't listen to him, Tug. He knows he's been silly.'

'She's right, Tug. I've been very silly. And now look at me.'

They looked at him, where he sat, looking back at them glassily. There were cuts down his cheek where the hawthorn had scratched him and grazes on the backs of his hands and knees. Dust and dirt in his hair made him look suddenly older. But he was still Dad. Limping to the sink, he poured himself a glass of water, gingerly sipped it and pulled a funny face.

'What time is it?' he said.

'Midnight.'

'Come on then, or you'll be tired tomorrow. I'm going up now. Tug?'

'Yes, Dad?'

'You weren't frightened, were you? When I fell.'

'No.'

'Good boy.'

'I didn't like the noise.'

'No. I must remember to be silent when I fall off roofs.'

‘But I wasn’t frightened.’

‘Good.’

Tug began to sniff.

‘Come on, Tug,’ Martha said. ‘Upstairs.’

They all went up together, into the darkness of the unlit landing, and Dad said goodnight and limped into his room. In the bathroom Martha made sure Tug cleaned his teeth. He was so floppy with sleepiness she had to hold him upright at the wash basin on his plastic step. Then she helped him to his room, the smallest bedroom, tucked away at the end of the landing, and read him one page of a story, and settled him down.

‘Good night, Tug.’

‘Good night, Martha. Is the light on?’

She switched on the nightlight. ‘Yes, the light’s on.’

‘Martha?’

‘Yes, Tug?’

‘Why’s Dad strange?’

Before she answered she drew her eyebrows together into a little frown, which was something she did when she was puzzled or upset. Then she said, ‘He’s not really strange, Tug. He’s just a bit excitable tonight. Go to sleep now.’

Going along the hall to her own room, she got into bed and lay there in the dark. A little while later she heard Dad get up and limp slowly back downstairs to the kitchen. She turned over and tried to get to sleep.

2

IT WAS A warm summer's night, and it was hard to sleep. Throwing off the duvet, Martha got out of bed and went to stand at the window. She was a slender girl, not very tall for her age, with long straight hair the colour of copper, grey eyes and a small pointed nose that she seemed to be pointing at people when she looked at them. Standing there in her pyjamas, her chin level with the window sill, she lifted her head and pointed her nose at the moon, and its light fell over her in a silvery veil and made her pale face paler.

The roundish moon was bruised with shadow. *Like an old piece of china*, she thought. *Like a cracked bowl*.

After a while she went to see if Tug was OK, but even before she reached his room she heard him growling softly in his sleep. He was lying on his back with his fists up by the side of his head like a baby, smiling to himself. She wiped his hot hair off his face. He was only five, and he liked sleeping.

But I'm eleven, Martha thought. *So that's OK*.

On the way back to her room, she listened at the top of the stairs to check if Dad was still in the kitchen, and heard him, and went back to bed and lay there again, looking at the old bowl of the moon, thinking.

Tug was right. Dad *was* behaving strangely – clowning around, making fun of everything, having accidents. And it was odd, because he hadn't always been like that. He used to be calmer and quieter. Safer.

She lay there remembering what Dad had been like before he was strange.

She remembered him teaching her to play tennis when she was small. He wrapped his arm round her, and his big, sensible hand held her little hand holding the racket and swung it for her, and when she turned she felt his face against hers, warm and raspy, smelling of the pear drops he was always sucking. She remembered how safe it made her feel. In the past Dad had always been quietly *there* – in the house or the garden where they could find him. Now he was nowhere in particular, and at the same time, unexpectedly, all over the place. He wasn't very quiet or sensible either. He sang songs at the top of his voice, and played boisterous games, and climbed up the front of the house when he locked himself out. Sometimes he got angry for no reason. Over the last few months he had become loud and risky and forgetful. Just that evening he had forgotten to talk to Tug's teacher after school, and had forgotten to make tea, and had forgotten to pick Martha up from Costumes Club, and when, in the end, she called to remind him, he had been in such a mad rush to leave the house he had forgotten his key.

Sometimes he seemed to be rushing everywhere, yet at other times he had no energy at all. Although he was full of great plans for things to do, he generally stayed in his dressing gown until lunch time. It was very odd.

