I disappeared on the night before my twelfth birthday. July 28 1988. Only now can I at last tell the whole extraordinary story, the true story. Kensuke made me promise that I would say nothing, nothing at all, until at least ten years had passed. It was almost the last thing he said to me. I promised, and because of that I have had to live out a lie. I could let sleeping lies sleep on, but more than ten years have passed now. I have done school, done college, and had time to think. I owe it to my family and to my friends, all of whom I have deceived for so long, to tell the truth about my long disappearance, about how I lived to come back from the dead.

But there is another reason for speaking out now, a far, far better reason. Kensuke was a great man, a good man, and he was my friend. I want the world to know him as I knew him.

Until I was nearly eleven, until the letter came, life was just normal. There were the four of us in the house: my mother, my father, me and Stella – Stella Artois, that is, my-on-ear up and one-ear-down black and white sheepdog, who always seemed to know what was about to happen before it did. But even she could not have foreseen how that letter was going to change our lives forever.

Thinking back, there was regularity, sameness about my early childhood. It was down the road each morning to ‘the monkey school’. My father called it that because he said the children gibbered and screeched and hung upside down on the climbing-frame in the playground. And, anyway, I was always ‘monkey face’ to him – when he was in a playful mood, that is, which he often was. The school was really called St Joseph’s, and I was happy there, for most of the time, anyway. After school every day, whatever the weather, I’d be off down to the recreation ground for football with Eddie Dodds, my best friend in all the world, and Matt and Bobby and the others. It was muddy down there. Cross the ball and it would just land and stick. We had our own tem, the Mudlarks we called ourselves, and we were good, too. Visiting teams seemed to expect the ball to bounce for some reason, and by the time they realised it didn’t, we were often two or three goals up. We weren’t so good away from home.

Every weekend I did a paper found from Mr Patel’s shop on the corner. I was saving up for a mountain bike. I wanted to go mountain biking up on the moors with Eddie. The trouble was, I would keep spending what I’d saved. I’m still the same that way.