

'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