

The Budgie Diaries

Part One

Aoife

I have a story to tell but my story has no ending.

I think it's only fair that you should know that from the start.

So if you'd like to read another story - one of those stories where everything gets figured out in the end - that's ok.

Really, I don't mind.

I'll give you some time to think about it.

My story is about a budgie.

And this budgie disappeared from its cage.

Just like that. Poof!

One night, Hannah put the cover on the cage with the budgie inside and the next morning Hannah lifted the cover off the cage with the budgie not inside.

It was a budgie-less cage.

And the thing is, the door to this cage was still locked.

The budgie's name was Richard Daw, by the way.

I know.

I've asked about this and it's all to do with Hannah and Tommy's Mam's friend Johnny. Now, you might need to read that again just to make sure you've got who Johnny is.

Johnny had a friend who owned the budgie but this friend had to leave the country under mysterious circumstances and couldn't take the budgie with them.

Now, I've added in the mysterious circumstances bit because why else would you leave a perfectly fine budgie behind when leaving the country.

There had to be something really fishy going on. They were probably smuggling something valuable out of the country.

Maybe gold.

Or hair scissors. Papa says there's a real shortage of hair scissors right now.

Or toilet paper. Papa says for sure the whole world can't get enough toilet paper right now.

Hannah says that the budgie got its name because Johnny's friend liked the name Richard.

But she's not sure about the 'Daw' part.

That just kinda happened.

And it turns out, Hannah and Tommy's Mam's friend Johnny couldn't look after Richard Daw either. He drives a lorry bringing food to supermarkets. And budgies and driving a lorry to supermarkets don't go well together.

And so the budgie ended up with Hannah and Tommy and their Mam. And nobody, not Hannah or Tommy or their Mam or Hannah and Tommy's Mam's friend Johnny know how Richard Daw got the 'Daw' part of his name.

He just did.

Hannah is my best friend, by the way.

Hannah is good at dancing and drawing owls and I'm good at singing and drawing ostriches so we kinda go well together.

Richard Daw wasn't a particularly happy-looking budgie but then it's hard to tell with budgies.

Budgies don't run like an ostrich or hoot like an owl. They just sit there and every now and then gnaw on the side of the cage.

And this budgie didn't talk either.

And I know that's disappointing for my story.

I know you were probably wondering from the very beginning what kind of things Richard Daw could say.

It's the first thing people tend to ask about birds in cages like parrots and budgies.

But Richard Daw didn't say anything. Not 'Pieces of eight' like parrots in the pirate movies.

And not 'Who's a pretty boy, then?' either.

Richard Daw only said one thing.

And that was 'outside drainage'.

And he said it quite a lot.

Richard Daw was let out of the cage to fly around the room, maybe once a day or so.

Hannah or Tommy would open the cage door and he would sit there at the opening and look out for a minute or two before taking to the air. He usually did a lap of the room, sometimes landing on the curtain rail.

One time Richard Daw flew around the room and straight into the window. He landed on the carpet and had to be picked up and put back into the cage.

I think he got a bit of a fright.

And that more or less did it for Richard Daw when it came to flying around the room for say a week or two.

But then he got back on the horse. But not a real horse.

I'm not sure a budgie could ride a real horse.

Daddy says that getting back on a horse happens after someone has a bit of a fright doing something. But once they get over the fright which may be after a day or a week or a month or even a year, they take a deep breath and try doing that same thing again.

Anyway, Richard Daw got back on the horse and started flying around the room once more

Like nothing happened.

Granny doesn't live in her own house any more. She moved a while ago.

I liked Granny's house.

I liked its smell.

I liked its garden with all the bees buzzing about.

And I liked the funny bits and pieces all over the place.

I especially liked the bear. The big, black bear that looked like it was walking towards you.

Prowling towards you. Sizing you up for its dinner. That's what Granny said.

Granny brought the bear back from her travels to the wilds.

'The wilds of where?' I asked.

'Oh, the wilds of everywhere. Everywhere there are wild animals. And wild birds. And wild winds' Granny said.

And then she laughed. Granny has a kind of chuckly laugh, like a car starting its engine.

And I laughed too.

Granny likes to say things like that. Things like 'wild animals and wild birds and wild winds'.

Once, when I was drawing a map of the world, she pointed to a big space that I hadn't gotten to yet and said 'There be dragons'.

And so, I drew a big picture of a fire-breathing dragon right there on the map.

Daddy is sorry too about Granny leaving the house.

Papa says we have to be extra kind to Daddy for a while because he's sad but in a special way. Not sad when your slice of pizza has a mushroom on it.

A kinda deep sad.

Granny lives in a nursing home now. A home with nurses in it.

We all helped Granny move in. You know, with packing stuff up and things like that.

I'm actually very good at wrapping things up in old newspaper and putting them into boxes. It's funny. Sometimes you don't realise how good you are at doing something until you do it.

And I'm good at opening the boxes too. I took the bear out of one of the boxes and put it on the window sill.

'Is it ok there?' I asked Granny and she nodded and said 'Absolutely! Now, when I'm in bed and about to go to sleep I can look over and think about the wilds with the wild animals and the wild birds and the wild winds. And maybe dream about them too if I'm lucky.'

Granny says she doesn't mind living in a nursing home. She says she can eat all kinds of nice things there and she doesn't have to cook or bake anymore.

But that gives me a funny kinda feeling. A strange, sad kinda feeling. Maybe even a deep sad feeling.

You see, Granny and I make a Christmas pudding every year and it's squishy and smelly and squashy and my absolute favourite thing about Christmas.

We mix the pudding in a great big bowl.

'This was the bowl my mother, your *great*-grandmother, used to mix her puddings in,' she tells me every time. 'And her mother before that who was my granny. A granny can have a granny too, you know'.

I like that all these people used our bowl to mix their Christmas puddings in. It's like we're all part of a great big chain.

When we mix the pudding in the bowl, we always make a wish. One time I wished that I could be good at the butterfly, just like Hannah. Hannah's a really good swimmer and the next time we were in the pool the coach said that my butterfly had really improved. I knew deep down that it still wasn't as good as Hannah's but I didn't mind.

So, you see, the pudding wishing worked.

And after the mixing we boil the pudding in Granny's kitchen and that's when the walls begin to cry.

I never knew that walls could cry. But they can.

The pudding boils away on the top of the cooker and there is steam everywhere.

It's not smoke, Granny says, it's steam. It comes from the water boiling away. And the steam rises up into the air and hits the walls and turns back into water again.

And that's what makes the walls cry.

But when I ask Granny about doing Christmas puddings in the nursing home, she says no, that's the end of the Christmas puddings.

She doesn't say maybe.

She doesn't say you never know.

She just says no.

She says some things come to an end. That's just the way things are. And there's no point in thinking too much about it.

So Granny now lives in the nursing home and me and Daddy and Papa go to visit her there. She says she likes the nursing home because it has a nice garden with flowers and bees. And Granny likes bees.

And it's around this time that the yellow and black signs begin to appear everywhere. On the park gate. On the playground. Outside the supermarket. Everywhere.

It's like there are no more colours left in the world except yellow and black. And we have to stop visiting Granny in the nursing home.

We'll allowed to go for a walk but that's about it. We usually end up going down to the park and sometimes I play hopscotch there. It started out as hopscotch but somebody has written a whole big adventure game on the path with coloured chalk so it's more than that now. I think a grown-up did it because the lines are really straight and the aliens look like aliens out of comic books. It's all about climbing the ladder and exploring the planets and jumping on the aliens and stuff like that.

It's all a bit crazy. I mean not going to school for ages and ages is one thing and going down to the park for a walk once a day and jumping on the aliens is another thing. But what has any of that to do with visiting Granny in the nursing home? Daddy says we can't visit Granny in case we bring the yellow and black germs into the nursing home. 'But of course we wouldn't do that. We would never do that!' I say immediately. Absolutely immediately.

'Well, maybe by accident', Daddy says so quietly it's hard to hear.

So, instead of visiting Granny in her room, we sometimes go and wave from the grass outside her window and she waves back at us.

And I jump up and down and sometimes Daddy and Papa jump up and down as well. And then Granny laughs and although I can't hear it, I know it's her car engine, chuckly kind of laugh.

Hannah looked everywhere inside the cage for Richard Daw. She checked to see if he was lying on the floor or hanging from the ceiling.

That's about it when it comes to looking for a budgie in a cage.

Hannah wears special glasses to help her see and she said she looked really, really hard at the floor and really, really hard at the ceiling.

I asked if Richard Daw was definitely inside the cage the night before.

She said 'Yes'.

But was she absolutely sure? Absolutely, definitively, positively sure? Because of course maybe the door only looked closed but hadn't quite clicked the way it should have.

But Hannah said no, the door was always either clicked shut or open wide and there was absolutely nothing in the middle.

So, it's a mystery.

A real-life mystery.

I tell Daddy and Papa that I need to visit Hannah to see if there are any clues.

But Daddy and Papa say we aren't allowed to visit other people's houses right now. That's the law because of the yellow and black germs.

Daddy says that if someone is really good at investigating, they don't need to visit the crime scene. They can figure it all out from a distance.

And then his phone rings and he looks at Papa and says it's the nursing home.

And the air gets kinda hard and tight.

Daddy goes out into the hall and I can hear him saying yes, he understands and then he wants to know if Granny needs a test.

'Is Granny doing a test?' I ask Papa. Sometimes we do tests in school for spelling and sums and things like that but I never knew Grannies in nursing homes had to do tests as well.

Papa looks very serious and comes and sits beside me and says we should wait and see.

But we can't wait and see because Daddy is just about to come back into the sitting room when his phone rings again.

And it's Granny because I can hear her voice and Daddy goes back into the hall which he never does when it's Granny.

And the air gets even harder and tighter.

Papa asks if he can have a cuddle.

And Papa never asks that. Papa is an ambush cuddler. You could be walking to the fridge and he'll just reach out and pull you in and give you this great, big cuddle.

Because he needs it, he'll say.

I can hear Daddy in the hall say 'Stay safe' which is a dumb thing to say. How can you stay safe? Either you're safe or you're not.

Either you jump into a volcano or you parachute out of an airplane without a parachute or you take Mrs Prendergast's dog, Freddie out for a walk or you don't.

Not safe if you do any of those things.

Safe if you don't do them.

Papa goes out to Daddy in the hall and I can hear them talking.

When they come back in, Daddy sits one side and Papa sits the other side and Daddy squeezes my hand.

I ask if Granny is ok. And he says yes. She is ok.

But I don't believe him and ask again.

And he says yes. Definitely yes. It's just that some people in the nursing home have the yellow and black germs.

But not Granny.

And he squeezes my hand again and asks if he can have a cuddle.

And I think things are going to be very strange from now on if you have to ask every time you want a cuddle.

I want to know how the yellow and black germs got into the nursing home.

Did they slip in under the door?

Or break in during the night.

Daddy says that's not how it works.

That it has to do with the space between two people who don't live in the same house. Daddy talks about that space a lot.

He calls it the special space but I don't.

There's nothing special about it. It's weird. It's the weird space that's about three arms-stretched-out-to-the-very-end wide.

I ask Daddy if we will be able to see the yellow and black germs through the window next time we're visiting Granny.

I kinda know this is a silly question. But I want to be sure.

No, Daddy says. We won't be able to see them.