Perhaps it's because he doesn't have a job any more, Martha thought. *And it makes him strange*.

She frowned. She was going to have to make sure things didn't get out of hand. After all, you can't have everyone acting strange. Someone has to keep their head, and if it wasn't going to be Dad, it would have to be her.

She looked out of the window, but the moon was gone. She was too sleepy to worry any more, and she finally closed her eyes. The last thing she heard before she fell asleep was Dad coming up the stairs whistling.

3

THE DOCTORS' SURGERY was across the park, by a little lake. There were coots on the lake, and swans and geese. The geese were noisy: sometimes they screamed like babies.

'I don't like gooses,' Tug said.

'Geese,' Martha said.

'Don't like gooses myself,' Dad said. 'Dirty birds. Perhaps,' he added, 'I shall tell the doctor that one of his gooses attacked me.'

He limped along the gravel path, wincing and occasionally stumbling. One of his eyes had closed up, and he wore dark glasses to hide the bruising.

As they walked along, Martha looked at him. It wasn't just the bruising that made him look odd. He didn't look well. His sandy hair, which used to be so thick and springy, was flat and shiny, and his face was pale and shadowy, and in general he looked sort of diluted.

Martha frowned. 'They're not his geese, Dad.'

'No, but he's their friend. I've seen him feeding them.'

It was a sunny Saturday morning. The park was full of people: members of the rowing club plying their skiffs on the water; old men in cardigans standing around the boating pond where they raced their model boats; joggers going round and round the paths. All the tennis courts were busy. There were people walking their dogs and pushing their bikes along and standing talking; some were even sunbathing on the lawns.

'Don't expect him to do anything for me, by the way,' Dad said. 'Doctors don't like to do much if they can help it.'

Dr Woodley was a grey-haired man with a large, pale face held together by a pair of thin steel spectacles, and he didn't like to do much, as he often told them.

'You're ill,' he would say. 'But you'll get better. It's dull being ill, Lord knows, but it won't last long. Come back if you start coughing up blood.'

They went into Dr Woodley's surgery, and Dad sat gingerly on a chair, and Martha sat on the bed, and Tug lay on the floor making noises and moving earth with his best JCB. It was real earth which he had picked up in the park, but Dr Woodley didn't seem to mind.

He peered at Dad. 'Cats?' he asked. 'Or did your children beat you up?'

'Fell off a roof.'

'Looks painful.' He began to examine Dad's face. 'Minor abrasions. Some contusion. Nice black eye. Really, very nice. Won't last long though. Let's have a look at your leg.'

Dad took off his trousers and lay on the bed.

'Not as bad as I feared when I saw you limp in. Did you ice it?'

'I iced it,' Martha said.

Dr Woodley peered at her. 'Clever girl.'

'Someone has to keep their head,' she said, with a glance at Dad.

Dr Woodley looked thoughtful. He wrote out a prescription for antiseptic ointment, and then he said, 'We've seen quite a lot of you recently, Mr Luna.'

Dad shrugged.

'Let's have a look at the records. Psoriasis flaring up. That was in February. Blurred vision at the beginning of March. Migraine and gastric upset in April. What's this? Last month you had what you thought was a hernia.'

'Turned out to be indigestion,' Dad said.

'And now you've fallen off a roof. You've been in the wars. Hardly saw you at all for years, then suddenly every month.'

‘Just a run of bad luck. I’m pretty fit in general.’

Dr Woodley peered at him silently. ‘I think what I’ll do,’ he said at last, ‘is take a quick sample for a blood test. Just to make sure you haven’t picked up an infection from those cuts.’

‘All right.’

A few moments later they were ready to leave. Dr Woodley shook hands with them all, even Tug, whose hand contained quite a lot of earth.

‘Look after yourself,’ he said to Dad. ‘Or perhaps,’ he said to Martha, ‘I should ask *you* to look after him.’

They walked back across the park.

‘What an old crock I am,’ Dad said. ‘I can’t go on like this. Things will have to change. Tell you what, how would you like us to live on a boat? I think things would be better if we lived on the water. Fresher, cleaner, more exciting.’

