

also by Nicky Singer

for adults

To Still the Child
To Have and to Hold
What She Wanted
My Mother's Daughter

for young people

Feather Boy
Doll
The Innocent's Story
GemX

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The Tiny Book of Time
(with Kim Pickin)
Little Book Of The Millennium
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drama

Feather Boy: The Musical
(with Peter Tabern, Debbie Wiseman and Don Black)

KNIGHT CREW

NICKY SINGER

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For Lee, who first showed me that a lost soul isn't.

Is every soul born good?
That's what Myrtle would have said. She'd have said we all tumble onto this earth brimful of possibilities. I think maybe we all arrive empty and life, oh so slowly, fills us up with love – or hate.

I've had plenty of time to think about this; the eternity of time, in fact, that I've sat here – beyond the mirrors. There are events which remain quite clear in my memory and other, darker things. But I need to tell this story and I have to start somewhere, so I will begin with the Mill.

The Mill was on a tidal island, just beyond the canal, and it had been derelict for years. It stood next to an equally derelict brewery which nevertheless still had two of those strange conical towers with the odd-angled chimney on top. Sometimes, when it was dusk and the mist was low, the frontage of the Mill and the brewery seemed to loom out of the water like some turreted castle from a bygone age. Or that's how it seemed to me. Maybe that was my mother in me, hoping, against all the odds, for the heroic. Perhaps it was Myrtle's influence. You can change things, Myrtle said, just by looking. And for a while I believed her. I still want to believe her, but it's not everyone that can live in a burnt-out car, or see a future in a discarded pot-noodle container.

This is a long story and a bitter one, but I will try to tell

it as honestly as I can, because I've come to understand that what happened wasn't all my brother's fault. No, it wasn't Mordec's fault. Nor Lance's for that matter, nor Quin's. I was as much to blame as any of them. More so, probably, because, in the end, it was my hand on the knife.

I was one day short of thirteen when I came to the Mill. Sometimes I wonder how things would have been if I'd never gone? It wouldn't have stopped the killing, of course, but maybe fewer of the people I loved would have died. Still, what happened happened and nothing can change that now. Besides, if I hadn't gone to the Mill that day, I would never have met Quin, and there are times, even now, with the water closed over me, I think that I'd go through it all again, just to be near her.

It was Mordec, four years my senior, who gave me my instructions: I was to arrive in the afternoon; I was to meet OG. When I got to know OG, he told me that he'd got his name from a book about American gangsters, but I never saw OG with a book and I'm not at all sure he could read. But OG stood for Original Gangsta and in the Mill, that meant God. Even – at that time – to Mordec.

It was spring, I remember, the sort of time (Myrtle would have said) where you can feel life crouching just beneath the surface of things. Everything I ever learnt about nature, I learnt from Myrtle. Before I met her I'd never even seen a snowdrop. No, that cannot be true, because there were always snowdrops by the canal in February, shy blooms pushing through at the edge of the concrete. I just didn't see them because I wasn't looking. 'Just as there's a difference between listening and hearing,' Myrtle said, 'there is a difference between looking and seeing.'

I took the long route out of the estates, doubling back on myself before finally going through the graffitied underpass

behind Tesco which leads to the track where the lights stop and the canal path begins. The air was chill and I should have been readying myself for whatever lay ahead. But I wasn't. Partly because I'd stopped being afraid – which is always a mistake – and partly because I was thinking about my mother. Not the crazy one who seemed to have exploded into our recent lives but the soft, quiet, long-ago one who used to read to me. Yes, my crazy mother used to read to me. Stories about castles and crescent moons, wise women talking in riddles and warriors battling bull-headed monsters. I remember the pictures, bright and frightening and magical. Fairy tales and myths that seemed too big for our apartment and that's what Keifer felt too. Keifer was my father – or the man I knew then as my father – that's part of this story too. Keifer didn't care for books; they reminded him, I think, that my mother's education had gone on longer than his and he wasn't to be humiliated by some *dum white woman* fallen on hard times. It wasn't long before my mother moved from reading me stories to whispering them to me in the dark, as though they were secret, dangerous things, which perhaps they were. At first she remembered well, and the pictures in my head were just as bold and colourful as the ones in the books.