Tommy thinks the germs are blue. Blue! As if germs can be blue.

At first, I thought they were red.

They had to be red because everything dangerous is red.

Traffic lights are red.

Alarms are red.

Fire engines are red.

But then it suddenly comes to me that the germs absolutely, definitely, positively have to be yellow and black.

There are the signs for a start and then there are the people on the TV who talk about the germs and absolutely, definitely, positively every time they do that, there's always something yellow and black behind them or beside them or in their hands.

But I think the germs are an invisible yellow and black. Like invisible bees.

Funny that the germs would get into Granny's nursing home. And be yellow and black. Just like the bees from Granny's garden.

I ask Hannah if Richard Daw could have dug a tunnel out of the cage and wiggled his way out.

Birds do lots of things. They fly. They chirp. They build nests.

Maybe they dig as well.

They can definitely dig worms out of the ground.

Papa says when he was in Australia a long, long time ago, before I was even born, before he'd even met Daddy, he was having breakfast in the middle of the mountains.

And he was outside, looking at the morning sky which was, 'for sure, the most beautiful morning sky ever', Papa says.

And a kookaburra landed on the wooden rail. That's a bird that lives in Australia.

'How did the kookaburra get its name', I want to know. And Papa says it must be to do with the sound it makes.

And I say it would be so cool to be named after the sound you make.

So amazingly cool.

I tell Papa he would be named 'For-sure-for-sure' and Papa says I would be named 'absolutely-definitely-positively' and we both say Daddy would be named 'run-that-by-me'.

Anyway, the kookaburra spotted a worm on the ground and Papa says she was down there and had grabbed one end of that worm before you could look around you.

And this is where the story gets interesting.

Another kookaburra appeared out of nowhere and grabbed the other end of the worm. And so they started a tug of war with the worm stretched out in the middle.

It's a sad story for the worm but a really interesting story for everyone else.

In the end, Papa says, one of the kookaburras stopped concentrating which is the absolute worst thing you can do when you're in a tug of war with another kookaburra over a worm.

And the kookaburra who didn't stop concentrating gobbled up that worm.

So if birds can do all of that, maybe they can dig their way out of a cage.

No, Hannah says. There was no hole.

Richard Daw did not dig his way out of the cage.

And that's absolutely, definitely positive.

Weeks and weeks and weeks ago, it was kinda hard to find something nice in the kitchen.

You'd have to open drawers really, really far or feel around in presses.

But now Papa and I bake every week. Sometimes two times a week.

We bake brownies or cookies and sometimes brownies *and* cookies.

Daddy says this has to stop but Papa just looks at me and raises his eyes up to the sky and then I raise my eyes up to the sky and Daddy says enough of everyone raising their eyes up to the sky and we all end up laughing.

I get talking to Granny on Daddy's phone.

She says she's fine. The invisible yellow and black germs haven't snuck into her room.

I say she should put something rolled up underneath the door, just in case.

But Granny says that won't stop the yellow and black germs.

But they don't like clean hands, she says and she has something squirty to keep her hands clean.

And she keeps it by her bed so she can squirt it out whenever she wants to keep the yellow and black germs away.

'Keep squirting!' I say.

Maybe Richard Daw pecked the door open.

A bird's beak is long and bendy. Maybe Richard Daw pecked at the door and opened it up.

But Hannah says that the door was closed when they found the empty cage in the morning.

Maybe Richard Daw turned around and closed it after him, making sure that everything clicked back into place.

Maybe birds are good at closing the door.

I know, grown-ups are always on about closing the door.

Daddy and Papa are always saying 'Close the door!' Always and always.

And sometimes I do.

We go to see Granny today.

From the grass outside her window.

She's sitting on a chair beside her bed and gives us a big wave and we all wave back. And I give a thumbs-up and Daddy and Papa give a thumbs-up and Granny gives a thumbs-up back.

Then she squirts some of the gooey stuff onto her hands and rubs them together.

Maybe Richard Daw was beamed up into a spaceship.

After all, if there are invisible yellow and black germs invading the planet, maybe they came from a spaceship?

And maybe the spaceship is parked up there in the blackness on double yellow lines and that's how the germs got their yellow and black colour?

And maybe an alien in the spaceship parked up there in the blackness on double yellow lines looked down and spotted Richard Daw and thought hey, he looks cute?

Except for one problem.

Richard Daw wasn't cute.

If something is cute, that means you can cuddle it.

Cuddling is all about squeezing in a snuggly way. And Richard Daw was small and bony and had a beak.

You can cuddle a dog or a cat, although would a cat care? Probably not. That cat would be thinking, I hope she puts me down soon so I can ignore her all over again. So I can stroll out that flap and have a wander around the neighbourhood and maybe get fed somewhere.

That's what a cat would be thinking.

So to be cute, you have to be squeezable.

And Richard Daw wasn't squeezable.

If you squeezed Richard Daw, his bones would pop. And he'd be dead.

So I don't think an alien in a spaceship parked up there in the blackness on double yellow lines would look down at Richard Daw and think 'Wow, that is the cutest thing I've ever seen... EVER!'

So now I've changed my mind. I don't think Richard Daw was beamed up into a spaceship.

Birds are smart.

I've read about birds that fly from the top of the planet to the bottom of the planet so that they can get two summers. They're called Arctic Terns.

One summer on the top of the planet. And the other summer on the bottom of the planet.

They must really like their summers.

All that way, flying and flying and flying.

My book says that some of those birds do so much flying in their entire lives that's it's the same as if they went to the moon and back and to the moon and back and one more time to the moon and back.

If I was that bird, I would be so tired.

And I would be fed up of all that flying.

Those birds are athletes, Papa says. He says for sure they're every bit as good as the people who are in the Olympics. Maybe even better.

Could those people in the Olympics run all the way from the top of the earth to the bottom of the earth? Or the bottom of the earth to the top of the earth?

No way!

My favourite bird is a magpie.

I like magpies because nobody else does.

They're black and white. And they clack.

I think it's the clacking that turns people off. People like singing instead. Clacking is just too noisy.

I think it would be great if we had clacking lessons at school instead of singing.

Even once a year.

Clacking lessons would be the best lessons ever. And my class would be great clackers. We could clack along to anything.

And it would be nice for the magpies to think that there were other creatures out there trying to say hello.

Papa and I go to the park.

There's a new adventure game is on the ground.

In one part there's an ogre.

I jump up and down on the ogre.

Up and down and up and down and up and down.

Sometimes during computer school, we can see other people in our class.

But I don't really like it. And I don't really like it during play dates either.

I end up looking at myself and even looking *for* myself. That's even weirder. Because if I can't see myself, I wonder where I've gone. Like maybe I've disappeared. And fallen off the screen.

In real life, you don't look at yourself all that much. And you never, ever look *for* yourself.

Ever.

I go shopping with Daddy and we have to queue up for ages. We have to stand on the yellow things on the ground.

'So there's the special space between us and the next person', Daddy says.

The weird space that can't be filled.

It's like a glass. With no juice. And even if you put juice into the glass, you can't drink it anyway or if you did, people would look all cross.

So we go into the supermarket and I get the frozen peas that we eat with chips and egg.

That's my number one favourite dinner.

Alice in my class says that soon there will be no more chips. That the invisible yellow and black germs will take them out!

But that's kinda dumb.

Take them out?

Take them out where?

To the cinema?

To watch 'Frozen'? But would chips like all that singing?

But frozen peas would.

They'd love 'Frozen'.

That would be their absolutely, definitely, positively favourite movie.

Papa says that chips aren't going anywhere. So that's good for me and Papa and Daddy and it's good for the chips as well.

And probably for the frozen peas too.

Daddy gets a phonecall from the nursing home.

He goes out to the hall to do all the talking. Again.

I don't like it when he does that. I don't mind if it's for work because he says things like 'Did you run that by...?'

And the air gets hard and tight again.

When Daddy comes back in, he says that he has to have a talk with Papa and then Papa goes out.

But I can't just sit there. The air is too hard and too tight and so I burst out into the hall.

And I don't know why but I'm crying.

And Daddy and Papa bring me back in and Daddy sits one side of me and Papa sits the other side and Daddy says Granny has the invisible yellow and black germs.

They're inside her.

My favourite animal is a spider.

People don't believe me. I don't know why. Some people go all 'Ugh' when I say it or decide I have to be joking.

But I should know when I am joking more than anybody else.

These are my reasons:

1. It has eight legs and eight is better than two
2. It's fast
3. It can hide in the smallest places.
4. It likes the toilet
5. It's a builder

6. Charlotte's Web made me cry
7. I like the way people look when I tell them.
8. I'm still working on number eight.

One night, Richard Daw was in his cage. Next morning he wasn't. Just like that. Poof!

That's a mystery.

Daddy and Papa look at the news every evening to find out the numbers.

I never knew numbers were so important. I always thought they were kind of boring but now grown-ups talk about them all the time.

I want to know if everybody who has the yellow and black germs dies.

I found a dead cat at the side of the road once.

It didn't move.

It didn't meow.

It just lay there.

Not asleep.

No, they say. Not everyone dies. Most people are fine. Just sick for a while. But they get over it.

Papa comes and sits by me and puts his arm around my shoulders.

Daddy asks if I'm ok. Do I have any other questions?

Yes, I'm ok. And I don't have any other questions.

'You know, you can run anything by me', he says.

And I say yes, I know that I can run anything by him.

And I go back to my book about food.

I'm going to be a chef when I grow up.

I'm going to make pizza with no mushrooms.

So if Richard Daw didn't dig a hole to get out of the cage, or peck open the door and then hang onto the outside and close the door after him, then only one thing could have happened.

Somebody opened the door, put their hand in and took him away.

And they closed the door after them.

But in Hannah's flat, it's just Hannah and Tommy and their Mam. And they're just as confused as everyone else.

Hannah says she's been thinking about it. Maybe, he swung on the swing and rocked the cage from side to side and up and back.

And somehow the door opened and he got out and then the rocking made the door close again.

We go to see Granny through the glass.

She's asleep in her bed.

She's smiling a wobbly kind of smile. Maybe she's dreaming about the wilds with the wild animals and the wild birds and the wild winds or maybe she knows we're there.

I think she knows we're there.

Papa says he'll wait in the car.

Daddy and I stay for ages. He squeezes my hand really hard when we leave.

I don't think Richard Daw rocked the cage back and forth and back and forth and escaped like that.

I think Richard Daw got fed up of being in the cage.

Day after day.

Night after night.

And so he plotted an escape. A secret escape.

When no one was looking, he held his breath really, really tight and squeezed through the wires of his cage.

And that's how he broke free.

Daddy says that we won't have school for ages and ages. But I'm fed up of talking to Hannah and Emma and Alice over the computer.

Why not? I ask Daddy. He says there are too many people at school and that we might breathe all over each another.

Grown-ups are so strange.

Do they really think we go around breathing all over each other? That after PE or the yard or assembly we squash up to each other and go pant, pant, pant?

Or after Maths, pant, pant, pant?

Or art, pant, pant, pant?

Or singing, pant, pant, pant?

Or clacking, pant, pant, pant?

'Well, you mightn't mean to', Daddy says 'but you might do it without realising you're doing it.'

'But if we don't have the yellow and black germs it doesn't matter' I say.

'But some people don't realise they have the yellow and black germs', Daddy says.

