The Black Flamingo
for George
I am the black flamingo.
The black flamingo is me trying to find myself.
This book is a fairy tale in which I am the prince and the princess. I am the king and the queen. I am my own wicked witch and fairy godmother.

This book is a fairy tale in which I’m cursed and blessed by others.

But, finally, I am the fairy finding my own magic.
When female flamingos lay eggs in the zoo, the eggs are taken from them and put into incubators. The zoo keepers give dummy eggs to flamingo couples to nest with, while the zookeepers watch their behaviour to figure out who will make the best flamingo parents. When the incubated eggs are almost ready to hatch they decide which couple will be given normal eggs and which will be left with those that never contained precious life.
I often feel like a bad egg that was not meant to be, like a dummy egg cracked open, an impossible thing, but somehow living and thriving, defying the zookeepers’ intentions, an experiment they watch and patiently wait to see what might become of me, to see how I survive, without complete
love.
I was born in London,
two months before the end of the world,
on 31st October 1999.

Mummy tells me,
‘When we got closer to the millennium,
people thought planes would fall from the sky
and clocks in computers would go back
one hundred years. But time cannot go back.
We can only move forward.’

I am a baby, just hatched.
My only feathers are my tiny eyelashes.

Over my gurgling, I don’t hear my father
telling Mummy, ‘I’m too young to be a dad.’

Mummy tells me all this, when I’m old enough.

How six days before the millennium,
she burnt their Christmas dinner
and he shouted, ‘You’re useless!’
before throwing his plate down, turkey
stuck to the kitchen floor, and I cried,
startled by early indoor fireworks.

That was the end for them. The beginning
for Mummy and me.
BARBIES AND BELONGING
Today is my sixth birthday and I’m hiding in my room.

Last year, for my birthday, Uncle B bought me this Casio watch. Look – it lights up and is water-resistant. That means I can wear it in the bath.

Last night, when Mummy was making dinner, I snuck into her bedroom and looked inside her wardrobe, parting clothes to see the back where she always hides my presents.

I picked up the parcel, feeling the shape of the long, thin box, inside the silver wrapping paper.

It was definitely the right shape to be

a Barbie!
I carefully peeled
the Sellotape at one end
and peeked underneath
the wrapping paper
at the top of the box,
to see a green logo:

*Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles.*

I told Mummy two months ago,
‘If you only get me one present
this year, *please* can it be

**a Barbie?**
'Michael Brown,'
calls Mummy, ‘where are you?
Come down and open your birthday present.
Your friends will be arriving soon!’

I stand at the top of our stairs
and shout down,
‘Is it a Barbie?’

Mummy comes to the bottom step,
smiling gently.
‘No, Michael, I didn’t think you were
serious. But I got you something
that I know you’ll love.’

I watch a tear
land on the wooden floor
between my Turtles slippers –

a gift from Aunty B last Christmas.

Mummy comes upstairs, embracing me
in a soft, warm, Mum-smelling hug.
‘Oh, darling, I can get you a Barbie
for Christmas, if you still want one.’

Christmas is ages away.

I’m about to cry again when the doorbell rings.
Emily, Amber, Laura, Toby and Jamal have all come round for birthday tea with their mums.

Callum is the last one to arrive. His dad brings him but doesn’t stay like the mums do.

Callum and Emily don’t like each other.

Callum lives in a flat with his dad. They play video games together and eat takeaways for dinner and sometimes Callum gets to stay up and watch TV all night, if his dad is out; it must be so much fun.

Callum is mixed the same way as me, a black dad and white mummy, but he doesn’t live with his mummy and I don’t live with my dad.

Mummy has made stuffed vine leaves, stuffed peppers and Greek salad. There’s olives, carrot sticks, pitta bread and hummus, which I love, and taramasalata, which I think tastes yucky but I love the word.
I teach my friends how to pronounce it:
Ta-ra-ma-sa-la-ta. Tarama-salata.

‘What is it?’ asks Callum. ‘And why is it pink?’