Tug stopped making JCB noises. ‘What sort of boat?’

‘A canal boat. One of those long, thin ones we see at the lock. It’d be like camping. When we get bored with one place, we just move somewhere else. We could move right out of the city. Imagine waking up among the fields. No traffic, just the birds and the cows and the early-morning mist. And walking into the nearest village for breakfast.’

‘Let’s do it!’ Tug shouted.

‘What about school?’ Martha said.

‘Take a year off,’ Dad said. ‘Nothing easier.’

‘But how will you get a new job if we keep moving?’

‘We’ll be runaways. Fugitives. Always one step ahead. Popping up here, popping up there.’

‘And what will we do about money?’

Dad sighed.

They came to the street and walked along swinging Tug between them until they reached their house.

‘You know your problem?’ Dad said to Martha. ‘You’re too serious.’ He began to look through his pockets.

‘Where’s that key?’

‘In my purse.’ She gave it to him. ‘I think I should look after the key from now on.’ She gave Dad a firm look.

Dad patted her head. ‘I expect you’re right.’ He yawned. ‘You know, I’m still tired after our adventures last night. Will you wake me up for lunch?’

He limped upstairs.

Tug followed Martha into the kitchen. ‘Martha?’

‘Yes, Tug.’

‘What shall we call it?’

‘What shall we call what?’

‘What shall we call our boat?’

‘We’re not going to get a boat.’

‘But Dad said.’

‘Dad didn’t mean it.’

‘Why didn’t Dad mean it?’

Martha didn’t reply. She didn’t know the answer. In any case, she was already getting out the dustpan and brush. Over the last few months – ever since Dad started to be strange – she had taken charge of the housework.

‘You have to help me now, Tug,’ she said. ‘First tidying, then cleaning, then lunch. What do you want for lunch?’

‘Lots.’

‘Lots of what?’

‘Lots of lunch.’ Tug was always hungry.

‘OK. Think about it while you sweep.’

As usual, Martha made a timetable in her head:

Do housework.

Make lunch.

Sew.

Go to Marcus’s.

Help Dad with tea.

Bath Tug.

Read to Tug.

Go to bed.

‘Come on,’ she said to Tug. ‘We haven’t got all day.’

Together they swept the kitchen floor, and emptied the bin, and cleaned the sink, and afterwards they tidied the front room. They drew back the curtains and opened windows, and sunlight came in and glittered in the dust of the air. The street outside was quiet, and as they worked they heard birdsong from the gardens around, high-pitched sparrows and broken-voiced pigeons. It was a small house, with a front room, a back room and a kitchen downstairs, two and a half bedrooms upstairs, and a strip of garden at the back divided equally into broken patio, rank undergrowth and collapsing shed. They had only lived there a few months, and it didn't feel like home yet. There was 'work to be done', mainly to the plumbing, which squeaked and roared, and to the kitchen, which was damp. Dad hadn't got round to doing the work yet.

'Pie,' Tug said at last.

'We haven't got pie. How about fish fingers?'

'All right. How many?'

'Four.'

'All right. Is there ketchup?'

'Lots of ketchup. Go and wake Dad, and I'll start cooking.'

Martha liked cooking. For Tug she cooked simple food like fish fingers, but she preferred to do more complicated things, like macaroni cheese or shepherd's pie or hotpot. She was very good at *Spaghetti alla Carbonara*, which was one of Dad's favourites. At Cookery Club she was learning to make quite sophisticated dishes. For her, cooking was a sort of game – a slow, patient game you played on your own. And the nicest thing about it was that while you played it you didn't have to think about anything else.

Sometimes – she thought – it was a relief not to have to think about things.

Tug came back down with the news that Dad would not be woken.

‘I bashed his foot a bit,’ he said. ‘But he didn’t stop sleeping.’

So Martha and Tug had lunch on their own, and Tug ate seven fish fingers with a quarter of a pint of ketchup. Afterwards he played in the garden, keeping away from the undergrowth where the broken glass was, while Martha sewed up the hole in Dad’s trousers.

At three o’clock she put away the sewing box and said briskly, ‘Now it’s time to play with Marcus. You have to come with me, Tug.’