'But how do you not realise you have the yellow and black germs? Wouldn't they be jumping up and down inside you? Like fizzy sweets'.

But Daddy says no, they're not like fizzy sweets

'And you would have to stay apart', Daddy says. 'You know, the special space'.

The yellow and black germs and their weird space. That's where they live. Swimming around in the air.

I want to go back to school. I'm sick of the weird space and the invisible yellow and black germs.

Maybe I'll be an astronaut when I grow up. And I'll swim around in the air.

I'm not scared of the air. Not like the grown-ups. Very soon, there won't be any more astronauts left because all the grown-ups will be so afraid of the air.

But not me.

And not spiders. Spiders like the air.

We can be astronauts together.

I don't feel like writing.

Or playing.

Or watching TV.

I don't feel like doing anything.

At all.

Nothing.

Daddy comes into my room.

He says he has something for me and puts Granny's black bear on my window sill.

Granny's black bear is looking at me. Prowling towards me. Sizing me up for its dinner. Granny's black bear comes from the wilds, where there are wild animals and wild birds and wild winds.

Daddy squeezes my hand. He says we're both sad together.

I squeeze him back and say we're deep sad together.

Hannah

On Tuesday, Richard Daw disappeared.

I took the cover off his cage and he was gone.

There he wasn't. That's what Tommy said.

It was a mystery. A real life mystery.

Richard Daw was with us for almost a year. That's a long time when it comes to birds. So Mam says.

Mam says birds aren't great at living long.

And by the way, Richard Daw wasn't a good talker.

Not like Hannah, that's what people say. Hannah's a good talker.

And I am.

But now I have to go to school.

In the kitchen.

Going to school means going into the kitchen.

Sometimes, Tommy and I pretend we're fighting our way through a snowstorm to get to the kitchen table.

And when we make it, we collapse on the chairs and throw our arms out wide.

And Mam says something like 'Well, I'm glad you managed to make it through all that bad weather'.

I get to use Mam's laptop or maybe her phone. Depending. Mam is working in the flat the same time we're at school so it's all depending.

Sometimes we get to see other people on the screen. And we make faces or wink.

Aoife doesn't like it at all. She says it's boring. She says it's like watching loads of TVs in one go because there are so many faces. And you can't really concentrate on one.

But I don't mind.

My favourite bit is at the end. When everyone waves to each other. It's funny to see everyone wave at the same time.

One time, Mam had a work meeting. I knew it was a work meeting because I heard her say 'Can you hear me, can you hear me?' 27 times.

I could kinda see her laptop from where I was sitting and after a while a voice said 'Ok, we'll leave it at that' and then all the grown-ups on the screen started waving.

Lines and lines of grown-ups waving.

And I knew they couldn't see me but I waved back anyway.

Tommy and I tried to teach Richard Daw 'How are you?' And 'Who's a pretty boy, then?' And 'Okey dokey'.

'Okey dokey, okey dokey'.

But all Richard Daw said was 'outside drainage'.

Which is harder to say than 'okey dokey'.

We never knew where he picked that up because nobody in our flat talks about outside drainage. Honestly and truly. I'm not even sure what it means.

Mam says drainage has to do with water going down the drain.

But we never talk about water going down the drain.

Sometimes, at dinner Mam will ask about our day or if anyone has any news.

And never, ever, ever has anyone said 'Today, I saw some water going down the drain outside the flat and I'd like to talk about that'.

Mam's on the phone to Johnny. She's tells him to be careful. She's always telling him to be careful.

Be careful of what, I want to know.

'Ah, just be careful', she says. 'We all have to be careful now'.

I think Mam is worried about Johnny. She says his job means he's out and about a lot.

'Why doesn't he stay at home?' Tommy asks, 'like everyone else'.

That is a really good question. Even for Tommy.

Mam says Johnny can't do that. He delivers food to the supermarkets.

'If people like Johnny don't work, we don't eat', she says.

Tommy has a slice of chocolate cake in his hand. 'Then, Johnny has to work!' he says and takes a big bite.

I tried to teach Richard Daw 'lockdown'.

I stood in front of his cage and said 'Lockdown, lockdown'. But he just looked at me with his head to one side.

And then I tried 'qu-ar-an-tine, qu-ar-an-tine'. Mam taught me that word. She said it was a better word than 'lockdown'.

'Because we're not really locked down' she explained, 'we can still go out and do things like go to the park and go to the supermarket'.

Then Mam said 'Q-u' words are good words for scrabble too. And that we'll have to remember that.

Mam am I are champion scrabble players.

'We're in the middle of a queer quarantine', she said and laughed.

'Quite a queer quarantine', I said. And Mam said I got a million brownie points for that.

And so, I tried to teach Richard Daw 'qu-ar-an-tine, qu-ar-an-tine' but got nowhere.

He just gave me his budgie look.

One time I walked away and was at the door when I absolutely, definitely, positively swear I could hear 'okey, dokey, lockdown' coming from the cage.

And I ran back and said 'lockdown, lockdown' 27 times.

And 'Okey, dokey, okey dokey'.

But Richard Daw just stared at me long and hard and then he put his head to one side and said 'Outside drainage'.

Virus is a scarier word than germs. Aoife doesn't like it. She says she doesn't like the sound of it. She says it's a hard word and germs is a soft word. And she's sticking with germs.

Yellow and black germs

Mam's friend from work got the virus and felt awful.

'How awful?' I wanted to know.

'Very, very awful'. Mam said.

She had to go to bed and she felt really, really tired. And she had a horrible cough.

'But she's ok now', Mam said.

'Really, absolutely ok?' I asked.

'Really, absolutely ok', Mam said.

Aoife thinks the virus can slip in under the door when you're asleep but Mam says no, that's not how it works.

It spreads by people standing too close together. And by coughing. Or sneezing'.

So I try to stop coughing or sneezing. It mustn't be allowed anymore.

The other day, I felt a cough coming on. It was deep inside me, tickling my throat and I concentrated really, really hard to make it go away. But it just stayed there tickling away.

And then, I ran to the kitchen sink and got some water to drown it. Wash it straight away because viruses can't swim. Not like me. I'm a champion swimmer.

I can do the front crawl and the breast stroke and best of all, I can do the butterfly.

The butterfly is hard.

You have to move your arms up in the air, like you're about to attack something big and scary or you're a ghost and you're whoooing, whoooing away.

It took me ages to learn.

We go to the park once a day if it's not raining and sometimes Tommy and I just run and run and run.

But that's when no-one is around. Mam says we can't do that if people are around.

You'll get too close, she says. You might bump into someone.

'Is bumping into people not allowed anymore, even my accident?' I ask.

Mam says that if it happens by accident, people will understand. But that we have to do our best to make sure accidents don't happen.

Sometimes, we all play with the ball. And sometimes we do the hopscotch thing that someone has drawn in the park.

We pretend to climb the ladder and explore the planets and jump on the ogre.

Grown-ups are all about the numbers now.

Sometimes the person on the TV says 27 and sometimes they say 53 and sometimes they say 127 or 153.

Mam doesn't like it when they say big numbers. She likes it when they say small numbers. She says small numbers are better than big numbers.

But I think big numbers are better than small numbers. Big is better than small.

But Mam says no, that's how it works.

I tell Tommy that the space between you and a person you don't know is the scariest place in the world because if you go in there, you die.

I know this isn't true but he's just knocked over my jigsaw of a 101 Dalmations and it's taken me ages to figure out all those spots.

And he runs to Mam and tells her he's afraid of that space and he doesn't want to go out anymore in case he goes into the space by accident.

Mam looks at me in a really cross way and says 'No, you won't die. We all just have to stay away from each other for a while'.

Grown-ups are crazy walkers. They zig and zag all over the place.

Today, I saw grown-ups zig out onto the street and then zag back onto the footpath.

And then zig back onto the street again.

It's like the dancing we do at school.

One person steps to the right, the other person steps to the left. Only they're not allowed to come back in the middle and spin around each other.

And that's the best part.

I'm still not sure if coughing and sneezing is allowed anymore. Mam says a lot of things aren't allowed anymore.

One time, we ordered pizza and the man with the pizza had a mask and blue gloves and he left the pizza on the floor outside our door.

It gave me a funny feeling.

I wasn't sure I wanted to eat the pizza anymore.

But Mam said that this was a treat and cost money and that we were going to eat the pizza now after ordering it.

I ate my part of the pizza really quickly to get it down fast. And then I really, really needed to cough. I tried not to. But then I had to. I had to cough. And cough. And cough.

I coughed and Mam and Tommy were right there.

I coughed and my cough put the virus into the flat.

That night, I lay in bed and I could feel the virus floating around the flat.

Floating in and out of the rooms.

And so, I jumped up and went into the sitting-room. I'm not sure why. And I started doing the butterfly, like I was a scary ghost.

I held my arms up really high and said Whoooo, Whooo. Because maybe a virus could be scared too. I said it really softly though because I didn't want to wake up Mam or Tommy.

But then I thought a virus is hard to scare and I needed to be a bit louder.

'Whooo, whoo' I went. And I kept my arms up in the air just like in the swimming pool.

And suddenly the lights were on and Mam was in the room.

'What's going on?' she said.

And I couldn't explain. I just stood there, shaking and then I started to cry.

And Mam said it was ok and that everyone had nightmares now and then.

But I said no, it wasn't a nightmare.

Then what was it, Mam wanted to know. But she asked softly. Just like the way I started doing my 'Whoo' Whoo'.

'I put the virus into the flat' I said and buried my head in her shoulders.

'What do you mean?' she asked. And I told her about the pizza and the cough.

And she held me really tightly and said no, not to worry. That I hadn't put the virus into the flat. Not one bit.

And I could cough anytime I wanted to.

'But why were you making that sound?' she asked.

And so I told her that I was trying to scare the virus away. And she said that was a good idea. A really good idea.

And so we stood there and went 'Whoo, whoo' together with our arms up in the air

And then Tommy came into the room and he was crying because of all the noise and Mam and I going 'Whoo, whoo'.

I guess it must have looked very strange.

Mam said we were scaring the virus away. And that he should give it a go as well. And so he put his arms up in the air, even though he's no good at the butterfly and went 'Whoo, whoo' as well.

And the three of us were 'whooping' away with our arms up in the air until we all started laughing really loudly.

And Mam said it was time for hot chocolate even though it was SOOO late.

She said we needed some hot chocolate after all that whoo-whooping.

Johnny says pears are his number one favourite fruit.

But they're not my number one favourite fruit.

They're probably my number four, after strawberries and baby oranges and chopped up apples.

I'm just not absolutely, definitely, positively sure because pears are so hard most of the time. And other times, they're black and squishy and yeuchy.

You have to eat them when they're in-between.

Johnny says they're a really sneaky fruit. They wait until nobody's in the room.

They wait until the door is closed and nobody's around and then they go nice and soft. Not squishy soft. Nice and soft.

But that only lasts for a really, short time. So you have to be quick and run back in the room and eat them there and then.

Meerkats are my second favourite animal.

I think grown-ups look like meerkats.

Not all of the time. Just some of the time.

Meerkats are always looking around to see what's going on. Checking up on who's doing what and where and why. Grown-ups are always doing that too, especially in the supermarket.

One time in the supermarket, I saw two grown-ups bumping into each other and then jumping away really fast. Just like they were on the trampoline.