'Hold these stories,' she'd whisper, as if giving me something precious, 'here in your heart.' But I couldn't hold them and nor, after a while, could she. Things became blurred, the moons clouded over, the bull-headed monster triumphed over the warrior, the wise woman's mouth was stopped with sand. No, it can't have been like that, that's just how I see it now, from beyond the mirrors. But there was a falling away, an increase of silence. If I'd thought about it at the time, which I didn't, I would have just supposed that I was growing up, growing away from her. Yet, at the edge of my knowing, something must still have remained. Because, deep

down, I still looked for the outline of a castle. Hoped for a hero. Perhaps that's why I went so meekly to the Mill that day, in case OG was that hero.

To get to the island you had to go over a metal bridge. It was a fixed structure, high enough not to have to lift for passing canal traffic, but I soon came to think of it as a draw-bridge – designed to keep strangers out and, perhaps, to keep us in. That day, I was the stranger. It was a mistless afternoon so I could see the buildings clearly, how they both seemed to rear straight out of the water itself, rising up five or six grey storeys towards the sky. On about level four of the Mill end, huge iron bars protruded from the building. I imagine they were to mount winches, to pull grain perhaps from the boats below. But by then, of course, they were rusted and wind-chafened and they looked like abandoned gallows. There were doors at the same level, right in the centre of the walls and, when he wasn't enthroned on the ground-floor mill wheel, OG sometimes positioned himself on the open door ledge, his feet hanging high over the river, staring at those gallows. And that's where I sat too, many years later. In fact I sat there the night I sent Quin to the slaughter.

As the Crew became both more organised and more afraid, we'd post lookouts, one on the bridge and one in the disused clock-tower of the brewery, but that day there was just Duane sitting on the river bank whittling a stick with a penknife. A penknife! Duane was about my brother Mordec's age, but leaner and darker with a kind of twitching quickness to him. He was also, as I was to learn that afternoon, very much stronger than he looked.

I was in no hurry, so I idled on the bank too, trying to guess from the spacing of the Mill windows what the layout inside the building might be. After a few minutes Duane made his way round the back and went through the kicked-in door.

I could hear the noise of voices, but only distantly, and followed him in. It was dark inside and smelt of damp wood and a kind of sweet muskiness. There was also the tang of cigarette smoke. I had been invited to come to the Mill, ordered even, so I should have stood up and announced myself. But I didn't. Perhaps I thought I'd just take a look and, if I didn't like what I saw, leave as quietly as I'd come. I was clearly nowhere near to understanding how much Mordec's life had spilled into mine and how, once you'd set foot in the Mill, nothing could ever be the same again.

I waited till my eyes got accustomed to the interior light and then picked my way across the dank floorboards, taking care to avoid the sudden soft-rot holes, the coils of rope and the empty beer cans. I made some noise of course, but there were noises in the building anyway: the slap-slap of water against the old mill machinery, the wind creak of the rusted gallows, the beating wings of some trapped bird, and the rich and dangerous sound of OG's laughter. I crept closer. The whole of the ground floor of the Mill seemed to be one giant room, divided by apparently random ladders, walls and machine wheels, so there were plenty of places of concealment.

It was not difficult to find the centre of operations. It was lit by candles, one or two of them stubbed into each tread of the giant Mill wheel where OG sat on high. The wheel must have had a span of twenty feet, but half of it was sunk beneath the level of the floor so OG's throne was the semi-circular top half. The zigzag treads where the candles burned were decades thick in bird shit. Using these as a sort of stairs, OG had lashed the seat and back of an office chair to the apex and there he sat, in flickering glory, looking down on the assembled company. He was big, OG, not tall, not fat, but hugely solid and even in winter he wore cut-off shirts (always baby blue) so you could see exactly how big the

muscles in his arms were. And just as he was bigger than everyone else OG was also blacker. Many of us were mixed-race. Not OG. He was solidly, monumentally black, and he oiled his skin till it shone. I watched the cigarette smoke curl in and out of his very white teeth.

