

**Michael
and the
Monkey King**

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Monkey King**

by

Alan James Brown

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For Maurice

Chapter One

When Michael's grandparents died, they left their house to him. They must have thought that he needed looking after, because he lived with his dad.

The first thing Michael saw when he and Dad moved in was something he had never had at home before. "The T-TV! They've left the T-TV!"

"Couldn't give away an old set like that," Dad said gloomily. "Anyway, you know what I think about TV. Waste of time and money."

Dad wasted lots of time and money. He fed Michael organic carrots and beans, and non-GM soya milk, at great expense. The carrots were shrivelled and mouldy, the beans didn't have any tomato sauce, and the soya milk wasn't even sweetened. Dad cared for the environment, but his cooking was awful!

Michael scabbled to plug the TV into the socket on the wall. He remembered wonderful things on this set. "We d-don't have to pay for it. And you said we couldn't g-give it away!"

He clicked every button he could find but there was not a glimmer on the screen, not a squeak from the speaker.

"Power's off," said Dad smugly. "Anyway, TV's a Bad Influence. We'll put it in the attic."

"I'm being d-deprived," Michael argued desperately. "No wonder I'm not d-doing well at school."

"Your marks are good. You're doing very well at school."

“I hate school!” Michael’s stammer was even worse at school, but he got no sympathy. Dad saved whales and stopped by-passes, but didn’t seem to care about his own son.

Michael had to wear itchy woollen socks that gave him eczema, sensible shoes that pinched his toes, and T-shirts without logos that had no style at all. It was hardly surprising that he stammered and had no friends.

“Go up to the attic and make some space for the TV,” Dad ordered. It’s full of old junk. Gran and Granddad never threw anything away.”

Just like you, Michael thought, but he did what he was told because a TV in the attic was better than a TV thrown away. One blissful day it might come down again to waste his time and Dad’s money, and, right now, who knows what treasures he might find!

Dad used a pole to open the attic. Standing on the landing, he pushed the trap-door back on its hinges and pulled down the folding ladder. It tried to bite him but he was too quick. He gave Michael a torch and left with words that were hardly reassuring.

“You’ll need this. I’ve put the power on, but there aren’t any lights. There’s a floor, though, so you shouldn’t fall through the ceiling.”

Michael’s heart was beating hard as he climbed up to the dark opening. The metal ladder was cold in his hands. He fumbled with the torch and a bright beam sprang out, revealing cobwebby rafters and tattered roofing felt.

He didn't want to put his head into the shadowy attic. He imagined rats and bats leaping at his face and shuddered. Then he thought of telling Dad that he was scared, and rushed up as fast as he could.

The attic was crammed from floor to ridge. There was a rusty lawn-mower, a broken clothes airier, several folding garden chairs with torn seats, boxes of oddments stacked on top of other boxes, bundles of papers piled on top of other bundles, stuff stuffed into bags, bags squeezed into baskets. Only a narrow passage down the middle of the floor had been kept clear. It looked full to bursting, with no room for a TV.

The roof space was hot and airless. At one end, specks of dust swarmed in the sunshine coming from a sky-light. Michael switched off his torch, and saw a power point in the gable wall. The TV had its own aerial. All it needed was power! If only he could get Dad to put it just there!

Michael decided to re-arrange his grandparents' things to make a space near the power point. He lifted one end of a large chest, and something inside slid downhill. This must be nearly empty, he thought. He would make room by filling it with other stuff.

The chest was bound with black iron hoops and had a huge clasp and lock. Michael struggled but could not open it. This was when he made his first mistake, the mistake that set him on a path of mistakes that made horrible things happen.

He did not stop to wonder what it might be that his grandparents had locked up securely. He was so excited about the TV that it did not occur to him that whatever was in the chest might be better left there.

He had even forgotten about treasure. He only thought that he knew where the key to the chest might be.

Michael climbed down the ladder, trying not to make it rattle. He wanted to keep Dad out of this until the space was ready for the TV. There had to be only one place where it could possibly go.

Luckily, Dad was making a clatter in the kitchen, putting away pots and pans. He did not look up as Michael crept stealthily past, into the living room.

Here was Granddad's mahogany writing desk, where important things were kept. Michael had seen Granddad fold the top down so that it became a writing surface. It was locked as securely as the chest in the attic.

Other boys might have given up at this point, but Michael was smart. He thought of the films he had seen with Gran and Granddad. The detective always found the key because it was hidden nearby, in an obvious place that the person hiding it would remember.

He ran his fingers along the mantelpiece and found only dust. He opened the grandfather clock and found only a large brass key that would fit it. He felt behind the picture of the Chinese Lady on the wall, and a small grey key fell into his hand.

It fitted the desk!

The top was heavy. Michael lowered it onto its wooden runners. Inside the desk were lots of fascinating little drawers and slots for paper and envelopes. There were gunged-up inkwells and places to stand pens. Everything smelled of Granddad's tobacco.