‘It’s fish eggs,’ I say, proudly, ‘and my mummy told me it’s dyed pink. I think it looks pretty.’

‘But it tastes disgusting!’ Callum says, spitting it back out onto his plate. ‘I hate pink.’ He scowls, looking straight at Emily.

Later, I blow out six candles on my Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles birthday cake and make my wish for a Barbie.
Emily’s playroom is a bubble-gum-pink mess. She has 42 Barbies; I know because I counted. She also has four ponies and six Jeeps for them. Goddess of Beauty looks brand new.

When Emily shows her to me she says, ‘She’s meant to be the Greek goddess, Aphrodite, but she looks like your mummy.’

Emily has lots of toys but this doll captivates me, her flowing white and blue gown and her gold headband.

I pick up some of her other Barbies with their missing arms, legs, heads. ‘Why don’t they have full bodies?’

‘Their heads came off when I was brushing their hair,’ Emily says, but I’ve never seen Emily use a Barbie hairbrush. The one for Goddess is still in its packet. I take it out and gently brush her hair.

‘I’m going to ask my mummy to get me this one for Christmas,’ I tell Emily, proudly.
Christmas morning,
I race downstairs to find
a present under the tree.

No wrapping paper, just
a pink bow on the box.
Mummy has bought me
a Barbie!

But she got it wrong.
It’s not the Goddess
but I hug her anyway.
‘Thank you, Mummy.’

This Barbie doesn’t have long, dark, curly hair
or dark eyes like Mummy’s,
like the Goddess.

I decide to name my doll Phoebe.

Phoebe looks like Emily.

I don’t cut Phoebe’s long, blonde hair
or pull off her head or any of her limbs
like Emily would.
Phoebe is not
the Barbie I wanted
but she’s the Barbie I’ve got,
and I decide to take care of her.
Uncle B arrives in his black BMW to pick me up to take me to Granny B’s for Christmas dinner with my dad and the rest of the Brown family.

As I leave, Mummy grabs my shoulders and turns me around, smiles and puts out her hand. ‘Michael, please can you leave Phoebe here? I need her to help me clean up.’
It’s only a ten-minute drive in Uncle’s BMW but it feels alien.
I wish Mummy was coming with us.

I’m happy when we arrive, because the family cheer and I think it must be for me.
Aunty B yells, ‘Finally, we can eat!’

‘First, we muss pray,’ says Granny B.
Everyone bows their head.
‘Faada God, we tank you dat Mikey can be wid us dis special day, we pray dat he is neva a stranger to you or to dis family. In Jesus’s name, amen.’

Everyone at the table repeats, ‘Amen.’

My dad comes down from his bedroom.

There is a spare seat and place laid out for him next to me. He silently piles his food up and takes his plate back upstairs.

‘Hey, Mikey – that’s great!’ Uncle B says, looking around the table at everyone else.
‘That’s two Christmas crackers we can pull together!’
Boxing Day.
Emily and I are playing
in my room.

She’s brought Goddess Barbie with her,
who has a shaved head now.

Emily sees Phoebe and asks,
‘Couldn’t your mummy afford
the one you wanted?’

I feel myself getting hot.
I reach under my bed for my
black Action Man toy from Uncle B,
kept in his box, which he says is vintage.

On the front is Action Man’s name,
‘TOM STONE’, and in his picture,
holding a big gun, he wears a green hat
and camouflage outfit.

I proudly say, ‘Look what my uncle got me.
Shall we get him out?’
Emily closes her eyes to make him disappear
and says, ‘He looks scary.’
A few days later, we’re in Emily’s playroom. Emily pulls out a brand new Barbie from her fairy backpack. Versace Barbie.

‘Versace is a fashion designer,’ Emily says. ‘Mummy has two dresses by Versace. Daddy bought them for her.’ She pauses. ‘Michael, do you have a daddy, too?’

‘No, my mummy buys her own dresses.’
For my seventh birthday, instead of another Barbie, I tell Mummy I want to change my last name. I tell her I want to match her. I want to change my surname from his Brown to her Angeli.