‘Why?’ Tug was suspicious of Marcus.

‘Because Dad’s still asleep, and I can’t leave you here because you’ll get into mischief.’

Tug looked interested. ‘What mischief?’

Martha sighed. ‘If you come to Marcus’s with me I’ll buy you a lolly at the shop on the way.’

‘Do they sell pies?’

‘No. Lollies. You like lollies.’

‘All right.’

They left a note for Dad written by both of them. It said: *Hope you had a NIS SLEEEEEP. Gone to MarKISS KISS KISS. Back for tea. Love Martha AND TUG XXXX*. Then they set off down the street.

For a while they walked quietly, holding hands. Martha was carrying a large bag and Tug was carrying his JCB, which he talked to from time to time.

‘Why didn’t Dad wake up?’ he asked again.

‘He’s very tired after falling off the roof last night.’

Tug yawned.

They walked down the street into the park and across the grass, avoiding the geese.

‘He *is* strange, isn’t he, Martha?’

She admitted it.

‘But he’s not as strange as Marcus. Is he, Martha?’

‘No one is as strange as Marcus, Tug.’

4

MARCUS'S HOUSE WAS small and ordinary, which was odd because Marcus was neither.

He opened the door, and stood there looking down at them. He was a large, solid boy with dark hair, and he was dressed in a pair of tights and a lime-green beret. He seemed to be wearing make-up.

'Have you got them?' he asked Martha. He spoke in a breathless, theatrical voice.

She held up the bag, and he took it and smiled. Then he noticed Tug.

'Is your brother on his way somewhere?'

Martha explained.

For a moment Marcus looked disappointed. But he recovered. 'There are some parts for small, grubby children,' he said. 'I'd forgotten. We can use him. We can use you,' he added, loudly, to Tug. He always spoke to Tug as if he was deaf.

'Come up to the studio,' he said.

'He *is* stranger than Dad, isn't he?' Tug whispered to Martha. He sounded impressed.

'Much stranger,' Martha whispered back.

On the way they passed Marcus's mum and dad, and said hello. Marcus's mum worked at Tesco and his dad was a postman, and they were both quiet, nervous people. They seemed especially nervous of Marcus.

'You know Martha already,' he told them, waving a hand. 'The costume designer. Her brother, an urchin. By the way,'

he went on, ‘we’ll be recording, so keep the noise down please. And can we have tea and biscuits at four?’

They left his parents nodding silently and smiling in a bewildered way at the bottom of the stairs, and went up after Marcus to the studio, which was his bedroom.

It did not look like a bedroom. The curtains were drawn very tightly to exclude all light and in a space cleared round the bed were a large white screen, several spotlights on tripods and a camcorder on an aluminium cradle. Everywhere else there were clothes and stage props and theatrical make-up.

‘Martha?’ Tug said quietly.

‘Yes, Tug.’

‘Why does he move his arms round like that?’

‘He only does it when he talks. Don’t stand too close.’

Martha sat on the edge of the bed. Tug found the camcorder.

Marcus said loudly, ‘Back away from the equipment please.’

From the bed Tug watched Marcus try on the clothes that Martha had brought in front of a full-length mirror on the back of the door. He put on a pair of grey trousers, then a brown velvet-look jacket and then a cravat. He smiled at himself.

‘This is very good, Martha,’ he said over his shoulder. ‘Very nice, very Henry Higgins. I only wish …’

‘Wish what?’ Martha said.

‘I only wish you could have used something a bit more colourful. Just a bit more adventurous. This brown.’

‘What about the brown?’

‘It’s a good brown. But it doesn’t hit you. Doesn’t knock your eye out.’

‘You wanted it to look old,’ Martha said, a little crossly.

‘And I like it,’ Marcus said. ‘I like it very much. I particularly like the stitching,’ he said soothingly. ‘But I wonder if we could make it a teensy bit livelier. What about

some fur round the collar? You can get some good artificial fur in electric blue, I've seen it.'

While Marcus and Martha talked, Tug sidled over to the camcorder again. It was very shiny, with lots of inviting buttons, and although it was quite big it didn't look very heavy, and Tug was just testing how heavy it really was when he felt himself being picked up and put back on the bed.