One drawer was full of old pipes. Another held important looking letters. Another was full of electrical junk – plugs hacked from the flex, fuse cartridges and fuse wire, bits of broken lamp holders. All sorts of stuff, but no keys to fit the chest.

Michael might have given up at this point, but he was not only smart. He was stubborn.

With trembling fingers, he pulled out every drawer and felt at the back for hidden catches or springs. When he got to the third drawer, a panel popped out! In the secret compartment was a black iron key that looked as old as the chest. Michael scooped it up in triumph!

Then he stuffed everything else back into the desk, expecting at any moment to hear Dad at his shoulder, demanding to know what he was doing.

But Dad was still in the kitchen, measuring out lentils for nourishing organic soup. Michael slipped safely past and bounded up the stairs on all fours. He swarmed up the creaking ladder into the loft, clutching the key tightly in his sweaty fist.

His heart singing with joy and excitement, Michael knelt in front of the iron bound chest and pushed the key into the lock. It fitted! He twisted the key and it turned stiffly. There was a Snap! and the clasp was unlocked.

Then he did what Granddad had tried so hard to stop anyone doing. He lifted the lid of the chest and looked inside.

Chapter Two

Inside the chest was a little wooden monkey with a sharp, ivory grin. He wore a short tunic, and carried a staff in his left hand.

Michael took the figure out and held it up to the light. The red mahogany gleamed as if Grandma had polished it only yesterday. The tip of the monkey's staff shone bright gold. His expression was wild and his eyes were oriental. He was a Chinese monkey.

Granddad had been to China as a young sailor, before he married Grandma. He returned with flaming dragons tattooed all over his body, and with the Oriental figures that were kept in the glass case on Grandma's sideboard.

Michael had always been fascinated by the tiny people in their fish-tank world, but he did not remember ever seeing the monkey. Perhaps Grandma had banished him to the attic before Michael had been old enough to remember.

Michael should have learned from his Grandma and shut him up again at once.

But he didn't. Instead, he stood the wooden monkey on a broken dining room chair, as if on a throne.

Then he filled the chest, and moved things around to make the space he wanted for the TV.

As he worked, Michael felt the monkey watching. Its beady, intelligent eyes seemed to follow him. Michael found himself talking to the figure.

“We’ll watch T-TV up here and Dad will never know. Just you and m-me, Monkey. Bad influences on each other!”

The monkey looked as if he understood every word.

When the time came to move the TV from downstairs, Dad refused all help. He struggled manfully up the stairs to the landing with much loud huffing and puffing and, under his breath, swearing and cursing.

“Be careful! Don’t b-break it!” Michael danced with fear at the bottom of the ladder. He held the aerial in his hands for safety. For some reason that he did not understand, he had hidden the monkey amongst the jumble in the loft.

Dad paused before his big effort to lift the TV through the open trap-door.

“I should have paid the refuse men to take it,” he moaned, wiping his brow. “It looks too big to go through. If I do get it up there, it’s not coming down in a hurry!”

That suited Michael.

With trembling arms, Dad lifted the TV and got one end through the trap door. Then he pushed and he puffed and the set slowly disappeared from view. Michael winced as it crashed to the attic floor.

Dad followed after and Michael heard the rasping sound of the TV being dragged from one end of the attic to the other. Then Dad climbed slowly down the ladder.

“Think I’ve put my back out,” he groaned. “I don’t want to see that damned thing ever again!” He reached for the pole to close the trap door.

Michael was caring and sympathetic. “You go and sit d-down. I’ll d-do that for you. I’ll just put the aerial up there f-first.”

Dad would not normally have fallen for such an obvious trick, but he was in pain and touched by his son’s concern for his welfare.

“Don’t forget, Mum’s coming to lunch!” he reminded Michael as he stumbled downstairs.

Michael skipped up. The TV was exactly where he wanted it! He put the portable aerial on top and plugged it into the set. Then he unravelled the power lead and plugged it into the wall socket. His finger hovered over the on/off button.

Something was not right. The audience was not complete.

He fetched the monkey figure from its hiding place, and stood it on the chair-throne. For once, the monkey’s eyes did not seem to follow him. They were fixed on the TV. Michael felt as if he was making an offering to a pagan god.

He pushed the button. It clicked, and the screen on the TV glowed white. There was a short blast of noise like all the game shows in the world rolled into one and a glowing ball of light pulsed out of the screen into the attic.

Michael put up his hands to shield his face. The light passed him by. It flew straight at the monkey statue, which seemed to suck it in, for in the blink of an eye the light was gone.

Now the monkey was glowing. Michael backed away, but before he could reach the ladder the wooden carving started to squirm and grow. The golden tip of the monkey's staff flared so brightly that the boy was dazzled.

The light faded and someone was standing in front of him.

"You took your time. The audience was yelling for you to open the box and claim your prize. Did you think it would be a dud?"

The monkey was now nearly as tall as Michael. His tunic rustled as he moved. His eyes were bold and unblinking. His lips drew back and his teeth clattered as he spoke. He was flesh and fur, and very much alive.