Everyone else sat at the foot of the wheel, either on up-turned beer crates or on pallets stolen from the yard that backed onto the canal. I don't know how many people were there that day, it was usually somewhere between fifteen and twenty and always more boys than girls. Quin was absent, so she never saw what happened next. If she had been in the Mill, I like to think she would not have joined in – but you never knew with Quin. Elayne was there and Tanisha, Duane of course, his twin brother Garvey, as well as Pels, Borz and Mordec.

They were talking about the Saxon Road Mob.

'Dey've got the soldjas,' Mordec was saying.

OG blew out a very slow, very deliberate smoke ring. 'But dey aint got no brains.'

Elayne broke off from drinking lager from a yogurt pot and giggled delightedly. Elayne was one of the yungas, a tiny spitfire kid, mixed-race with mad, triumphal hair plaited flat with myriads of girlie ribbons. That was the first day I ever set eyes on her and I remember thinking even then how strange the ribbons looked against her boyish face. 'The Knight Crew got brains,' she said. 'The Knight Crew got brains – and heart!'

Later I would find out just how much heart that girl had.

Despite the dark and the smoke, the word 'knight' didn't conjure the road I'd known from childhood, a decrepit, garbage-strewn place where every second building was boarded up; no, I suddenly saw (as if my long-ago mother had breathed through the window) a host of knights on horses,

lances in hand and, at the head of them, king of them all – me. My vision was short-lived. As I shifted my weight from my right to my left foot, the board beneath me creaked.

'Who's dat?' growled Mordec.

They were quick then, Duane, Garvey and Mordec. In one fluid move, as if they were just different limbs of the same animal, the three of them hauled me into the light.

'Oh,' said OG. 'A snake.'

I waited for Mordec to speak, for him to say something like, 'Oh dat's no snake, dat's my lil brother, Art. I told him to come.' Only he never said a word. And somehow, caught in OG's gaze, I said nothing either.

'A snake in de grass,' said OG lightly.

Elayne giggled again, but it was nervous laughter now. I could smell the fear in it – and the anticipation.

OG took a last, sharp suck on his cigarette and stubbed it out in some bird shit. A float of ash extinguished against the mill wheel.

'A Saxon boi,' OG added, making what I later understood to be some sort of signal with his right hand, which is when my brother kicked me in the back of the knees. Hard.

Taken unawares, I crumpled to the ground so I didn't see whether it was Mordec or Duane who pulled me straight to my feet again. But I know it was Garvey who threw the first punch, a blow to the head that sent me spinning down once more, only to be jerked up again by the collar. The next punch was to my stomach, I doubled in on myself but still managed to catch a side-blow to the chest as I fell. Hands pulled me up again. And again. As many times as the blows fell, and it wasn't just Garvey and Duane and Mordec, others had risen from the pallets and stood over me, waiting their turns.

I was dizzy and disorientated and there was blood in my

mouth from the gape in my lower lip but I knew I mustn't go down another time, because then they would kick me properly. I don't know how I knew that, or why I suddenly found the strength to lash out myself. Maybe it was my brother's face, looming over me, grinning. Maybe it was just survival instinct, or plain anger or a straightforward sense of injustice, but I hit them, flailing about like a madman, grinding and gnashing and, mainly, missing.

At once their blows ceased. They all stood back, some resumed their seats, others just moved away. The breathing around me changed, I heard the click of cigarette lighters and another, more relaxed, laugh from Elayne. I stopped flailing.

OG looked down at me from his seat on the Mill wheel. My blurry vision made out two of him, his dual faces set in parallel expressions of total languor.

'You're alryt, Art,' he said.

He'd known who I was all along. That shocked me, but not as much as the tiny accompanying incline of his head which, I later discovered, meant that I was bound – life and death – to the Knight Crew.