Aoife says we all have to be astronauts when we grow up.

She says the grown-ups can't be astronauts anymore. They're too afraid of the air.

So it's up to us to be astronauts instead.

But I don't want to be an astronaut. I want to be a dog hairdresser.

That way, I get to cuddle dogs. Any time I feel like it.

Mam says we can't have a dog. Not in a flat. So I need to get a job where I can cuddle dogs.

Johnny says I should be a vet. He says I'd be a very good vet because I'm good at talking to Richard Daw and cleaning out his cage.

But I don't want to be a vet. A vet has to touch all kinds of animals. Like tortoises and hamsters and rabbits and guinea pigs.

I don't want to cuddle tortoises or hamsters or rabbits or guinea pigs.

I just want to cuddle dogs.

So I don't want to be a vet.

And I absolutely, definitely, positively don't want to be an astronaut.

Llamas are my third favourite animals.

I like the sound of llama. It kind of puts you to sleep. Llama, llama, llama.

And they're soft and furry and cuddly.

Also a llama is not an ostrich. Aoife likes ostriches.

But I don't like ostriches. They look cross. And they kick.

When I wash my hands sometimes I rub, rub really fast and then I rub, rub really slow.

Rub, rub, fast

Rub, rub, slow.

Sometimes I even forget to sing 'Happy Birthday' in my head.

Instead, I stand by the sink and 'rub, rub, fast, rub, rub, slow' is in my head.

Like a song.

Going round and round and round.

Rub, rub, fast

Rub, rub, slow.

Rub, rub, fast

Rub, rub, slow.

And when I'm lying in bed, it's still there. In my head.

Mam and I are bakers. Cakes and buns and muffins and tarts.

One day, we go to the shop to get some flour. We're going to make double chocolate chip cookies like the ones we saw on TV but when we get there, no flour!

The shelves are empty.

Totally empty.

Mam says the whole world is baking now.

Mam says it's because people have time, lots of time and they didn't have time before.

I know all about time. I can read the clock.

Time doesn't change. That's what the teacher said.

But I know that's wrong because sometimes it goes fast and sometimes it goes so, so slow.

I think now it's going slow. Really, really slow.

Tommy

What is it with the number 19? It's just another number.

There are loads and loads of numbers out there.

Millions.

Zillions.

Zillions of millions.

Millions of zillions.

But now number 19 is the scariest number on the planet. Scarier than 13.

Much scarier.

People talk really low and serious when they say 'Cockpit 19'.

Nobody ever, ever laughs when they say 'Cockpit 19'.

My friend Eddie's birthday is on the thirteenth and I used to think that was really bad luck.

Terrible bad luck. Because 13 is really, really, really unlucky.

It means Eddie will always have rain on his birthday or he won't get any presents or nobody will come to his party.

But now all that bad luck is going to dump on me! Cos my birthday is on September 19th.

So now I have the unluckiest birthday in the whole world!

But Mam says what about the people with birthdays on January 19th and February 19th and March 19th and April...and I say, ok, ok, they're unlucky too.

Mam says she'll never forget my birthday. It's a cast iron guarantee. And they're the best kind of guarantees, she says.

But no guarantee about the rain, she says. She can't give a cast-iron guarantee there.

Mam likes to watch programmes about houses and how to put a door in here or a window in there or three doors in here and five windows in there or how to make them whiter or yellower or bluer.

It's SOOOO boring.

Sport is better. Much better. Sport is never boring.

Mam and Hannah and me watch GAA and rugby and tennis and basketball and soccer and running and jumping and catching and throwing.

Mam and Hannah and me watch anything.

Anything at all.

And we close the curtains so Hannah can see better and let her sit up front in the comfy chair closer to the TV.

And we have a hot chocolate half-way through.

But now, there's nothing.

Absolutely nothing.

Mam and Hannah and me sit in front of the telly and wonder what to watch.

I say, well maybe we could watch some old matches. There are plenty of old matches on youtube.

But Mam says the problem with old matches is that you probably know the score and if you know the score, it ruins everything.

She's right.

One time we recorded a match cos Johnny took us all to the zoo and we were really, really careful not to find out the score. We even turned off the radio for the sports bits.

But I didn't like it one bit cos the score was out there somewhere and anytime you weren't watching, it could float right down on top of you and then you'd know who won and who lost.

I'm fed up of washing my hands.

Sometimes I think my hands are the cleanest hands in the world. Nobody can have cleaner hands than me.

I think I'm going to be walking to the park and a TV crew will jump out from behind a tree and say 'Tommy! Congratulations on having the cleanest hands in the world'.

And they'll give me an award except they'll have to leave it on the grass and move away and then I'll go over and pick it up.

And then they'll interview me for the world's TV. They'll ask how it feels to have the cleanest hands in the world. But it will be the shoutiest interview ever cos we'll be so far away from each other.

I'll say 'I'm fed up of washing my hands' and they'll say 'Sorry, we couldn't quite catch that. Could you say that again?' And I'll say 'I'M FED UP OF WASHING MY HANDS!'

Washing hands is better than the squirty thing, though.

I don't like the squirty thing because it's smelly and gooey and gets all over your hands and you have to rub really hard to get rid of it.

One day, in the supermarket I squirted the squirty thing and the gooey stuff landed on me and the boy in front of me. The boy gave me a look because the gooey stuff was all over his sleeve. So I said 'sorry' and Mam said 'sorry' and the boy's Dad said 'Oh, that's ok'.

But the boy gave me a look.

When Hannah shouted that Richard Daw was gone, I thought she meant dead.

I thought Richard Daw was lying there dead in the cage with his legs up in the air.

But no. He was gone.

Properly gone.

One time Richard Daw flew around the room and landed on the curtain rail and Hannah and I climbed on the back of the sofa and tried to shoo him in the direction of the cage.

But he just sat on that curtain rail for ages and ages and every now and then he chirped 'Outside drainage, outside drainage'.

I did my best to get him to say other things.

One time, I stood in front of the cage and said 'Up Fairview Road!' 95 times.

That's our club.

I said it again and again and again but it made no difference.

And just as I was leaving, I'd swear I heard him say 'Okey, dokey, Up Fairview Road, lockdown, lockdown, quarantine!'

I even ran back to the cage to make sure. But he just sat there on his perch and stared right back at me.

Richard Daw didn't do anything.

Apart from a bit of flying and that was only when he felt like it.

A fish swims. It doesn't just stay still in the water like it's playing statues.
And a tortoise does a bit of wandering. Very, very slow wandering but that's still wandering.
And a guinea pig digs or munches or does other things that guinea pigs do.
Richard Daw just sat on his perch and looked out at the room.
I wanted a parrot.
A parrot would sit on your shoulder and say things like 'Pretty Polly' and 'Pieces of Eight'.
The pirate in my book has a parrot called Harold.
It would be brilliant to have parrot. I would put Harold on my shoulder and feed him pieces of banana. I would lift the pieces of banana up into Harold's beak and he'd take them immediately. Might even snap at them.
And I'd say, 'Now, Harold, easy there'.
And Harold would say 'Who's a pretty boy, then?'
And Harold would never, ever say 'outside drainage'.

Richard Daw had a nice cage.
It had a bell and a swing. But Richard Daw never used the swing. And he never rang the bell.
That was a pity.
I'd love to have seen Richard Daw swinging on the swing or ringing the bell.
Maybe he would have liked a slide, instead. Maybe birds like slides more than bells or swings.
Or maybe he would have liked a roundabout. One of those roundabouts that you push round and round with your foot and then you jump on board and go round and round until you start getting dizzy and more dizzy and more dizzy and a little bit sick.
Maybe budgies like the feeling of getting dizzy and more dizzy and more dizzy and a little bit sick.
Maybe Richard Daw would have liked a roundabout in his cage.

Our flat is haunted by a squeaky ghost.

Sometimes at night, I can hear it squeak, squeak really slowly. And then it stops. One time, I snuck out of bed to see if I could see the ghost.

My heart was going 'boom, boom, boom' and I opened the door of the sitting room really slowly.

I put my head around but there was nothing there and I closed it again as fast as I could.

And I jumped back into bed.

But just before I fell asleep, I'm almost sure I could hear 'Squeak, squeak' all over again and I pulled the covers up tight over my head.

Hannah says it's the ghost of a boy who died of the virus a long, long time ago.

And now this boy is walking around our flat in his squeaky shoes.

My absolute favourite day is Saturday.

I know most people's favourite day is Saturday.

But not everyone's favourite day is Saturday.

Mirha, in my class loves Tuesdays. She loves Tuesdays because that's the day she does dance lessons. And Mirha is really into her dance lessons. She says dance lessons are better than anything else, anytime, any place, anywhere.

But I love Saturdays because on Saturdays Mam makes pancakes for breakfast. Pancakes with butter and sugar.

And they are SOOOO good.

And on Saturday we go to GAA practice. Except not now, of course. Nothing happens now.

Jack is our coach and he used to give us loads of really hard drills.

We had to run up and down the pitch for ages and ages, passing the ball and bouncing the ball and kicking the ball.

And after a while, you would be so tired. You'd have to bend over to catch your breath. And sometimes you'd even have to hold your sides.

But Jack never had to bend over. And he never had to hold his sides.

Mam said Jack could run forever.

Then one day Mam got a beep on her phone. She looked at the message and went out of the room and I could hear her talking to someone. And when she came back in, she said she had to tell us something.

She told us that Jack had the virus.

But Jack could run and run and run and run. How could the virus catch Jack?

Jack was too fast for the virus.

But Mam said that anyone could get the virus.

I wanted to know if Jack was going to be ok.

Mam said he had to go to hospital. And that the nurses and doctors would do their best.

'They'd better!' I said.

Now, Jack is out of hospital. He's not back to running up and down the pitch and passing the ball and bouncing the ball and kicking the ball.

But he's getting there. Mam says he's getting there.

We used to play Ludo and Snakes and Ladders when we got bored. But then we got bored of playing Ludo and Snakes and Ladders.

One time we were playing Snakes and Ladders and I landed on the biggest snake on the board and went all the way down, down to the very beginning.

And I went 'huh'.

I didn't even care!

I guess that's what boredom does to you. It makes you go 'huh' when you go all the way down the biggest snake on Snakes and Ladders.

Huh.

Some days I have to think really, really hard about how long it's been since we were at real school. And not computer school. Or phone school.

Four weeks? One hundred and twenty-seven weeks? Ten thousand, five hundred and sixty-three weeks?

Who knows?

Sometimes I have to think really hard about what day it is.

Is it Wednesday?

Is it Thursday?

Is it Monday?

They're all mushed together.

I never liked walks.

They were so boring.

So boring.

Just walking. One foot and then the other foot, one foot and then the other foot and on and on and on.

When Mam said, 'let's go for a walk', I would disappear.

I would dive behind a door.

I would clench my teeth and close my eyes and try really, really hard to go invisible.

But not now.

Walks are brilliant now. The most brilliant things on the planet.

A walk means we get out of the flat.

I take my scooter and we go down to the park.

The park has a playground with one of those roundabouts that Richard Daw might have liked.

He could have pushed himself around and around with his foot.

Maybe he'd have stayed if he'd had a roundabout.

But the playground is closed up now.

There is a yellow and black sign on the gate. And it has the number 19 on it.

My favourite animal is a rhinoceros.