'Now I know why you're called Tug,' Marcus said. 'I'm afraid I cannot allow the urchins to handle the equipment,' he said to Martha.

'But I like equipment,' Tug said.

'I have another use for him,' Marcus said. 'I have another use for you,' he said loudly to Tug, who was watching his hands and managed to dodge them. 'Have you heard of a thing called *My Fair Lady*?'

Tug shook his head.

Marcus spoke loudly and slowly. '*My Fair Lady* is a film. A movie from days long ago. A great classic. Nod if you understand me.'

Tug nodded doubtfully.

'Your sister and I are remaking it. Here, in my studio. A speed version. If you listen carefully I will tell you the story. Then you will help us remake it. Do you have any questions?'

'When will the biscuits get here?' Tug said.

Marcus told the story of *My Fair Lady*. It involved a bad-tempered gentleman teaching a poor girl how to talk in a posh voice. There were songs, apparently funny, and some dancing.

'I will play the posh old gentleman,' Marcus said. 'His name is Henry Higgins, and he wears a jacket of brown velvet which may or may not be trimmed with blue fur. I will also play the poor girl, who is called Eliza Doolittle. She wears a variety of dresses.'

He looked at Martha.

‘In the bag,’ she said. ‘I haven’t made the petticoat yet.’

Marcus turned back to Tug. ‘I am going to let you appear in the very first scene. You will play the part of a street urchin. You will be dirty and badly-behaved. There is no need to act. You will sing a song. The song is called “Wouldn’t it be Loverly”.’

‘Wouldn’t it be what?’

Stepping backwards into the area enclosed by the white screen, Marcus began to sing. As he sang, he pranced to and fro. The song was full of words like ‘abso-bloomin’-lutely’, which made no sense, and noises like the sound of someone having his nose tweaked, and the whole thing was terrible.

Marcus came to an end. ‘Do you think you can sing that?’

Tug shook his head firmly.

‘Well, what can you sing?’

Tug thought for a moment. ‘“The Bear Went Over the Mountain”.’

‘How does that go?’

Tug sang in a shy, gruff monotone: ‘The bear went over the mountain, the bear went over the mountain, the bear went over the mountain.’

Marcus nodded. ‘All right, that’ll do. Shall we start?’

‘Martha?’ Tug said.

‘Yes, Tug.’

‘Why aren’t you playing?’

‘I don’t much like playing, Tug.’

Then they started.

When tea and biscuits arrived, Marcus told them to ‘take five’, and Tug took five biscuits, and they sat on the bed listening to Marcus talk about becoming a celebrity.

‘But I will remember you,’ he said. ‘I will write about you in my memoirs.’

His memoirs were already in their third volume. He wrote them mainly in Maths on Wednesday and Friday afternoons, and sometimes passed the pages to Martha – who sat next to him – for safe-keeping.

After a while he told Tug to move away from the camcorder again.

‘But I like cameras,’ Tug said. ‘My dad used to work in a television studio, and they had lots of cameras there. And a canteen,’ he said.

Marcus nodded. ‘I know. I was hoping your dad might be able to help me get on in the movie industry. Has he got himself a new job yet?’

Martha shook her head.

‘Why? Aren’t there any?’

‘He doesn’t seem to want one at the moment.’

‘Is he all right?’

For a moment Martha didn’t know how to answer. ‘Yes,’ she said at last. She frowned.

‘We’re going to live on a boat,’ Tug put in. ‘In the fields.’

‘Your brother’s quite a fantasist, isn’t he? Quite a little dreamer of dreams, aren’t you?’

‘I like to sleep,’ Tug said.

‘I was impressed with the way he handled himself in scene one,’ Marcus said to Martha. ‘Despite the risk to the equipment.’

‘I like equipment,’ Tug said stubbornly.

‘I know you do, little Tug. But does it like you?’

‘You’re strange,’ Tug said.

‘Of course I am. Do you think you can be a celebrity without making a spectacle of yourself? Now I must change for the next scene. Martha, tell me honestly: do you think the tea gown will work without the petticoat?’