Mum once told me, ‘Angeli means “angel” or “messenger”.’

She kneels down and puts her hands on my shoulders, asks, ‘Are you sure? You’re very young to make these kinds of decisions. What about Granny Brown and Aunty Brown and Uncle Brown? They all do such nice things for you.’

I reply, ‘They do, but you do the most nice things.’

She smiles and hugs me tightly.

I hug her back; I count ten seconds in my head and then drop my arms to my side but Mummy doesn’t let go for another nine seconds. Nineteen seconds is the longest hug I have ever had.
On my seventh birthday, after my presents, Mummy hands me a piece of paper: ‘Change of Name Deed, Michael Angeli’.

But I read: ‘Name Dead’ and it makes sense.

I don’t want his name dragging behind me like a dead dog on a lead,

like toilet roll on the sole of my new Kickers boots,

like a shedded snakeskin,

like a second shadow,

like the thick vapour trails of the Red Arrows, diesel mixed with coloured dye,

making a mark in the sky. I don’t need a plane because with my new name I can really fly.
That night
I have a dream
in which Mummy is killed
when a British Airways Boeing 747 crashes into our house.
The left wing cuts through her bedroom window but I survive.

Would I live with my Uncle B,
Aunty B or Granny B?
Or would I become an orphan?
Mum’s gone out and her new boyfriend, Trevor, lets me watch a horror movie called *Nightmare on Elm Street*.

I am fascinated by the man in the red and green striped jumper who visits people in their dreams and kills them. At school I describe what he does and the glove he wears. Knives for fingers. I swipe at the air and children run away screaming, except Callum, who just laughs and then says, ‘Go on, then, rip my guts out!’ Smiling and holding open his navy blue blazer.

The next day, the head teacher calls Mum after complaints from the other parents.

‘Children are having nightmares,’ she tells me when she sends me to bed early, but I sit at the top of the stairs.

‘What were you thinking?’ Mum shouts at Trevor. ‘He’s only seven years old.’

Trevor speaks quietly and I can’t make out his reply.
‘You really don’t think you’ve done anything wrong, do you?’ Mum laughs. ‘He’s not your son. It’s not for you to decide what he’s old enough for.’

‘So why did you leave him with me?’ Trevor shouts.

‘Because you said you wanted to bond with him. I didn’t think you meant by showing him Freddy-effing-Krueger.’

I hate hearing her shout. It makes my tummy feel funny. But mostly I feel bad for getting Trevor into trouble.
I am eight
when my sister,
Anna,
is placed
into the nest of her
white-wicker Moses basket,
newly hatched,
a chick
for me to help
Mum
raise
for the whole of the summer holiday.

Crying
for her thumb to suck
when I tuck her hands
under her
tiny torso.

Anna is a living doll.
A brown-skinned Barbie.
Mum lets me pick out
her outfit each morning.
When school starts again,
I count down the hours until
I can run home and see Anna.

My favourite thing is to sing to Anna:

‘Itsy Bitsy Spider’,
‘Baa, Baa, Black Sheep’,
‘Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star’ and other nursery rhymes.

Mum asks if I want to have singing lessons.

Trevor takes me in his cool silver Audi every Saturday morning.
Anna has a different dad
but we have the same surname.

Mum decided
and Trevor didn’t argue.

In the dining hall at school,
I explain to Callum: ‘Trevor is Anna’s dad
but not mine.’

Callum asks, ‘If you have different dads,
isn’t she your half-sister?’

When I get home,
I ask, ‘Mummy, are we only half?’
'Don’t let anyone tell you that you are half anything. You and Anna are simply brother and sister.

Don’t let anyone tell you that she’s your half-sister.

Don’t let anyone tell you that you are half-black and half-white. Half-Cypriot and half-Jamaican.

You are a full human being. It’s never as simple as being half and half.

You are born in Britain. You need to make space for what British means.

What it means to you to be British, Cypriot and Jamaican, too; but it’s only for you to decide.’