

Six

At home, there was a hole in the floor where Ernie's toilet had been. It was filled with new cement. The plywood screen had gone. Ernie's old gas fire had been taken away and there was just a square black gap behind the hearth. The floor was soaking wet and it stank of disinfectant. Dad was filthy and wet and grinning. He took me into the wilderness. The toilet was standing there in the middle of the thistles and weeds.

'Thought it'd make a nice garden seat for us,' he said.

The gas fire and the plywood were down by the garage door, but they hadn't been taken inside.

He looked at me and winked. 'Come and see what I found.'

He led me down to the garage door.

'Hold your nose,' he said. He bent down and started to open a newspaper parcel. 'Ready?'

It was a parcel of birds. Four of them.

'Found them behind the fire,' he said. 'Must have got stuck in the chimney and couldn't get out again.'

You could make out that three of them were pigeons because of their grey and white feathers. The last one was

pigeon-shaped, but it was all black.

'This was the last one I found,' he said. 'It was under a heap of soot and dust that had fallen down the chimney.'

'Is it a pigeon as well?'

'Yes. Been there a long, long time, that's all.'

He took my hand.

'Touch it,' he said. 'Feel it. Go on, it's OK.'

I let him hold my fingers against the bird. It was hard as stone. Even the feathers were hard as stone.

'Been there so long it's nearly a fossil,' he said.

'It's hard as stone,' I said.

'That's right. Hard as stone.'

I went and washed my hands in the kitchen.

'Today was OK?' he said.

'Yes. Leakey and Coot said they might come over on Sunday.'

'That's good. You managed the buses OK, then?'

I nodded.

'Might be able to drive you there next week,' he said.

'Once we're sorted out a bit.'

'It's OK,' I said. 'Mrs Dando asked about the baby.'

'You told her she was fine?'

'Yes,' I said.

'Good. Get some Coke and a sandwich or something. I'll make tea when the others come home.'

Then he went upstairs to have a bath.

I looked down through the wilderness. I waited for ages, listening to Dad's bathwater banging its way through the

pipes. I got my torch off the kitchen shelf. My hands were trembling. I went out, past Ernie's toilet, the fire, and the dead pigeons. I stood at the garage door and switched the torch on. I took a deep breath and tiptoed inside. I felt the cobwebs and the dust and I imagined that the whole thing would collapse. I heard things scuttling and scratching. I edged past the rubbish and the ancient furniture and my heart was thudding and thundering. I told myself I was stupid. I told myself I'd been dreaming. I told myself I wouldn't see him again.

But I did.

Seven

I leaned over the tea chests and shone the torch and there he was. He hadn't moved. He opened his eyes and closed them again.

'You again,' he said, in his cracked, squeaky voice.

'What you doing there?' I whispered.

He sighed, like he was sick to death of everything.

'Nothing,' he squeaked. 'Nothing, nothing, and nothing.'

I watched a spider scrambling across his face. He caught it in his fingers and popped it in his mouth.

'They're coming to clear the rubbish out,' I said. 'And the whole place could collapse.'

He sighed again.

'Got an aspirin?'

'An aspirin?'

'Never mind.'

His face was pale as dry plaster. His black suit hung like a sack on his thin bones.

My heart pounded. The dust was clogging my nostrils and throat. I chewed my lips and watched him.

'You're not Ernie Myers, are you?' I said.

'That old git? Coughing his guts and spewing everywhere?'

'Sorry,' I whispered.

'What do you want?' he said.

'Nothing.'

'You got an aspirin?'

'No.'

'Thanks very much.'

'What will you do?' I said. 'They'll clear the place out. It'll all collapse. What'll...'

'Nothing. Go away.'

I listened for noises from outside, for them calling me.

'You could come inside,' I said.

He laughed, but he didn't smile.

'Go away,' he whispered.

He picked a bluebottle from the front of his suit and popped it in his mouth.

'Is there something I could bring you?' I said.

'An aspirin,' he squeaked.

'Something you'd like to eat?' I said.

'27 and 53.'

'What?'

'Nothing. Go away. Go away.'

I backed away, out into the light. I brushed the dust and bluebottles and cobwebs off. I looked up and saw Dad through the frosted glass of the bathroom window. I could just hear him singing 'The Black Hills of Dakota'.

'Are you the new boy here?' said somebody.

I turned round. There was a girl's head sticking up over the top of the wall into the back lane.

'Are you the new boy?' she repeated.

'Yes.'

'I'm Mina.'

I stared at her.

'Well?' she said.

'What?'

She clicked her tongue and shook her head and said in a bored-sounding singsong voice, 'I'm Mina. You're ...'

'Michael,' I said.

'Good.'

Then she jumped back and I heard her land in the lane.

'Nice to meet you, Michael,' she said through the wall, then she ran away.