"Well, did you, *Master*?" The monkey stressed the last word in mockery.

"N-no, of c-course n-not. Well, I don't kn-now. Maybe..." The words tumbled out. Michael blushed to be speaking such nonsense and stammering so badly.

The monkey threw back his shoulders proudly and twirled his staff. There was not enough space in the attic for it to happen, but the gold tip of the staff made a ring of fire over his head.

"You are ignorant of who I am," he said disdainfully. "Amazing. Allow me to introduce myself."

He bent his knees in a formal bow, leaning on the staff, which had become short like a walking stick. "I am Sun Hou-tzu, also known as Hanuman, immortal magician and king of all monkeys. My magic is tried and tested, results guaranteed or your money back. You may call me Monkey."

Michael rubbed his eyes. When he opened them again Monkey was still there. Michael pinched himself, hard, and winced. The immortal magician still stood in front of him, smiling broadly.

“Did you say... M-m-master?”

Monkey clashed his teeth in annoyance. “You brought me back to life, so I must serve you before I can go home to Fruit and Flower Mountain. An onerous but necessary chore.”

“Serve m-me! What sort of things can you d-do?”

Monkey snorted. “Anything you have seen on TV, I can do better. I can fly on the wind. I can leap across mighty oceans. I was born from a stone egg and I can live forever on jade juice, squeezed from the living rock by the weight of mountains.”

He whirled his staff and Michael’s eyes followed the ring of fire made by the gleaming gold tip.

“My magic staff can be as big as the universe!”

The staff grew instantly like a mighty tree, out of the attic skylight. Michael peered up the trunk. It disappeared amongst the clouds, seemingly with no end.

“Or it can be as small as a needle!”

The staff shrank faster than the eye could follow. Monkey held up a tiny sliver of wood with a glowing tip, which he stuck jauntily behind his ear.

“There is no limit to my power! Your wildest dreams can come true. What do you want? Just name your heart’s desire! I can do anything - almost.”

Now, Michael wanted lots of things. Some things he wanted so much, it made him dizzy to think that he might have them. But it would take a big miracle to give him his heart's desire, so he started with smaller ones.

"I want to see Dinosaur P-park! Dad never takes me to the pictures. And I want all the ice-cream I can eat!"

Michael thought nothing would happen. He was used to disappointment and had come to expect it. Nobody had ever even noticed him before, let alone given him his heart's desire.

Monkey sniffed and drew himself up to his full height. "These are modest demands for an immortal magician and king of all monkeys. Stand back."

He plucked the staff from behind his ear and held it upright. It grew rapidly into a tall tree. Fern-like leaves sprouted from the crown.

Michael coughed as the air suddenly became hot and humid. He was no longer in the attic. He was surrounded by strange fern-like trees, on the only high ground in a steamy swamp.

A large animal crashed through the forest towards him. Weird cries filled the air and flying creatures that were not birds flapped away in panic. Michael ran and hid behind a tree trunk.

Suddenly, a green-scaled head dipped towards him. It was a dinosaur!

Its nostrils flared as it smelled him. Its jaws opened and Michael gasped at its enormous teeth and the stench of its breath.

Tyrannosaurus bellowed, and Michael screamed!

Instantly, the scene was gone and he was back in the attic, shaking with fear.

“Hm,” said Monkey. “Dinosaur Park is too exciting for you. Let’s try something more restful.”

The Monkey King held his staff out sideways, and it became the serving counter of an ice-cream parlour. Michael found himself sitting on a high stool, looking at open tubs of ice-cream. There was strawberry ripple and sticky toffee. There was pistachio and peach. There was tangerine and tutti-frutti. There was ice-cream of every kind and colour, except boring vanilla.

“What will you have?” Monkey was behind the counter, wearing a white hat. He trailed a serving spoon across the tubs like a musician running his fingers across the keys of a piano. “All you can eat! Stay all day, nothing to pay. The bargain of the century!”

Michael chose mint choc chip, and blueberry, and chocolate, and black cherry, and runny treacle. Monkey piled one on top of another in a huge sundae glass. Then he piped whipped cream on top and finished off with blood-red raspberry sauce.

“Bon appetit,” he said smoothly as he pushed the mountain of ice-cream across the counter to Michael.

It was delicious! Michael had never tasted anything so sweet and creamy, so obviously unhealthy and forbidden. He gobbled it greedily.

He ate more ice-cream than ever before in his entire life, but the glass remained as full as when he started.

“Stay all day,” Monkey repeated, looking into the distance with a bored expression on his face. “We can’t go back until you’ve finished.”

Michael spooned up more ice-cream. He couldn’t see how the glass remained full, but it did. He was eating automatically, now, putting a spoonful of ice-cream in his mouth, swallowing, putting another spoonful in his mouth, swallowing.

His teeth ached and his stomach felt as though he had a huge snowball inside, but still the glass was full.

