

The Mole and Beverley Miller

Allan Frewin Jones

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THE MOLE AND BEVERLEY MILLER

‘He sped round the corner; at the end of the street – only fifty metres away, the main road slashed across the houses like a razor. Cars were moving. No sign of an accident. As he ran he had time to hope that someone had been avoiding a cat, but a small crowd was already gathered and Beverley’s bike lay wrenched and twisted on the pavement.

He stopped as though he had run into an invisible wall. It was a blue van. Michael felt violently sick. The van was against the kerb at an acute angle and the driver’s door was gaping. Michael’s head swam and his heart moved in convulsion against his ribs. Someone was lying in the gutter, someone with rainbow-striped leg-warmers. One foot was crossed over the other and one shoe was missing. . . .’

ALLAN FREWIN JONES was born in London in 1954. After leaving school, he worked as a post boy, a civil servant and a local government clerk, before taking a diploma in Fine Art and History. He is now a ballot clerk with a trade union, and lives in London with his wife who is a local government officer.

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***For Jeanette
who made me write it***

Chapter 1

‘Goodbye.’

‘Bye.’ Michael leaned on the gatepost, watching as Beverley adjusted her leg-warmers and wheeled her bike to the kerb. He licked the wetness of her last kiss off his top lip.

‘Take your time,’ he said as she leaned away over the machine, screwing the safety lock into place on the frame.

‘You’re rude,’ she said.

‘True.’

He gazed after her as she rode away. She waved once without looking round. She turned the corner and Michael walked back up the path. He halted on the doorstep, frowning. I never told her to mind how she went, he thought. The omission nagged at him as he closed the front door. Oh well, he thought, it’s only once. Once won’t hurt.

As he passed the hall stand he saw the book, left where she had laid it to free

her arms for their parting embrace. Silly sausage, he thought affectionately.

Father stood at the kitchen door, toolbox in hand and woolly hat on head. There was not time for Michael to make a run for his room.

‘Just the very lad.’

Michael stared hollowly at him; rat under the cobra’s stare. A cobra with a woolly hat and a toolbox, a rat with no excuse on a Sunday afternoon in March.

‘Busy?’ asked Michael.

‘Yes, we are. It’ll only take half an hour. It’s nothing energetic, I only want you to hold the ladder while I scrape out the gutter.’ Of all the boring jobs in the world, holding the ladder was the most deadly; cold, monotonous, endless – and half an hour meant all the rest of the afternoon in his father’s work-speak.

‘I’ll get my coat.’

‘Get away with you. Coat!’ Michael was propelled to the front door. The two things hit Michael simultaneously: a blast of chill air and the distant scream of brakes on the main road.

‘That sounds grim,’ said his father. There was a slamming of an upstairs door and the clatter of feet on the stairs.

‘Did you hear that?’ called his sister Sophie. ‘That noise always makes me cringe.’

Michael looked round, seeing Beverley's book lying like a silent confirmation on the hall stand. He ran, pushing his father sideways, wrenching open the gate, pounding down towards the main road and a silence more frozen than his fear.

He sped round the corner; at the end of the street – only fifty metres away, the main road slashed across the houses like a razor. Cars were moving. No sign of an accident. As he ran he had time to hope that someone had been avoiding a cat, but a small crowd was already gathered and Beverley's bike lay wrenched and twisted on the pavement.

He stopped as though he had run into an invisible wall. It was a blue van. Michael felt violently sick. The van was against the kerb at an acute angle and the driver's door was gaping. Michael's head swam and his heart moved in convulsion against his ribs. Someone was lying in the gutter, someone with rainbow-striped leg-warmers. One foot was crossed over the other and one shoe was missing.

Michael walked slowly forward. He saw what had happened as clearly as if he had been there: Beverley had suddenly remembered the book and, without thinking, had turned to come back for it – turned into the path of a blue television rental van.

Michael stood on the perimeter of the ring of passers-by. Someone, a woman, had taken charge. 'Call an ambulance, will you?' she said. No one moved. 'You!' she pointed. 'Ambulance! Go on!'

Michael gazed down at Beverley. She looked pale but her face was undamaged. A halo of dark blood was spreading around her head.

