

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.

Eight

When he came down from his bath, Dad started moaning that there was no bread and there were no eggs, and in the end he said,

'I know. Let's have a takeaway, eh?'

It was like a light went on in my head.

He had the menu from the Chinese round the corner in his hand.

'We'll get it in for when your mum gets back,' he said.

'What d'you fancy?'

'27 and 53,' I said.

'That's clever,' he said. 'You did that without looking. What's your next trick?'

He wrote it all down.

'Special chow mein for Mum, spring rolls and pork char sui for you, beef and mushroom for me, crispy seaweed and prawn crackers for the baby. And if she won't eat them, we will and serve her right, eh? She'll be back on boring mother's milk again.'

He phoned the Chinese, gave me the cash, and I ran round

to collect it all. By the time I got back again, Mum and the baby were there. She tried to make a fuss of me and kept asking me about the journey and about school. Then the baby puked over her shoulder and she had to get cleaned up.

Dad belted through his beef and mushroom and the seaweed and prawn crackers. He said he was all clogged up with Ernie's dust and he swigged off a bottle of beer. When he saw I was leaving half of mine, he reached over with his fork.

I covered it with my arm.

'You'll get fat,' I said.

Mum laughed.

'Fatter!' she said.

'I'm famished,' he said. 'Worked like a bloomin' slave for you lot today.'

He reached out and tickled the baby's chin and kissed her. 'Specially for you, little chick.'

I kept my arm in front of the food.

'Fatso,' I said.

He lifted his shirt and grabbed his belly with his fingers.

'See?' said Mum.

He looked at us.

He dipped his finger into the sauce at the edge of my plate.

'Delicious,' he said. 'But enough's enough. I've had an ample sufficiency, thank you.'

Then he went to the fridge and got another beer and a great big lump of cheese.

I tipped what was left of 27 and 53 into the takeaway tin and put it in the outside bin.