“I can’t eat any m-more,” he groaned. “I’m going to be sick!”

“Then that’s all you can eat!” announced Monkey cheerfully. “Let’s see what you scored on the ice-ometer!”

The ice-ometer was like a giant thermometer. Red juice inside reached past ‘Why bother?’, ‘Good guzzler’ and ‘Great glutton’, to where it said ‘Complete Pig-out’.

Monkey shook his head in disgust. “Is ‘Pig-out’ the best you can do? Couldn’t you even reach ‘Titanic sinker’? Well, never mind, here comes your star prize!”

Michael opened his mouth to say that he didn’t want a prize, that all he wanted was to go home, but the words would not come out. What did come out was a grunt. A pig’s grunt.

In horror he looked down at his body. It was pink and bristly. His feet were trotters. He squealed!

And was himself, back in the attic.

Chapter Three

Monkey magic had not worked out too well so far, but magic it certainly was. Michael began to truly believe that he might have everything he ever wanted, and he put his fears aside. After all, he felt better already. No real damage had been done.

But the miraculous appearance of Monkey gave Michael a new problem. What would other people say when they saw him?

“You can’t just leap about in f-front of everybody,” he told the Monkey King. “They’ll put you in a z-zoo. Can you be a wooden statue again?”

Monkey sniffed and clashed his teeth at the same time. He looked ferocious. “Go back to a block of wood? Solitary confinement in a dusty old attic?” Then his voice became wheedling, like a petty criminal in a police drama. “I’m givin’ you the straight goods, Guv. What sorta reward is that?”

“I’ll bring you down,” Michael offered generously, “and p-put you on the mantelp-piece.”

“On the mantelpiece! The Monkey King on the mantelpiece!”

“It’s like a th-throne. High up. You’ll be K-king of all you see.” Michael saw Monkey’s expression of horror and realised he was not going to win this argument. “Weren’t you on the sideb-board once, with the other Ch-Chinese carvings?”

“I was on the mantelpiece in the living room,” Monkey admitted reluctantly. “I watched TV all day and learned about the world. But

when I turned the brass ornaments green and fogged the family photographs your grandmother banished me to the attic.”

“Well, I rescued you, and I don’t want p-people asking who’s my f-funny f-friend.”

Monkey clattered his teeth at this, but said nothing.

“Can you f-fix it so that nobody sees you but me?”

“Consider it done, Master.” Monkey picked something off his fur with delicate fingers and munched on it reflectively. “A very minor piece of monkey business.”

“Let’s try it out on Dad.”

Michael went first down the loft-ladder. When he arrived at the landing, Monkey was already there, jumping up and down and grinning. “Thousands of miles in a single bound!” he crowed.

“Just make sure D-dad can’t see you!” said Michael nervously.

Dad was in the garden, pulling weeds from the over-grown flower beds. His bald spot shone with perspiration in the afternoon sun.

“You could help him, with all your p-power,” said Michael.

Monkey sniffed. “He is not my master. Why should I help him? He is the son of the man who locked me in the chest.”

“And I’m his son! If I’m your m-master, I command you to help!” When Michael was angry he often said the wrong thing.

Monkey whirled his staff. Michael’s eyes were irresistibly drawn to the ring of fire. He blinked and Monkey was gone.

Dad stood, hands holding his stiff back and a dazed expression on his face. Weeds and flowers were flying in all directions, dahlias uprooted with the dandelions, begonias with the buttercups.

“Stop it, M-monkey!” Michael ran down the garden path, ducking as clods of earth flew past his head. “I c-c-command you!”

The mayhem ceased abruptly. Monkey sat demurely in the laburnum tree, picking his teeth with a gold tipped pick.

“Why did you do that?” Michael shouted at the Monkey King. He was so furious, he didn’t even stammer.

“Why did *I* do that?” roared Dad. He looked straight past Monkey and accused Michael. “What on earth do you think you’re playing at? If I wanted the garden ploughed, I’d have asked a farmer!”

Monkey looked smug. Michael tried to think of some ordinary everyday reason he could give Dad for what had happened.

“Don’t say a word!” Dad threw down his fork and gloves. “I’ve heard enough nonsense already. Just put it all back before Mum gets here. Do you understand?”

Then he stormed off.

“Now I-look at what you’ve d-done!” Michael danced in rage on the path, body language that Monkey understood.

“You want me to do as your father says?” the king of the monkeys innocently asked.

“Of course,” fumed Michael. “You made this m-mess!”

“As you command, Master.”

Monkey somersaulted down from the tree. He whirled his staff and disappeared in a blur of speed.

The clods of earth flew back through the air. Plants sailed in all directions. In seconds the garden was as before - before the flowers

had been dug up, before the weeds had been dug up, any of them - before Dad had started work!

“You’ve p-put all the weeds b-back!” Michael shook in fright, just thinking about what Dad would say.

Monkey was unconcerned. He shrugged his shoulders and clashed his teeth. “What is the difference between a weed and a flower?” he philosophised. “All are beautiful, and all have their place on Fruit and Flower Mountain. Do you have any peaches?”