First it was a white-coated weasel. I know loads of things about white-coated weasels.

But now, it's a rhinoceros.

That's cos of a man called Durer. My books says a long, long time ago, he got the job to draw a rhinoceros. Only thing is, he had no idea what a rhinoceros looked like.

No idea.

He'd never seen one.

Some people had seen a rhinoceros, though. And they wrote down what a rhinoceros looked like.

So he checked that.

But they weren't great at writing down what a rhinoceros looked like. It sounded like the rhinoceros had a suit of armour so Durer gave the rhinoceros a suit of armour.

Imagine a rhinoceros with a suit of armour? And now that picture is famous!

How mad is that?

Mam calls us into the kitchen and says it's time.

Time for what, we want to know.

'Time to get our hair cut', Mam says.

But my hair is fine. It's scraggly and pokey and I like it. Sometimes I look in the mirror and I wonder who is that cool caveman looking back?

And that cool caveman is me!

Now, Hannah's hair is long. Really long. So long she can almost, almost sit on it.

Hannah says that's what she wants. That what's she's aiming for. Like she's been living in a cave for an age.

Mam says in a way, we all have.

And come to think of it, Mam's hair is a bit cavewoman-ish too. Long and sticky-outey with lots of grey bits.

I say we're a cave family.

That makes Mam laugh. 'Well, we might be a cave family', she says 'but I'm sure cave families had some way of cutting their hair'.

But I don't think they did. All the cave families in my book have long hair.

Hannah and I don't want to get our hair cut.

We say 'No, no, PLEASE!'

And Mam thinks for a minute. And I'm waiting for her to say 'We'll cut off just a little' or 'We just need to tidy it up a teeny, weeny bit'.

And I sit there, waiting, just waiting and my 'NOOOO Mam! It's NOT FAIR' is all ready to go. It's in my head.

And then Mam says 'Ok fine'.

Hannah and I just sit there looking at each other.

'Really?'

'Really', says Mam.

'But', she says. 'I want you to cut my hair'.

'Cut your hair?' I say.

I think I'm dreaming.

'It needs tidying up' she says and sits down and gives a big sigh.

'You can take it in turns. Tommy, go get the mirror in my room. You know the one on the wall'.

And so I bolt into her bedroom and when I get to the mirror, I give it a bit of a wobble and hold on really tight and it comes off in my hands.

Right into my hands.

And it doesn't break. Cos I know if it breaks we'll get buckets of bad luck, cos I'd read about that in my book.

Mam sits down and hands us the scissors and holds the mirror up to her face.

'Now, I'll need a towel' she says 'to catch the hairs'. And Hannah grabs the towel off the back of the kitchen chair really, really quickly and puts it around her shoulders.

I think she's afraid Mam will change her mind.

'Ok' Mam says. 'Now you see that little bit sticking out behind my ear, can you cut that?'

Hannah does the first bit. She goes up really close to Mam's hair so she can see it properly and then chop, she cuts off a teeny, weeny bit.

'Ah, you can do better than that!' Mam says.

So Hannah has another go and cuts off a chunk.

And I do the second bit.

And we take it in turns like that.

Slowly, slowly, bit by bit.

When it's my turn, I hold the scissor really carefully and concentrate really, really hard before I make the cut.

And Mam say 'That's fine, just fine. Anyway hair grows back'.

When it's all finished, she looks at herself in the mirror and from the sides and says 'That is the best haircut I ever had!'

A lot of people are wearing masks.

At first, I thought it was kind of scary but now I think it's kind of cool.

Mam says she's going to wear a mask but she's not sure about us. She's going to look that up.

She wants to see if it's allowed.

I want to wear a mask.

I want to look like one of those doctors on TV.

Like I'm heading into an operating room to take out someone's insides or move them round a bit.

And I'll shout 'Clear' just like they do on the TV

And I'll put out my hand like they do on the TV and be really bossy and say 'knife' or 'fork' or 'frying pan' or 'basketball'. And I'll squash them all into the person's insides.

And I'll save the person's life and everyone will think 'what a fantastic doctor'.

And I'll wear the mask in the supermarket and people will say 'Wow, do you see that person there, beside the boxes of washing powder? He's a world famous doctor and he's saved so many lives - so many lives!'

And I'll put a box of washing powder into my basket and walk right by them. Walk right by them and pretend I didn't hear.

Richard Daw

Things were going along just fine up to this.

Everything was ticking away nicely. These wingless creatures were giving me plenty of material for my book and I was getting it all down in my notepad.

I stash my notepad in under the water container, by the way. Tuck it right in. They never look. They just fill that thing with water without a passing thought.

They're too busy cleaning up my excrement which to be honest, I do appreciate. Sometimes, I hear them call it 'poo'. 'Poo' seems like a strange word for 'excrement' but either way, once it's gone, I'm happy.

I like it when the floor of the cage is slipped back into place, clean and shiny first thing in the morning. And I like it late at night when they put a cover over my cage. That's when things get nice and quiet.

Mind you, it's a very flimsy cover. They could have done better there. And don't even get me started on its colour – a kind of cabbage green. I mean, cabbage green!

Anyway, back to first thing in the morning. Once they leave the flat, I can get on with it. Open the door. Stretch my wings. Poke around a little here. Rummage around a little there.

See what they eat. What they wear. What they read.

It's all very doable.

I just keep on high alert for any sound of their return.

And when I hear that key in the lock, I get myself back in that cage as quick as you like and pull the door up behind me.

But things began to get strange a while ago now.

They stopped going out.

They started hanging around the flat all day long.

They're still hanging around the flat all day long.

It's as if the family are in their own cage now. All day long.

So that's done it for the daytime reconnaissance missions.

No more poking.

No more rummaging.

It's all become a bit boring.

Truth to tell, there isn't much to do in a budgie cage. I mean, there's the swing and there's the bell but believe me, I did the whole bell thing in my last place of residence. Those wingless creatures were always out and about and I rang the bell there all the time.

Possibly too much of the time.

It came to the point where I could barely sleep at night with the sound of the bell ringing in my head.

So I've had it with bells.

A slide would be nice, though. Or a roundabout. I'm particularly partial to roundabouts.

And here's another thing about my cage. It's so bland. Not one speck of colour. I mean who designed this place? The door is practically crying out to be painted and preferably something bright. Personally, I'd go with wild grasslands green with just a hint of buttercup yellow.

But do these wingless creatures ever consider what I'd like in my cage? Never.

So, I'm left with the swing. Sometimes at night, I go back and forth and back and forth. Just for something to do.

And by the way, they really need to oil that swing. It is very squeaky.

Their routine is all over the place now.

They might go out in the morning.

They might go out in the afternoon.

You never can tell.

And never for very long.

And they've begun to hang around the cage and do that 'Who's a pretty boy?' thing again.

Who's a pretty boy?

I mean, am I supposed to jump up and down and say 'Me! I'm a pretty boy'.

Well, of course I'm a pretty boy. I'm very aware of this. From the moment, I squeezed my way out of that egg and shook those tiny, eggy fragments off my feathers, I knew, I just knew, instinctively and without a mirror to hand, that I was a particularly pretty boy.

And then I looked around that nest and thought, boy does this place need doing up.

Anyway, 'Who's a pretty boy?' It's me. Of course, it's me. But I have no intention of saying this out loud for their benefit.

It's all so tiresome.

And don't even get me started on the 'Richard Daw' thing!

That's the name the wingless creatures came up with.

I have no problem with the 'Richard' part. It has a kind of seriousness about it. It's a no nonsense, sensible kind of name.

But the 'Daw' bit really takes the biscuit.

That was all to do with the bigger wingless one, the one they call Johnny and his friend's sister's workmate's cousin who was in the house one day, making a dog's dinner of fixing the plumbing, and all the while singing this inane tune.

'Dum di dum

Dum di dum daw-daw

Dum di dum

Dum di dum daw-daw'

And then he had the audacity to come up to my cage and say 'Hey Richard, what do you say? 'Dum di dum. Dum di dum daw-daw. It's a good one, isn't it?'

I was so stupefied, I could barely squawk. Dum di dum? Dum di dum, daw-daw'? A good one? Really? I mean, really?

But somewhere in the middle of it all, I let the word 'daw' slip from my beak. Probably as a result of the stupefication, now that I come to think of it.

And somehow it stuck.

From that moment on, I was Richard Daw.

Sometimes, when they're right in front of the cage, going through that whole 'Richard Daw' routine, I say my own name.

My real name.

My budgie name.

And I say it nice and slowly to see if they'll catch it.

ZZZxxxqqq%%~~#!

It couldn't be simpler. But do they get it? Not a chance! There are times I find myself putting my wing to my forehead and shaking my head over these creatures.

But I do occasionally feel sorry for them, especially the smaller wingless ones. They try so hard to make me talk.

So every now and then I run through the whole list of things they want me to say, 'Okey, dokey, quarantine, lockdown, up Fairview Park', the lot.

And I only do it when they're as good as out of the room so they don't know for sure that I've actually said it.

And they bolt back to the cage and look at me with amazement. It's an interesting look and I've drawn a particularly nice picture of it on page 38 of my notepad.

And when they give me that look, I do the 'outside drainage' thing.

It's a phrase I picked up from the rectangle in the corner.

The bigger wingless one likes to look at programmes on the rectangle when she wants to relax. And she especially likes programmes to do with houses and walls.

I have absolutely no problem with this. Truth to tell, when I see her settle down on the sofa, I do the same on my perch.

Oh, there are times I can't believe what's happening on the rectangle. I want to hop up and down and squawk 'You're going with flamingo pink! Have you entirely lost your mind?' or 'You're putting a door over there! Why in the name of all that is good in budgiedom would you put a door over there?'

But back to the walls.

Building them and knocking them down.

I guess that's all you can do with walls.

Anyway, at some stage in one of these programmes, someone, somewhere with a yellow bucket on their head said 'Blah, blah, blah, wall something, blah, blah, blah wall something else, blah, blah, blah, outside drainage'.

And I perked up immediately. That completely took my fancy.

'Outside drainage'? I could work with that.

The thing is, though, that even though I'm an exceptionally smart budgie, I'm not entirely sure what it means.

But I do love the reaction I get when I say it out loud. Everyone looks so confused and baffled.

So I've drawn a picture of that confused, baffled look on page 56 of my notepad.

The bigger wingless one even raises her eyes to the sky and shakes her head.

I have to admit I do envy wingless creatures being able to raise their eyes to the sky, like that.

It's the one advantage they have over budgies.

I still do the fly-around-the-room to keep them happy. They seem to like that for some reason. And it's good exercise for me.

I just avoid the window. I have to say, that shook me up a bit. I'm still not sure what happened there.

One moment, I was in the air. The next moment, on the carpet. Splat!

Not a bad carpet, to be honest.

Morning-sky grey and quite fluffy.

It was so very warm and comfortable that I just wanted to stay there, snug as a bug in the fluffiness.

But before I knew it, one of the smaller wingless ones had me in the palm of their hand and was taking me back to the cage.

Very, very gently.

I tried to smile as a thank-you but I'm not convinced these wingless creatures know what a budgie smile looks like.

They're not sleeping as well as they used to. None of them.

Of course, I'm not sure how they sleep at all since they do it lying down and not sitting tall and straight in a sensible, rational way on a perch but let's leave it at that.