'She forgot her book!' he said to no one in particular.

He closed his eyes and felt himself fall, but when he opened them again he was still on his feet. His father and sister ran up. His sister grabbed him and held him tightly, pushing his face into her shoulder, smoothing his hair.

'It's all right,' she said. 'It'll be all right.'

'Has anyone phoned for an ambulance?' That was his father's voice. 'What are you doing?' asked Michael, pulling away from his sister. 'Don't look,' she said. 'Come away.'

'Take him home,' said his father. 'I'll wait here for the ambulance.'

'She forgot her book,' said Michael as Sophie led him away.

'Yes, I expect so,' said Sophie.

'It's on the hall stand. She only put it down for a minute.'

'You can give it to her later.'

Michael's mother was on the doorstep, wiping soapy hands on a striped towel.

'It was Bev,' said Sophie, 'she's been knocked off her bike by a car. Dad's there.' She sounded very choky, as though she were giving voice to Michael's emotions.

In a cool daze Michael allowed himself to be led into the kitchen. He sat at the table, staring out of the window at the wall of the house next door.

'Would you like some coffee?' asked Sophie. Michael heard her quite clearly but could not answer. He felt his eyes pinned to the dark wall as his mind swam in slow circles. 'She only put it down for a second.' He relived their parting embrace; he always kept his eyes open so there could be no doubt that she was real. He had kissed too many phantoms.

'Just make it,' said his mother softly, turning the television down.

Black skiers spun dark threads down a white snow-face. It was a film and there was shooting going on and then the scene changed to a boy pushing another boy onto railings. Michael watched it, but images meant no more than his sister's endless talking. She was pouring out a stream of comforting words which Michael could not understand.

Time went by. The kettle boiled and Michael drank the coffee. The front door was

left open for his father's return and it was bitterly cold.

Michael was unaware of it, but his mother had been on the telephone to Mrs Harker, Beverley's grandmother, to tell her what had happened. Beverley lived alone with her gran and her dog, Gustav. Sophie vanished. A lot seemed to be happening around him but Michael sat quite still, staring through the window.

'Well,' said his father. 'That's it. Sophie's gone with her.' He put his hands on Michael's shoulders. 'How are you, my lad?'

'Okay.'

'She'll be all right.'

'Yes.'

'That's it.' He ruffled Michael's hair. 'Sophie'll phone from the hospital. Lucky we live so close, isn't it? I'll pick her up afterwards.'

'Cup of coffee?' asked Michael's mother.

'Not half. I'm perishing.' He leaned on the table, looking out of the window. 'And it's starting to rain. Oh well, no gutters for us this afternoon.' He looked at Michael. 'Not that you'll mind,' he said.

Michael smiled wanly. 'I think I'll go up to my room,' he said.

'Listen for the phone,' said his father. 'It'll be Sophie.'

‘It’s like a dream,’ he said, as the comforting warmth of his bedroom engulfed him. Half an hour ago she had been there: sitting cross-legged on the bed, holding his hand between the two of hers, using his forefinger to draw on the knee of her jeans, ‘I love you.’ And now where was she? In an ambulance, or maybe in hospital already, her light brown hair in a corona of dark red blood, her face peaceful and still.

Michael rolled onto the bed and stared at the ceiling.

Time passed.

He heard the telephone. His father’s footsteps sounded on the stairs. There was a peremptory knock.

‘She’s not too bad,’ he said. ‘She’s in emergency. Sophie says her gran’s there with her.’

‘Can I see her?’

‘Not today. She’s not come round yet.’

‘Is it serious?’

‘I don’t know.’ His father sat on the edge of the bed. ‘She’ll be okay. Just a few bumps and bruises, I expect.’ He stood up. ‘I’m just off to collect Sophie.’

Michael sobbed and tears filled his eyes. His father looked anxiously at him for a second then hastily left the room. Michael turned onto his stomach, rubbing his eyes on his pillow.

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‘Please God,’ he said, ‘please don’t let her die.’

They had only been together for a few, short months, and as Michael lay desolately on his bed, he tried to recapture their time together and keep Beverley clear in his mind.