2

Looking back, I can see patterns in everything that happened, but at the time events seemed to fall out as randomly as I fell over Myrtle's feet that evening. I was still bruised from my beating, but I didn't feel bruised. Perhaps the adrenalin had fired me to a place beyond pain, perhaps it was just the cider I drank that night. I didn't like the taste of the cider but I kept downing it because Mordec kept pouring it, pot-noodle container after pot-noodle container of it. After a time I could no longer smell the tang of curry which had initially clung to the plastic innards of the cup, or recall the number of refills.

So I wasn't exactly watching my footing as I slewed over the bridge from the island back along the mainland canal bank. Before the arrival of the burnt-out car (I'll tell that story later) Myrtle shifted her abode fairly frequently. That night she'd set up camp beneath a concrete arch notched into a brick wall. A flattened and extremely rusty oil-drum was all that lay between her and the damp February ground, and she was surrounded by other bits of neatly arranged urban swill: four polystyrene cups, a Lucozade bottle, a cement-encrusted industrial tape-dispenser, a single bright pink plastic glove, a hosepipe, half an office chair, a Value bacon packet (empty) and some rubble. Myrtle was a baglady without a bag. She never carried stuff about, it just

seemed to move with her, as though she and the rubbish were umbilically connected.

I later learnt that Myrtle had been born in Jamaica but, if you looked at her face, you wouldn't have been able to tell if she'd been a black baby or a white one. She just looked weather-beaten, her face the colour and texture of those mud flats with cracks in that you see in news reports of parched continents where famine sets in. How fat or thin Myrtle was, was difficult to gauge. She wore voluminous, earth-coloured clothes which flowed rather than settled about her, so in movement she seemed to be a cloud of grey or green or brown. Her hair was knotted and wild and lay like ropes of ivy about her shoulders. I hear myself getting extravagant in describing her, as though she didn't really belong in this world, or she was a person from one of my mother's stories. But perhaps I'm really just talking about myself here, because Myrtle rekindled in me that feeling I'd had when I was a child that I didn't belong either, at least not in the place God seemed to have allotted me.

Sometimes Myrtle sat writing spidery notes with a pencil in a battered leather-bound book. There were so many notes in this book that she had to use the margins, or write between lines that already existed, or even write over what she had written before. If you saw inside the book (which was only ever for a moment, she didn't like you to look) it seemed like a place of spells. But now that I have read every word in that book, I shall name it for what it was: The Book of the Future. Sometimes the book was hidden and Myrtle just sat, apparently staring at nothing in particular for hours on end. Sometimes she lay, as she did that night, invisibly, as though she was just part of the landscape.

It was still not easy to trip over her because she was guarded by Shaman, her lean and muscular black mon-

grel dog. Shaman often lay outstretched, as though he was deeply, profoundly, impossibly asleep, but one tread near Myrtle and his head would lift and his eyes would be on you. Shaman's eyes were black and had the dense, reflective quality of polished marble. It was discomfiting to be caught in his gaze for too long, you couldn't help but stare back into his eyes and yet, at the same time, you felt if you looked for a moment longer you might see things no human being should see. All this was clear to me long before what happened to Myrtle's soul – but I'm getting ahead of myself.

That night – as on all nights – Shaman must have raised his head and given his low, warning growl. But if he did, I never saw or heard him. The drink had obviously anaesthetised more than my bruises and I just blundered along the towpath until I tripped over Myrtle's extended left leg. I wasn't a moment in the dirt before Shaman was on me, the hot slather of his teeth bare against my face.

'Tch, Shaman, tch.'

They were such small, soft sounds, Myrtle rustling upright and whispering the dog's name, clicking her tongue against the roof of her mouth. At once Shaman withdrew, removing his jaw from mine and sitting down quietly as if nothing at all had happened. The click was an easy enough sound to make but no one but Myrtle could control the dog with it – except me. The minute Shaman became mine, I could do it too.

Mordec, who was close behind me that night, kicked neither the dog nor the old woman, which showed a respect which was clear to me even through the alcoholic haze. However, as I struggled to my feet, my brother did allow himself a shout:

'You best move out the way!'