They've begun to walk around in the middle of the night. A couple of times I heard one of them coming down the hall while I was in mid-swing and I had to grab the side of the cage to stop the back and forth and sit rock solid and stony quiet.

Then there was the time I was sitting in my cage, minding my own business when one of the smaller wingless ones came into the room and started making these very odd 'Whooo' sounds. I could just about see her outline through the cover.

Anyway, I leaned over and slipped my wing out through the bars to pull the cover back just a little so I could see what was going on.

And then the bigger wingless one appeared, followed minutes later by the other of the smaller wingless ones and they all started making these 'Whooo' sounds. And they put their arms out straight in front of them and wiggled their fingers.

All three of them.

So I spent most of the night drawing a picture of all that whooing and wiggling. It's on page 92 of my notepad, by the way

My notepad is full and I'm heading home.

Early tomorrow morning, at first light, I'm going to open the cage door, slip out underneath the cover and fly into their toilet for the very last time.

No, not to use.

I do that in my cage. I think I may have mentioned this before.

No, they keep a window open in there. And I'm taking my notepad and heading back to the Australian grasslands. I've gathered enough information for my book by now. I've given it a lot of thought and decided it's going to be called 'Observations by an exceptionally smart budgie on the strange and odd habits of wingless creatures and why it is they need help with interior decoration and in particular choosing the best colours'.

And I'll explain in some detail the mistakes they've made and what it is they should have done instead. I might even include some examples of nests that really worked.

I expect it will be a best-seller.

And I'm going to shut the door of the cage behind me when I leave. Push it right back into place until I can hear that click. I know leaving the door open or shut doesn't make any difference, one way or the other.

But indulge me a little here.

A budgie disappears from a locked cage. You've got to love that.

And I sincerely hope they do too.

Part Two

Tommy

We were supposed to go back to Cork where we'd been on our summer holidays, but I knew, I just knew deep down that it wasn't going to happen.

We were having spaghetti carbonara with Johnny when Mam said it was all off. She said we couldn't leave the county. That it wasn't allowed any more. For the time being anyway.

Hannah just sighed. She said she kinda knew that was going to happen and I said I kinda knew that was going to happen and Mam said she kinda knew that was going to happen. And then we looked at Johnny and he said he *definitely* knew that was going to happen. And we all laughed.

I wanted to know if an alarm would go off if you put your foot outside the county. Or even your big toe.

That would be so cool and even cooler if you could hear a NEEE, NAAA, NEEE, NAAA, NEEE, NAAA right when you did it and guards jumped out from behind bushes. And somebody said 'Hey grab that kid, he's put his big toe over the line!'

That would be so brilliant! I'd sit in jail and when they'd say 'You can make one phone-call, kid', I'd ring the nearest takeaway and ask them to deliver a spice bag to my cell.

Mam says there aren't actually lines on the ground to show where one county ends and another begins. No line to show where Dublin ends and Wicklow begins or where Dublin ends and Louth begins or where Dublin ends and....can't think of another county beside Dublin but you know what I mean.

I think that's a real pity. If I was in charge I'd give someone the job of drawing those lines. Maybe Hannah. She's really good at drawing lines. Only thing is, there might be owls sitting on some of those lines.

But, maybe people would like owls sitting on the lines showing where Dublin ends and Wicklow begins and Dublin ends and Louth begins and Dublin ends and.... KILDARE, I FORGOT ABOUT KILDARE.... begins.

Now, you're not supposed to go 5 kilometres from your house.

We're eating breakfast and I'm chewing on my toast and I want to know if that's left and right.

Mam says yep, it's left and right.

And I'm still chewing on my toast and I want to know if that's up and down.

And Mam says she's not so sure about the up and down bit.

And I say well, what about the airplanes because they go more than 5 kilometres up in the air and I know that because I checked it online.

And Mam says she's doesn't think the guards have an airplane to go 5 kilometres up in the air and so they wouldn't be able to do a check-point up there.

And Hannah says that even if the guards had an airplane to go 5 kilometres up in the air, they'd have to park it somewhere so they could get out and do their check-point.

And they'd have to wear special garda flying suits.

And they'd have to wave at the planes to get them to slow down and then the pilot would have to roll down the window.

And they'd have to say 'I'm afraid you've reached your 5 kilometre limit so you're going to have to turn around now'.

And then Johnny says, 'How about the 5 kilometres down?'

And I say I have to think about that.

That that's a tough one.

I have to think about that.

So we're back at school.

And we're staying in pods and bubbles.

I never knew what a pod was until now.

If you'd asked me 'Hey Tommy, what's a pod?' just a few months ago, I'd have said 'Whadoya mean, a pod?'

And I'd also have thought, mad question. Really mad question.

But now I live in a pod. At school anyway.

A pod is something that floats around in a bubble.

Sometimes I blow bubbles. Big wobbly bubbles.

I never thought that one day I would live inside a pod inside a big, wobbly bubble.

The teachers wear masks all the time.

I'm kinda used to it now.

At first, I thought it would be like living in a hospital with everyone going around like doctors and nurses and you were like a patient.

But we don't have beds in the classroom. That's a real pity.

It would be brilliant to have beds in the classroom. You could put your hand up and say, 'Excuse me, I'd like to have a little nap now' and then climb into the bed when there was boring stuff happening.

Aoife

Yesterday, we went to the shop and I bought a mask. I wanted a yellow and black mask like the yellow and black signs. If we have to wear masks then the masks should match the signs.

But Papa said no, that the masks didn't have to match the signs so we could go with any colour.

But I wanted a mask that matched the signs. So we went to the shop and looked and looked and looked but couldn't find a yellow one or a black one, never mind a yellow and black one.

So we got a blue mask instead. But if I was in charge, I would have a rule that masks had to be yellow and black.

I think masks are brilliant because sometimes you can hide behind a mask. It's like hiding right out in the open. So you're hiding but not hiding.

You can be looking at someone and thinking I really hope we have chips and egg and peas for dinner but they can't see your face so they don't know what you're thinking. You can think whatever you want to think and nobody knows.

I read where the lockdown dogs are being given back. Or they're wandering around the streets on their own. Or they've been put into rescue shelters.

Papa says yep, a dog is not just for lockdown.

And I say absolutely, definitely, positively.

Straight away, immediately, I say absolutely, definitely, positively. A dog is not just for lockdown.

And Papa says 'I know what you're thinking. For sure, I know what you're thinking'.

And I know he knows.

And he knows I know he knows.

He knows I want a dog.

And I wouldn't give that dog back. Or let it wander around the streets on its own. Or put it into an animal shelter.

Absolutely. Definitely. Positively.

But Papa says he and Daddy have to think about it.

But they've been thinking about it for ages and ages now.

For ages and ages and ages.

Hannah

Mam says we have to get rid of Richard Daw's cage.

Mam says Richard Daw is not coming back so there's no point in having an empty cage standing there in the sitting room.

I say are we sure, absolutely sure that Richard Daw is not coming back and Mam says yes, absolutely one hundred percent sure.

But I say, what if Richard Daw is like Lassie in the film? And Lassie managed to find her way home even though she was a dog and she'd been taken really far, far away?

What if Richard Daw finds his way back to the flat and then he can't find his cage, what will he do?

So Mam says ok, we can keep it for a bit. So we put Richard Daw's cage over in the corner behind the sofa. And we put the stand in where the ironing-board is.

'That's just for the time being', Mam says. 'Once things get back to normal, it'll have to go into the recycling. Or we might put an ad online asking if anyone would like a budgie cage'.

And then Johnny says he thinks he might know someone at work who's thinking about getting a bird. Some kind of bird.

I hope that person at Johnny's work changes their mind. I hope they decide to get a cat instead.

Sport is back on the TV.

Live sport.

And that's FANTASTIC! And also BRILLIANT! And a bit OUTSTANDING, which has become my favourite word.

OUT-STANDING!

'Out standing in a field', Tommy says when I say it at dinner and he smirks at me. So I throw a Brussel sprout at him. And then, Mam says, 'Stop, stop!'

We watch everything.

GAA, soccer, rugby - everything.

The women's rugby team score this crazy try where they pass the ball again and again and again and they're running from one end of the pitch to the other and in the end they get it over the line. Outstanding!

There are no crowds in the stadium now so you can hear the players shouting at each other.

And you can hear the referee shouting at the players.

It must be really hard to be a referee nowadays. They know that everyone at home can hear what they say. It must be really hard for them to concentrate all the time.

I mean the players can just run around and do their thing but the referee really has to concentrate. There must be times when they start daydreaming and thinking about other things.

One of these days, a ref is going to stop concentrating for just a second and they're going to say 'I think I'll have an Indian tonight' right out loud.

And I want to be watching TV when they do!

Richard Daw

No doubt you were worried. Probably quite concerned.

So yes, I will tell you what happened.

I flew out the window. That part was easy. I'm pretty good at flying, if I say so myself, so no problem there.

I mean I'd decided to go to Australia and I knew that was left when I got outside the bathroom window but after that it all began to get a bit tricky.

Did I go round the corner by the chipper or up past the traffic-lights?

And, of course, these wingless creatures hadn't put up a signpost. No, that would have killed them.

Just a simple signpost with 'Australia' on it and an arrow pointing in the right direction would have been very useful.

But not a chance.

It is a mystery to me how they manage to get from A to B.

But then, as I watched them walking down the street, it was a mystery to me why they felt the need to cover up their faces.

On a bright, sunny day.

Not even that cold.

Anyway, I decided to go around the corner by the chipper and was figuring out my next move when I heard a voice.

'Hey buddy, where are you going?'

The voice came from a window-ledge nearby. I looked up and there was the most enormous seagull I'd ever seen.

The most enormous.

I mean it was, of course, none of her business where I was going but still the tone of the question did take me aback.

'Nowhere', I said.

'Doing nothing, going nowhere'.

And suddenly there were three of them looking down at me. Big and burly, with their heads cocked to one side.

'Hey,' she said, 'look what we've got here! Look at this tiny bird, who's not telling us where he's going'.

Now, as an exceptionally smart budgie, I can read a situation very quickly. I can size it up in one go.

And I looked at this situation and thought. 'Mmm, this is not good. Not good at all'.

And here's the interesting thing. You have your heart and it's in there somewhere doing what hearts are supposed to do and you never give it a passing thought. Not once, all the day long.

And then out of the blue, it starts thumping in your chest and you feel it's about to jump right out of your mouth and land on the footpath.

And you'll find yourself looking down at it beating away on the footpath.

And as an exceptionally smart budgie, I'm in no way embarrassed to say that is exactly how I felt when this seagull and her buddies started ganging up on me.

Aoife

I write a list of reasons why it would be good to have a dog and put it up on the fridge door.

- It feels good to cuddle a dog.
- Dog is an easy word to spell.
- A dog can rescue you if you fall into a hole.
- A dog doesn't eat too much.
- All a dog wants to do is go for a walk.
- A dog can talk to you.

And then I go into the sitting room and wait and wait.

Daddy is the first one to see it. 'Aha', I can hear him say, 'what do we have here?'

And he comes into the sitting room and sits down.

Papa comes in then and Daddy says 'It seems someone has broken into the house and written a list of reasons to have a dog and put it up on the fridge door'.

'Someone has broken into our house!' Papa says. 'HOW? WHEN?'

And I say, 'Ok, ok, I know you know that it's me.'