“No, we don’t have any p-peaches!” yelled Michael, hopping up and down. He hacked viciously with the fork at a thistle. “This is a weed!” He held up a drooping dahlia, “and this is a f-flower! D-dad knows the d-difference, and he’s going to k-kill me!”

“I did just what your father asked, as you commanded. You want me to try again?” Monkey raised his staff above his head.

“No!” Michael yelled in panic.

Monkey vanished, leaving his parting words hanging in the air. “It’s nice to be appreciated.”

Chapter Four

By lunch-time, Michael had got back to where Dad had left off in the garden. His hands were raw, despite the stout gardening gloves, and his T-shirt was dripping with sweat, but he had done the job without Monkey's help.

Weeding the garden had given him time to think about the events of the morning. Monkey magic was powerful, but hard to control. Monkey called him 'Master', but didn't act like a servile genie of the lamp.

Using monkey magic was a risk. Was it worth taking the risk for the things Michael wanted? He decided to give the Monkey King one more chance, on something that did not affect anyone else. If that worked out, Michael would go for what really was his heart's desire.

He called, "Monkey! Where are you?"

Nothing happened. Michael searched the garden. He saw darting squirrels and fussing blackbirds, but no strange teeth-clattering, tunic-wearing, man's closest relative on the evolutionary tree.

"Come in and wash your hands," Dad yelled from the house. "Mum will be here soon."

Michael looked at his digital watch, a high-tech present from Mum. Time had flown. He had to find Monkey before she arrived.

In the bathroom, he soaped up to his elbows and scolded the absent Monkey King. "Where are you, Monkey? A fine magician you are. Am I your m-master or not?" Michael did not stutter so badly when he was alone.

“You are,” said Monkey, appearing in the mirror behind Michael’s head, “for the moment. Until the debt for rescuing me is paid off.”

The soap squirted out of Michael’s hand and hit the mirror, leaving a trail of white foam across the reflections in the glass. “Don’t do that! You gave me a f-fright, p-popping up like that!”

Monkey looked down his nose and clashed his teeth. “I am not the Cheshire Cat, you know. I don’t come and go a bit at a time. Perhaps I could, if you wanted...”

“Would that count towards p-paying off your d-debt?” Michael asked suspiciously, filling the bowl with clean water to rinse his arms.

Monkey’s damp reflection began combing its hair with a gold tipped comb. “Certainly. All magic has its cost.” He sighed melodramatically. “I, of course, just do as I am told.”

“In that case, I’ll p-put up with you.” Michael decided to save the magic for the things that really mattered. He dried himself on a towel.

“You called, Master,” said Monkey impatiently. “Did you want something? I have other things to do, you know, years of TV to catch up on. New adverts, films, quiz shows.”

Summoning all his courage and speaking as clearly as he could, Michael said, “I want you to cure my s-s-stammer!”

Monkey rolled his eyes. “That’s a big one, bigger than invisibility. Are you sure?”

“Yes,” said Michael, though he wasn’t.

Monkey raised his staff and Michael held his breath. This was how trouble started - the devastation in the garden, the ever-lasting ice-

cream, nearly being eaten by Tyrannosaurus Rex in Dinosaur Park. One last chance for monkey magic!

The staff twirled and the gold tip became a ring of fire. The fire became a light, burning on Michael's face. He could not see beyond the light, but he sensed the presence of many people, an audience. He was sitting on a chair in the middle of what seemed to be a stage.

With a fanfare of trumpets, Monkey leaped into the spot-light. He flashed his teeth in a broad smile and swirled his black cape with a theatrical flourish.

Then he spoke to the unseen audience. "Folks, Michael has agreed to be hypnotised right here, right now, before your very eyes. I will do my best," Monkey gave a modest shrug of his shoulders, "yes, my level best, to cure this brave boy of his stammer."

He stood behind Michael and rested his hands lightly on the boy's shoulders. "Son, show the folks back home what we're dealing with here. Say a few words."

"I-I-I..." Michael's courage was failing fast.

"There you have it, folks," Monkey cut in. "The worst case of the aye-eyes that I've come across in a long career, and I've seen some."

"I-I-I..." Michael wanted to say that he had changed his mind, that he would live with his stammer and that the Monkey King could go home to Fruit and Flower Mountain.

"Sure, son," Monkey interrupted impatiently as he strode round the chair to face Michael. "The folks get the message. Just remember who's the star! You're in bad shape, but guess who's going to sort you out!"

Michael tried to get up out of the chair but was pushed back by thunderous applause.

“Just watch my staff, Michael. Keep your eyes fixed on that gold tip.”

The staff swung to and fro like a gleaming pendulum. The Monkey King’s voice became soft and caressing, reminding Michael of bedtime with Mum when he was very young.

“Just relax, Michael. Relax. Your arms are heavy. Your legs are heavy. Your eyes are heavy. You’re feeling cosy and comfortable, more and more comfortable. Your eyes are closing. Let them close, Michael.”

