

lovely chaffinches. And look, this is the goldfinch that visited last Thursday.'

She showed me the goldfinch, the greens and reds and bright yellows in it.

'My favourite,' she said.

She slapped the book shut.

'Do you like birds?' she said, and she looked at me as if something I'd done had made her cross.

'I don't know,' I said.

'Typical. Do you like drawing?'

'Sometimes.'

'Drawing makes you look at the world more closely. It helps you to see what you're looking at more clearly. Did you know that?'

I said nothing.

'What colour's a blackbird?' she said.

'Black.'

'Typical!'

She swung round into the garden.

'I'm going in,' she said. 'I look forward to seeing you again. I'd also like to see your baby sister if that can be arranged.'

Ten

I tried to stay awake that night, but it was hopeless. I was dreaming straight away. I dreamed that the baby was in the blackbird's nest in Mina's garden. The blackbird fed her on flies and spiders and she got stronger and stronger until she flew out of the tree and over the rooftops and on to the garage roof. Mina sat on the back wall drawing her. When I went closer, Mina whispered, 'Stay away. You're danger!'

Then the baby was bawling in the room next door and I woke up.

I lay listening to Mum cooing and comforting and the baby squeaking and hissing. The birds were singing outside. When the feed was over and I was sure everyone was asleep, I crept out of bed, got my torch, pulled some clothes on and tiptoed past their room. I took a jar of aspirin from the bathroom. I went downstairs, opened the back door and tiptoed into the wilderness.

The takeaway trays were down under newspapers and a heap of weeds. They'd tilted over and lots of the sauce had run out. When I looked inside the char sui was all gluey and red

and cold. I dropped the soggy spring rolls into the same tray and went down towards the garage.

'You must be stupid,' I told myself. 'You must be going round the stupid bend.'

I looked up at the blackbird on the garage roof and saw how it opened its yellow beak so wide as it sang. I saw the sheens of gold and blue where the early light shone on its black.

I switched on the torch, took a deep breath, and stepped inside.

The scuttling and scratching started. Something skittered across my foot and I nearly dropped the food. I came to the tea chests and shone the torch behind.

'You again?' he squeaked. 'Thought you'd gone away.'

'I've brought something,' I said.

He opened his eyes and looked at me.

'Aspirin,' I said. 'And number 27 and 53. Spring rolls and pork char sui.'

He laughed but he didn't smile.

'Not as stupid as you look,' he squeaked.

I held the takeaway tray across the tea chests towards him. He took it in his hand but he started to wobble and I had to take it back again.

'No strength,' he squeaked.

I squeezed between the tea chests. I squatted down beside him. I held the tray up and shone the torch on to the food. He dipped his finger in. He licked his finger and groaned. He stuck his finger in again and hooked a long slimy string of beansprouts and sauce. He stuck his tongue out and licked. He

slurped out pieces of pork and mushrooms. He shoved the spring rolls into his mouth. The red sauce trickled down from his lips, down over his chin on to his black jacket.

'Aaaah,' he said. 'Ooooooh.'

He sounded like he was loving it, or he was in pain, or both those things together. I held the tray closer to his chin. He dipped and licked and groaned.

His fingers were twisted and stunted. His knuckles were swollen.

'Put the aspirin in,' he said.

I put two aspirin in the sauce and he picked them out and swallowed them.

He belched and belched. His hand slipped to his side again. His head slumped back against the wall.

'Food of the gods,' he whispered. '27 and 53.'

I put the tray down on the floor beside him and shone the torch on him. There were hundreds of tiny creases and cracks all over his pale face. A few fine colourless hairs grew on his chin. The red sauce below his lips was like congealed blood. When he opened his eyes again, I saw the tiny red veins like a dark net across the whites of his eyes. There was a smell of dust, old clothes, dry sweat.

'Had a good look?' he whispered.

'Where you from?'

'Nowhere.'

'They'll clear all this out. What will you do?'

'Nothing.'

'What will you—'

'Nothing, nothing and nothing.'

He closed his eyes again.

'Leave the aspirin,' he said.

I took the top off, and put the jar on the floor. I had to push aside a little heap of hard furry balls. I held one up to the torchlight, and saw it was made of tiny bones glued together with fur and skin.

'What you looking at, eh?' he said.

I put it on the floor again.

'Nothing.'

The blackbird on the roof sang louder and louder.

'There's a doctor comes to see my sister,' I said. 'I could bring him here to see you.'

'No doctors. Nobody.'

'Who are you?'

'Nobody.'

'What can I do?'

'Nothing.'

'My baby sister's very ill.'

'Babies!'

'Is there anything you can do for her?'

'Babies! Spittle, muck, spew and tears.'

I sighed. It was hopeless.

'My name's Michael. I'm going now. Is there anything else I can bring you?'

'Nothing. 27 and 53.'

He belched again. His breath stank. Not just the Chinese food, but the stench of the other dead things he ate: the

bluebottles, the spiders. He made a gag noise in his throat and he leaned away from the wall like he was going to be sick. I put my hand beneath his shoulder to steady him. I felt something there, something held in by his jacket. He retched. I tried not to breathe, not to smell him. I reached across his back and felt something beneath his other shoulder as well. Like thin arms, folded up. Springy and flexible.

He retched, but he wasn't sick. He leaned back against the wall and I took my hand away.

'Who are you?' I said.

The blackbird sang and sang.

'I wouldn't tell anybody,' I said.

He lifted his hand and looked at it in the torchlight.

'I'm nearly nobody,' he said. 'Most of me is Arthur.'

He laughed but he didn't smile.

'Arthur Itis,' he squeaked. 'He's the one that's ruining me bones. Turns you to stone then crumbles you away.'

I touched his swollen knuckles.

'What's on your back?' I said.

'A jacket, then a bit of me, then lots and lots of Arthur.'

I tried to slip my hand beneath his shoulder again.

'No good,' he squeaked. 'Nothing there's no good no more.'

'I'm going,' I said. 'I'll keep them from clearing the place out. I'll bring you more. I won't bring Doctor Death.'

He licked the dry sauce from below his lips.

'27 and 53,' he said. '27 and 53.'

I left him, backed away towards the door, went out into the

light. The blackbird flew away over the gardens, squawking. I tiptoed into the house. I stood for a minute at the baby's cot. I put my hand beneath the blankets and felt the rattling of her breath and how soft and warm she was. I felt how tender her bones were.

Mum looked up at me and I could tell she was still asleep.

'Hello,' she whispered.

I tiptoed back to bed.

When I slept, I dreamed that my bed was all twigs and leaves and feathers, just like a nest.

Eleven

Next morning, Dad said he could hardly move. He was all bent over. He said his back was killing him. He was stiff as a blinking board.

'Where's those aspirin?' he yelled down the stairs.

Mum laughed.

'All this exercise'll do him good,' she said. 'It'll get that fat off him.'

He yelled again:

'I said, where's those blooming aspirin?'

I kissed the baby and ran to catch the bus to school.

That morning, we had science with Rasputin. He showed us a poster of our ancestors, of the endless shape-changing that had led to us. There were monkeys and apes, the long line of ape-like creatures in between, then us. It showed how we began to stand straighter, how we lost most of our hair, how we began to use tools, how our heads changed shape to hold our big brains. Coot whispered it was all a load of rubbish. His Dad had told him there was no way that monkeys could turn into men. Just had to look at them. Stands to reason.