'How do dogs talk to you?' Daddy asks. 'I don't get that.'

'Just by looking at you', I explain. 'You can figure out if they want to go for a walk or if they want food in their bowl or if they want to jump up and sit in your lap'.

Daddy says 'Ok, I guess that's right'.

'Well, they talk a lot more than Richard Daw, and he was a budgie and he was supposed to talk. That was his job', I say.

'Ok, you've got me there' Daddy says.

'How can dogs rescue you if you fall into a hole?' That's Papa. 'I mean I think it's brilliant that they can do that but how exactly do they do that.'

But I'd seen a film where this boy fell into a hole and the dog barked and barked and then it tugged at this woman's trousers and kinda pulled her to the edge of the hole. And the woman saw the boy in the hole and got a rope and pulled the boy out.

'And are you planning to fall into a hole?' Daddy asks.

'Not really,' I say, 'but it's handy to know that if I do, the dog will drag you or Papa to the very edge of the hole and you'd be able to see me way down there'.

'That would be handy', Papa says.

'And I'll do everything', I say. 'Walking, feeding, bathing.

Absolutely, definitely, positively everything'.

Hannah

Richard Daw's cage is a bit sad.

I think maybe anything that's empty is a bit sad.

It looks lonely.

I didn't know a cage could look lonely but it can.

The swing is just sitting there. Not moving.

Mind you, it never moved when Richard Daw lived in the cage. It just sat there, not moving, then as well.

I don't think Richard Daw liked swings. Tommy always said he wanted a roundabout, instead.

But an empty cage can make you feel sad.

Aoife asked me if I missed Richard Daw.

That was a really hard question.

I don't know if I miss Richard Daw. Richard Daw never said anything. He just sat there. And sometimes he just looked at you.

And he never said anything.

Apart from 'outside drainage'.

Aoife says if you miss someone you feel it inside. That it's like a hole deep inside you that you can't fill.

And even if you have all the sand in the world, you still can't fill that hole.

But Aoife says her Daddy says that after a while that changes. Sometimes it's a long while and sometimes it's a short while. But after a while, that changes and you slowly fill the hole up again. You fill it up again with memories of that someone.

I don't think I have a hole deep inside me that I can't fill.

I just have an empty cage.

But the empty cage still makes me feel sad.

Tommy

Jack is back.

But not back training yet. Not yet.

Mam and Hannah and I go up to have a chat with Jack. Mam asks him how's he doing since he got sick with the virus. And he says he's good. But sometimes he gets very tired. Sometimes he finds it hard to go up the stairs.

I can't believe that Jack finds it hard to go up the stairs. Jack is the fastest, fittest trainer in the whole club. And now he finds it hard to go up the stairs?

'Take care', Mam says.

And I say 'Take care' too.

And I mean it.

We have a new teacher and she says there's a famous Irish person who once said 'Try again, Fail again, Fail better'.

I think that is the maddest thing I've ever heard.

The absolute maddest.

And nobody really understands it.

Try again, fail again, fail better?

And then she says, ok, talk about it with the person beside you in your pod.

So me and Mirha have a go at it and decide that it's about trying your best and not getting it right.

And then trying your very best and not getting it right.

And then we decide that trying your very best is better than trying your best even if you're still not getting it right. So you're making progress.

Kind of.

And then the whole class starts talking about it. And we decide it's about getting there in the end.

And then the teacher says 'Sure, absolutely but what if you never get there in the end?'

And that makes everyone go 'WHOOAAAH, WHOOAAAH, what's the point then?'

And she says 'Yeah, that's a good question. What is the point?'

And I have to tell you, my head is beginning to hurt by then. Thinking can really make your head hurt.

And Mohammad says, 'Let's just put it on the Wall of Interesting Bits and Pieces so we can think about it when we feel like it'.

And that's a brilliant idea. I want to run over and give Mohammad a high five.

Except that Mohammad's not in my pod.

So I give him a thumbs up instead.

So, it just goes up on the Wall of Interesting Bits and Pieces.

It's just up there. And sometimes, I look at it.

At first, I thought masks would be brilliant.

Just brilliant.

Because you could be talking to someone and making a face at the same time but they couldn't see you.

Aoife says you can absolutely, definitely, positively hide behind a mask.

That you can be making the maddest face in the world and no-one will know.

It's like a secret, mad face that no-one knows about.

But the thing is, people can see your eyes.

And you can figure out a lot from people's eyes.

I never knew that before.

I suppose if someone had said to me ages ago 'Hey Tommy, hello there. Now just wondering, how do you know what someone is feeling?'

I'd have said by looking at them. Just looking at them.

And then, if they'd said 'But Tommy, what if you can't see their face? Only their eyes?'

I'd have said, well that's that then. You can't figure it out how someone is feeling without looking at their face.

But I'd have been wrong.

Because you can figure it out.

By looking at their eyes. You can figure it out. Their eyes can get big or small or crinkly or frowny and you can kinda figure out if they're happy or sad or excited or scared or worried or cross or anything else.

And I NEVER, EVER, knew that before.

Richard Daw

They started moving towards me. Big and burly and flappy.

I knew I'd have to make my escape but how?

And so I did the only thing you can do in situations like that. I'd seen it done on the rectangle in the corner.

I raised my wing and pointed behind them. Trying to pretend there was something there.

And on the rectangle in the corner, the person who's being told to look in a certain direction, always looks in that direction and the other person makes an escape.

'Look!' I yelled. Just for effect.

But I don't think the seagulls had seen these programmes. Maybe they don't watch rectangles in the corner.

So they didn't look in that direction.

They just looked at me and came closer and closer.

I took a few steps back. And glanced left and right.

And in that moment, I must admit, I was scared, yes scared and also angry, yes angry. I was angry at the utter madness of these big, burly birds getting the better of an exceptionally smart budgie like me.

If it came down to sensible, rational arguments, I have no doubt I would win the day. And I was just about to explain to these seagulls what an exceptionally smart budgie I was when out of the blue a huge shadow fell over all four of us.

And as one, we looked up.

All of us.

Together.

Me and the three big, burly birds.

What exactly was happening? For a moment, I thought it was a building falling right down on top of us.

And even as an exceptionally smart budgie, it still took a moment or so to realise that the shape of this shadow looked familiar. Very familiar.

It wasn't a building.

It was a bird.

Another bird.

And suddenly out of the beak of this bird fell a bag, a paper bag, with chips in it.

Now, I know all about chips.

I know wingless creatures love chips.

And I know that the chipper at the corner of the street, which I'd just passed on my way to Australia, is the best place in the whole of Dublin to get chips.

The whole of Dublin, according to the wingless creatures in my house.

Anyway, the chips spilled out onto the ground and then, well then, madness set in.

The three seagulls started screaming and squealing and squawking and shoving each other out of the way to get near the chips.

It took a moment for me to realise that in the mad frenzy to devour these chips, they'd completely forgotten about me.

And I was just about to squeeze past all three and make my escape, when the shadow bent down and said 'Hey, this way' and pointed upwards with its wing.

It seemed like a sensible suggestion and so I flew up and up and up, getting more and more tired with the exertion of having to flap and flap and flap.

And below me the seagulls continued to scream and squeal and squawk and shove.

The shadow gestured to a wall nearby and I thought 'Not a bad idea' and so I perched there to catch my breath. By now, the shadow was a shadow no more. Instead, I could make out the form of an enormous, watchful bird who looked on as I puffed and panted and held my sides.

I turned to the bird to thank her for rescuing me from those pesky seagulls and without missing a beat, she looked at me in a funny kind of way and said 'Hello Richard Daw, how's your book getting on?'

Aoife

I've been thinking about my list. My list of favourite animals and I've decided to add in a number three.

Dogs, of course, are my number one.

It used to be spiders but now it's dogs.

I still like spiders. Spiders are really cool. So I'm keeping spiders. Papa says he was sitting on the loo when he was in Australia and he went to get some toilet paper which was under a flap and when he pulled out the toilet paper there was this enormous spider, just sitting there. It had been hiding, maybe asleep, just under the flap. And suddenly it was there in his hand.

Papa said he jumped so high he almost hit his head off the ceiling.

I'd say the spider probably did the same thing.

So spiders are moving to number two. And I've decided that my number three is bats.

I think spiders and bats kind of go together. They're both a bit scary.

And these are my reasons for liking bats:

1. A bat hangs upside down. Sometimes, I put my feet up on the back of the sofa and stretch all the way down to the carpet so I'm like a bat.
2. And a bat likes to go around at night. So do I. Sometimes I can't sleep. Sometimes I turn on the light and read my book right in the middle of the night. I don't think bats read books right in the middle of the night but they might if there were special bat books. And they could read them while they were hanging upside down.
3. Bats eat insects. And one time I ate a fly. I was out in the park and a fly got into my mouth and I'm pretty sure I ate it. Yucky fly!
4. The end.

But I might change all that. Sometimes I look over at my black bear on the window sill and I think I'll make black bears my number one. But I haven't decided yet. My black bear is a special black bear. It's not the same as all the other black bears. So I haven't decided yet.

The weird space between people is still there.

Sometimes I don't know what to do when I come across two people talking.

Do I walk right in the middle of them?

Do I jump into a ditch to try to avoid them?

Do I veer out into the middle of the road to get out of their way?

Sometimes it's really hard to figure out what's the right thing to do.

Emma in my pod caught the yellow and black germs. They're inside her now.

She caught them just like you catch the ball in camogie. Pity the yellow and black germs aren't like the ball in camogie. If they were, you could just throw it away.

If the yellow and black germs were like the ball in camogie, I would climb up the highest mountain and take that ball and wallop it away with my camogie stick. Far away except of course it would end up somewhere.

Daddy says there's no such place as away. So the ball would end up somewhere.

Plop!

And someone would pick it up and they wouldn't realise what they had in their hands and they'd bring it home and then after a while they'd have the yellow and black germs inside them. So that's not good.

Even if I threw the ball into the sea, I wouldn't want the fish to get the yellow and black germs. Poor fish, just swimming around doing their thing. They don't deserve to have yellow and black germs inside them.

It's like we're back in the first lockdown again. No school and just hanging around the house all the time.

For two weeks.

At first just our pod. Me and Hannah and Kwame and Conor.

And then the whole class.

All in our different houses.

Two seems like such a small number.

Two ducks.

Two pencils.

Two bags.

Two packets of crisps.

But actually it's a really big number. And staying inside for two weeks is such a pain.

Two rabbits.

Two jumpers.

Two worms.

Sometimes I lie in bed and I just think of two. It's like the number two is going around and around in my head.

It's so boring. And a special kind of boring. This is a boring that bumps into another boring and they become one big boring and that one big boring bumps into another one big boring and they become one enormous big boring. They become a mountain of boring.

Papa has decided that we should play board games. So we're playing lots and lots of Ludo.

We wake up. We eat. We talk. Daddy works. Papa cooks. I do computer school. We play Ludo. I'm any colour except yellow. I don't want to be yellow. And I don't want to be black. But that's ok because there's no black in Ludo.

We read a book. We watch TV. We eat. We go to bed.

When this is all over, I'm going to move to the park. I'm going to climb up into one of the trees and live there. Maybe build a tree house.

Papa says that's not such a good idea. He says I might be very busy when we come out of our own special lockdown.