Michael closed his eyes. It was easier than keeping them open. He wanted to please Mum. It was so peaceful, just before sleep came. She would not go away this time.

Monkey spoke to the audience. “Michael is now in a hypnotic trance. He will do whatever I tell him. In this state he can do marvellous things - things he could never do before.”

He turned back. “Can you hear me, Michael? Talk to me if you can.”

“Yes,” said Michael slowly. He heard his own voice as if it was somebody else, speaking at the bottom of a deep, dark well.

“I am going to ask you to repeat some words after me,” said the immortal magician, “and you will say them without stuttering. Do you want to do that?”

“Yes,” said Michael in his faraway voice.

“Then you will,” said Monkey. “You will have no doubts. You will say the words clearly and without hesitation.”

He twirled his staff over Michael’s head and the audience gasped in excitement. “The words are: ‘I am a boy who can speak perfectly and without any difficulty.’“

These were the sort of words that made Michael stutter most. He could have refused to try, for he was still in control of his own body. But he wanted to do as Monkey told him, and he knew that he could. Slowly but confidently he spoke.

“I am a boy who can speak perfectly and without any difficulty.”

The audience cheered and clapped. The sound came to Michael like waves on a rocky shore.

Distantly, he heard Monkey say, “You will never stutter again.”

Michael opened his eyes and found he was alone in the bathroom. “I will never stutter again,” he said softly to himself.

Then he realised what had happened. Monkey magic had worked! This time Monkey had really done it!

“I will never stutter again!” he shouted. “I am a boy who can speak perfectly and without any difficulty!”

“Who are you talking to in there, Michael?” Dad called through the door. “Mum will be here any minute.”

Michael waited until he heard Dad’s departing footsteps before calling for Monkey. There was no answer. He remembered how the immortal magician had appeared last time, and called again, looking in the mirror.

The glass clouded, and then cleared. The Monkey King was standing behind him, grinning into the mirror.

“Yes, Master?”

Michael spun round and hugged him. “It worked! It worked! I am a boy who can speak perfectly and without any difficulty!”

“Of course it worked,” said Monkey in embarrassment and taking refuge in his habitual boasting. “Am I not the greatest magician in the world? Who else can fly on the wind and leap across mighty oceans and all that stuff?”

“I bet you can do just about anything,” said Michael, seeing his heart’s desire now within reach. Monkey had shown that he had the power.

“Just name it and it shall be yours,” said Monkey proudly.

The moment was here. Michael took a deep breath. “I want Mum and Dad to get back together, so we can be a family like we were before. But this time I want them to stick together.”

It was all done for love. If Michael had loved them less, or had more imagination, he would have asked Monkey to trade his awful parents for completely new and better ones.

“You want the regular ‘till death do us part’ thing?” suggested Monkey.

Michael knew this was what people said when they got married. He thought it was part of the ordinary family life that everybody else had, and that he wanted so badly.

“Yes,” he told Monkey. “Can you do it?”

Monkey bowed and replied confidently, “It will be exactly as you say.”

Chapter Five

The doorbell was ringing.

“Let your mother in, Michael,” Dad growled from the sofa. “It’s you she’s come to see.”

At the front door, Michael fumbled with the latch in excitement. He could see Mum’s wavy outline through the little coloured lights of the door. She seemed to be walking away, as if she did not know whether this was the right house or not.

The door sprang open and Michael rushed out. Mum turned on the front step and a big smile spread across her face. She gathered him up in her arms and they kissed and hugged.

Mum laughed and straightened the wide padded shoulders of her business suit. Her blonde hair was cropped short. Last time Michael had seen her, it had been long and mousy brown.

“I’ve got to be back at work soon,” she said. “So no climbing trees.”

Michael grinned. “It’s an amazing house! You must see the attic!”

“I’m glad you’re settling in.” Mum spoke over Michael’s head to Dad who was standing in the doorway. Neither of them noticed that Michael was not stammering.

“Show your mother in then, Michael,” said Dad, gruffly.

They stood uneasily together in the lounge. Mum fished a packet of cigarettes from her black leather executive bag and Dad coughed pointedly.

“Perhaps you’d better start in the garden while I make the tea,” he suggested. “We’re on a hill. That’ll be useful when sea level rises.”

While Dad clattered cups and saucers in the kitchen, Michael showed Mum his new home.

She admired the overgrown garden. “You can do what you like out here,” she said, puffing on a cigarette. Her mobile phone beeped and she took three calls and made two.

She praised Grandfather’s rambling house. “Dad will enjoy fixing it up,” she said, breaking off a piece of rotten window sill and crumbling it in her manicured fingers.

She sat on Michael’s bed and approved his spacious bedroom. “You can get away from Dad up here,” she said, pulling a laptop computer from her executive bag. “I’ve just got to check some figures for a meeting at work.”

Rows and rows of numbers flashed across the computer screen, accompanied by electronic beeps and drings. Mum typed something on the keyboard. Her mobile phone rang. She held it to her ear with one hand and deftly lit a cigarette with the other, tapping ash into the lid of Michael’s games machine.

Michael opened the window to let the smoke out. Mum exclaimed, “What a lovely view!” and threw her cigarette end down into the pond. A goldfish choked on it and floated belly up in the water.

Just like old times! Michael was so pleased to be with Mum that he forgot all about Monkey, and monkey magic.

“Tea’s ready!” Dad called up the stairs.

Michael did not want to share his happiness, but Mum said she wanted some tea so he went down with her as graciously as he could.

Dad was pouring from a fine china teapot into translucent white cups. It was Grandma's best tea service.

Monkey was sitting in the armchair next to the window. He grinned at Michael with his tombstone teeth, and winked.

"Have a seat, Lynne," Dad said. "Milk, no sugar?"

"You should know," Mum said sharply, going to sit in the armchair by the window.

"No! Not that one!" yelled Michael. He grabbed her arm and pulled her towards the sofa.

Monkey clattered his teeth, but the sound was lost in the clatter as Dad arranged teaspoons neatly in every cup and saucer.

"Really, Michael," he scolded, "your mother should be able to sit where she wants."

"His mother is quite happy here," Mum announced, her lips thin with annoyance.

Michael sat in the armchair by the door and gave Monkey a frowning stare. All the Monkey King had done so far was to make Mum and Dad quarrel. Unrepentant, Monkey winked back and whirled his staff above his head.

Michael held his breath and waited for someone or something to appear or disappear. Nothing seemed to change. Michael let out his breath in a slow sigh and wondered if monkey magic was so powerful after all. He could not see it, but horrible things were already happening.

“That’s a big sigh,” Dad observed. He handed Michael his tea. “Don’t worry. Things never turn out so badly as you think.”

He gave Mum her cup and sat beside her in his usual place on the sofa.

There was an awkward silence. Michael looked appealingly at Monkey. The boy had changed his mind about using monkey magic on Mum and Dad. Life did not seem so bad, right now. He did not know it was already too late.

Monkey would not meet his eyes, but gazed out of the window in a disinterested way.

Mum and Dad both spoke at the same time.

“So the only place you haven’t seen is the attic,” Dad said.

“I can’t stay long,” Mum said, trying to edge away from him.

They both stood up, looking embarrassed. Dad tried to retreat to the kitchen. Mum tried to run for the door. Back to back, their feet tread-milled but neither moved.

Dad gritted his teeth and bent forward. Like a circus strong man towing a caravan, he grunted his way across the room. Mum’s feet rose in the air and she was carried with him in an upside down piggy-back.

Precious china crashed to the floor in smithereens. Mum screamed.

“Let me down! This is an assault! Michael, call the police!”

Michael opened his mouth to yell at Monkey, but the Monkey King had gone.

“Get off me, you stupid woman!” Dad bellowed, forgetting all political correctness.

He turned, and Mum turned, and the moment Michael had prayed for came. Mum and Dad were in each other's arms, but they were fighting again!

Mum thumped Dad on the back to make him go away. Dad pushed Mum by the shoulders to make her go away. Mum's head came up and hit Dad, Whack! on the nose. He started bleeding all over them both.

"My best suit!" Mum raved. "I've got to go to work in this suit! It cost me a week's wages!"

Dad held his nose with one hand and tried to prise Mum off his chest with the other. "Wobbidoo dabor?" was all he could say.

Michael tried to come between them. "Stop fighting!" he yelled. "It's all a mistake!"

His mistake, for using monkey magic. For, try as he might, he could not get a hand between his parents. Mum and Dad were sticking together whether they liked it or not, and they hated it!

They twisted and turned, and pushed and pulled, and shouted and blamed each other until they were exhausted, but they were stuck together like magnets.

Chapter Six

“**M**agic? Don’t be daft!” Dad was scornful of Michael’s attempts to explain what had happened. “If you can’t talk sense, don’t talk at all.”

“So you’re taking it out on Michael now, are you James?” Mum cut in. “You never take responsibility for anything. You wouldn’t last five minutes in business. It’s your crazy fads for soya milk and decaffeinated tea that’s caused all this!”

They shifted position on the couch, moving as if joined by an incredibly strong elastic band. Dad grunted as the phone Mum carried in a holster at her waist dug into his hip.

“Radiation,” he pronounced, “from this contraption, that’s what’s done it. We don’t know what we unleash with modern technology. There’s a hole burned in the ozone layer with every phone call. It’s tampering with nature.”

“Well, I need to tamper with a cigarette,” said Mum, pulling her executive bag towards her.

“No you don’t,” said Dad firmly. “You’ll not get rid of me with passive smoking!”

“I don’t mind going into the garden,” said Mum the martyr. “I’m used to it.”

They struggled to get up. Whenever one was almost on their feet, they were jerked back by the other.

“You have to co-operate,” said Michael helpfully, taking Mum by the arm. “We do things like this at school.”

Both parents glared at him, but slowly and unwillingly they began to co-ordinate their efforts.

“Now!” said Dad.

Mum refused to follow his lead, and pulled him back down again.

“Now!” said Mum. Dad was still recovering from his fall, and pulled her back down again.

“Now!” said Michael, pulling on Mum’s arm. They both ignored him.

“Now!” they said together, and rose smoothly as if it were no effort at all.

Whatever was joining Mum and Dad would let them stand side by side, hip to hip, but the join was always at the torso, never at an arm or leg.

Attempting to walk pitched them onto the floor before they had left the room. It took longer to get to their feet again. Last time had been a fluke.

Helpful Michael said, “You have to do it three-legged, like in a three-legged race. We...”

“...do it at school!” said Mum angrily. “You know, Michael, being right is not always a good thing. It does not make you Mister Popular round here.”

Dad snorted. “Now who’s taking it out on Michael?” He frowned and added, “Though there might be something in what your mother says.”

“His mother is gasping!” Mum dragged Dad out of the French windows and into the garden as if they were truly in a three-legged race and she was determined to win.

From the lounge Michael could hear them bickering, like children in a playground.

“This competitiveness is why I divorced you.”

“You divorced me! I did all the legal work!”

“Only because you were too mean to pay for a solicitor...”

Michael took the chance to go look for Monkey. He tried calling him from in front of the mirror. No Monkey. He searched the house and went up to the attic. No Monkey. It was as if Monkey did not want to be found.

I’m not surprised, thought Michael. When I find him, I’m going to give him such a roasting - after he’s put everything right!

By the time Michael gave up looking for Monkey, Mum and Dad had agreed, sort of, a plan of action.

Mum used her mobile phone - another hole in the ozone layer - to call a taxi.

“We’re going to the accident department at the hospital,” said Dad. “I don’t trust doctors but we can’t think of anything else.”

“You’d better come, Michael,” said Mum. “We can’t leave you on your own.”

“I suppose so,” Michael reluctantly agreed, not mentioning that Dad often left him on his own. He needed desperately to find Monkey, or have Monkey find him, and he did not know if this was

possible away from home. Still, it would be interesting at the hospital. “Will they cut you apart?” he asked.

“For heaven’s sake!” Mum rolled her eyes. “We’re not Siamese twins! There’s nothing to cut, we’re not joined that way at all.”

“We just can’t get apart,” said Dad, miserably. “It’s a nightmare.”

“He doesn’t even use a deodorant!” exclaimed Mum.

“She isn’t even a vegetarian!” exclaimed Dad.

“The taxi’s here!” Michael interrupted. So much for getting his parents together! They were making the same mistakes all over again.

The taxi driver stared as the three-legged person struggled into his vehicle. “Going to a carnival?”

Dad snorted and Mum groaned.

“They’re doing it for a bet,” said Michael.

The journey to the hospital took place in stony silence. At the reception desk, the woman on duty asked what was the problem.

“He is!” said Mum.

“She is!” said Dad.

“We don’t do marriage counselling,” said the woman with a tart twist of her red lips. “We deal with things like knife wounds and drug overdoses. Have you been to Relate?”

With his parents speechless with rage, Michael tried to explain.

“Hold Dad’s arm,” he told the receptionist. She hesitated. “Go on. Hold it tight.”

The woman’s expression clearly said that she did as he asked only to get rid of these trouble makers as quickly as possible.

Michael grabbed Mum's arm and pulled as hard as he could. Both parents were stretched out between himself and the receptionist.

"See! They're stuck! We've got to get them unstuck before they need to go to the bathroom!"

Mum yelled that they were dislocating her executive shoulders. Dad struggled to get away, calling the receptionist yet another mad woman. She let go. Michael and his parents flew across the vestibule and collapsed in a heap on the floor, smallest person at the bottom. That was Michael.

"Security! We need security over here!" the receptionist shrieked. Then she saw a reassuring figure in a white coat. "Doctor, thank goodness you've come!"

"What seems to be the problem?"

Scrambling out from under his dysfunctional family, Michael was amazed to see Monkey with a stethoscope round his neck and hair slicked back to match his shiny black shoes.

Michael dragged him away from the reception desk. "They aren't supposed to see you!" he hissed.

"They don't," said Monkey smugly, "...though their lives would be richer if they did. What they see is that white knight in the lab coat, curer of all ills, their trusted physician."

Michael seized on one important word. "Can you really cure them?"

Monkey sighed and pulled a thermometer out of his top pocket. It had a gold tip.

“You said you wanted them to stick together and I gave you exactly what you asked. You want them separated, now? Make up your mind!”

Michael had to think fast. Mum and Dad were struggling to their feet. The receptionist was waving to a uniformed security guard.

“Yes!” he said.

“It shall be as you wish, Master.”

Monkey twirled the thermometer in his finger tips and started the most horrible thing of all.