I want to know why. He says, well you know, I'll be back at school properly and not computer school and things will be busy.

He says, for sure, for sure things will be busy.

Hannah

So we're at the supermarket and I ask Mam if we can buy a turnip.

I love turnip! I know you're not supposed to. But I do.

I love pizza and chips and sweets and chocolate but I also love turnip. I really love turnip

And it has the best colour ever.

Most veggies are green like peas and cabbage and spinach. But turnip has no colour.

Well, a kind of purple.

But not a real purple. And I know this because I've looked at it really closely with my glasses on.
It's a kind of no-colour-purple.

And here's the thing, when you cook turnip, it doesn't stay a kind of no-colour-purple. It turns yellowy/orange, instead.

It goes from no-colour-purple to yellowy / orange! Just like that!

So we do a big shop and we walk home carrying all the messages and we go into the flat. And Mam goes into her bedroom to get something and I start putting the messages into the press when suddenly out of the blue, I hear a sound.

It's not a scratching or a flapping.

Or a banging or a thumping.

Or a sighing or a singing.

No, it's a kind of...squeaking.

And I stand really still and just listen. And listen.

And then just as suddenly it stops.

And I think about the ghost of the boy who died of the virus walking around our flat in his squeaky shoes. I made up that story because Tommy was annoying me. But now I'm not so sure.

And I give a little shudder.

I don't think I'd ever given a shudder before.

Like a scary little shake.

Why do people say 'out of the blue'? Mam says maybe it means out of the blue sky but the sky bit got lost over time.

So it means something that comes out of the sky all of a sudden. Like rain but not actually rain.

And nobody was expecting it. At all.

Out of the blue doesn't make sense, though.

I think it would be better to say 'Out of the green' because most things don't live in the sky. Most things live here on the ground.

So I think it would be better to say 'out of the green' because of all the grass or 'out of the brown' because of all the ground or 'out of the grey' because of all the buildings.

But the park is my absolute favourite place and the park has loads of grass and trees so I would vote for 'out of the green'.

Aoife comes over to look at the cage. She says she's been thinking really hard about how Richard Daw disappeared.

She says maybe someone came in and stole him. But the door was locked and the windows were locked and there was no sign of anyone breaking in.

And anyway, do people steal budgies?

Do they, really?

They steal dogs but do they steal budgies?

During the first lockdown, the real lockdown, everyone wanted a dog.

They were stuck in their houses and their flats all day long and they began to think that having a dog would be so brilliant.

So loads of people went to the dog shelters to get a dog and loads of people went online to get a dog, so suddenly there was a dog shortage in Ireland.

Suddenly, there weren't enough dogs in the whole country so people began to steal dogs. I heard that on the news.

People began to sneak up on dogs when they weren't looking and grab them from behind. You'd have to grab a dog from behind and not in front. The front bit is the noisy, dribbly, bitey bit.

And they put the dog in a sack and threw that sack over their shoulder. And the sack would wiggle and squiggle and then they'd have to walk down the street and try to look really casual. Try to look like it's perfectly natural to have a wiggly, squiggly sack over your shoulder.

So suddenly we didn't have enough dogs.

It's lucky we don't live in a snowy country. If we lived in a snowy country, we'd need sleighs to move around because cars would be no good in the snow.

And we'd need huskies to pull the sleighs because huskies are better than reindeer at pulling sleighs. And if we ran out of huskies, we wouldn't be able to go anywhere.

We wouldn't even be able to go to the shops.

Aoife says that now some people are giving their dogs back because they didn't know that dogs like to go for a walk or that dogs like to bark or that dogs like to run and jump.

Aoife says they thought that dogs would be just like statues. Sitting there, all still and quiet.

And I think who are these crazy people who thought dogs would be just like statues? Sitting there, all still and quiet?

It's all about levels now.

So many levels.

Mam says that actually there are only 5 levels but I still can't figure them out.

And the thing is no matter what level it is, there's always something you can't do.

So it's just a case of figuring out what that is.

Sometimes you can't go out for pizza.

Sometimes you can.

Sometimes you can't do tennis lessons.

Sometimes you can.

Sometimes you can't have a friend over to your house.

Sometimes you can.

It's all very complicated, Mam says.

Richard Daw

Ok, that fairly got my attention.

'My book?'

'Yes, your book. Is it finished yet?'

'No, not quite yet' I said.

'Good', she said. 'Follow me'.

And with that, she led the way. Her wings were enormous. If you thought seagulls wings were big and flappy, these were even bigger and flappier.

'I'm afraid I can't keep up', I panted after a bit.

'Oh, sorry', she said 'hop on board'. By on board she meant, well I think you might know exactly what she meant.

And so I did. Hop on board that is.

Now, I've always considered myself an above average flyer.

But this bird was simply superb.

Superb.

And her wings were like two long, narrow canoes on either side. Floppy, flappy canoes.

Now, as an exceptionally smart budgie, I know I can do most things but the exceptionally smart part of me also knows about the things I can't do. And I have to tell you, it would have been simply impossible for me to fly like this bird.

'Hang on' she said as she swooped higher.

'How are you so good at flying?' I managed to shout down in the general direction of her ears at one stage.

'Well, it's what I do', she replied. 'Pretty much all the time. I fly to catch the sunshine. Sometimes heading South. Sometimes heading North.

I chase the sunshine! All over the planet!'

We arrived at a nest.

Yes, a nest.

Nothing surprising there.

But a nest like I'd never seen before.

Once inside, it was so soft and so snug that the only thing to do was to lie back and take in the colours.

And what colours!

Brown has always been a favourite. Mind you, the wingless creatures don't seem to like it. I've talk of mud-brown and dirt-brown and boring-brown and blah-brown.

But I strongly suspect that if you were to put all those browns in a line, the wingless creatures wouldn't be able to distinguish one from the other.

But back to the nest. It was made up of twigs and bark and bits and pieces of this and that with every shade of brown imaginable.

Bark- of-a-tree brown; grey-that's-trying-really-hard-to-be-brown brown; deep-deep-dark brown; sand-on-a-beach brown; sand-on-a-beach-with-shells-stuck-in-the-middle brown; sand-on-a-beach-that's-very-wet-brown; flash-of-a-mouse-running-over-some-stones brown; flash-of-an-otter-coming-out-of-the-water brown.

And then all those greens from the leaves woven in amongst the twigs: Grass green, heather green, eyes-of-that-wingless-creature-that-goes-meow green; with-just-a-hint-of-grey green; leaves-blowing-in-the-wind green, just-one-part-of-that-piece-of-material-flapping-about-high-up-a-pole green; long-soft-chair-that-the-wingless-creatures-like-to-sprawl-on-when-looking-at-the-rectangle-in-the-corner green; with-just-a-hint-of-blue green.

It was, I have to say, quite something.

And so I said, 'This is quite something'.

'It is, isn't it?' said the bird 'do you think it will make it into your book?'

'I see no reason why it wouldn't', I replied.

'My name is Harlequin Armitage, by the way,' said the bird 'and I'm pleased to make your acquaintance Richard Daw.'

Aoife

The day started off the same as ever. Breakfast.

I suppose everyone's day starts off with breakfast.

But this was a different kind of day.

This was the day the two weeks was over.

No more TV.

No more Ludo.

No more computer school.

I thought I was going to burst. Burst outside of the walls like one of those superheroes you see on TV.

I had it all planned. We were going to go to the park for a walk.

And maybe a go on the play-ground as well. Maybe a really long go on the playground.

And then Daddy says 'I don't think we'll get to the park today. Well, not straight away anyway. We have to collect a dog.'

It's a puppy. A small, bouncy puppy that someone had got during lockdown. A lockdown puppy. That's what the woman in the dog shelter says.

The woman says somebody came in with the puppy and said that they couldn't mind it any more.

Imagine, just like that.

And they left a little bit of money and said 'Sorry. Very sorry' and then they just handed the puppy over.

And as they were walking away, they turned and said 'His name is 'Bailey'.

'We can always change that', Daddy says, 'We can always change his name to something else'.

But I say, no. If that's his name, then that's his name.

'Why don't you call him to see if he'll run to you?' the woman says.

And so I do. And he does come running. Except not proper running. More a jumpy, gallopy kind of running. With his ears flapping. Like he'd just started having running lessons and wasn't very good at it yet.

'So, what do you think?' Papa asks.

'Yes,' I say. 'Yes, Yes, Yes.'

And then, just to be sure, I said 'Yes' again.

Richard Daw

I am, as I think I may have said before, an exceptionally smart budgie but with my book not yet out I hadn't expected to be recognised.

Not now, anyway.

In six months time, with my book out? Absolutely.

Absolutely in six months time.

But not now.

So how had Harlequin Armitage come to hear of me?

'Well,' she said, settling herself into her nest, 'I was flying from one pole to the other on one of my many trips to do a little sun-bathing, when I saw a ship underneath the clouds, bobbing about on the waves. I was feeling just a little weary and so decided to take a break and hang around on its rails for a while.

So while I was perched there, taking my breath, I had a look around the ship. It was exactly as you'd expect - ropes, masts, barrels that kind of thing.

And then I spotted a small, green and blue bird on the rail opposite. It was just sitting there looking down at the waves, no doubt admiring their majestic movements, up and down and up and down. And I couldn't help noticing a box nearby that was clearly being used as a nest.

Now, I have to say, as a bird who prides herself on choosing the right colours for the right occasion, I was quite taken with the colour tones of the twigs and moss and other bits and pieces inside that box. Quite taken indeed.

Anyway, I couldn't hang around too long. There were too many of those wingless creatures around the place.

But I know birds who know birds and those birds know other birds and I made some inquiries. I wanted to find out who this interloper on board the ship was, this stowaway that had such impeccable taste and that had somehow slipped on board unnoticed and was now bound for Ireland. All the way from Australia. And so I did. Find out, that is.'

And I have to say, listening to Harlequin Armitage tell that story, I did something that budgies rarely do. Something, in fact, that only those very familiar with budgies would be able to recognise.

I blushed.

Turns out, when Harlequin Armitage made her inquiries, she also discovered where I was living. Or rather where I ended up living, after the whole debacle of that wingless creature leaving the country and passing me onto someone else.

Passing me onto someone else!

Anyway, Harlequin Armitage had been hoping to make contact. And it was the sheerest of sheer luck that she had come upon the scene with those troublesome seagulls.

We were relaxing in her nest at this stage. Although, every now and then I found myself hopping over to one side or the other to examine those items with particularly delicate shades of brown or green.

‘All natural materials!’, Harlequin Armitage exclaimed, at one point.

No plastic here!

Not one bit.’

Aoife

I’m trying to teach Bailey to walk in a socially distant way.

I don’t want him to go into the weird space because who knows what could happen to him if he went in there?

Dogs aren’t as strong as humans and maybe he would die.

Right there on the spot.

Maybe he would just keel over and fall down.

Papa says dogs can go into that space no problem. And that no, they won’t die.

But I’m not so sure.

And what if he meets another dog and wants to sniff that dog? That’s not good, is it? You can’t sniff another dog in a socially distant way. And you especially can’t sniff another dog’s bum in a socially distant way.

Sniffing another dog’s bum has to be the worst thing a dog can do with the yellow and black germs out there, everywhere.

And what if Bailey catches the yellow and black germs? Will he turn yellow and black? Do dogs do that?

But Papa says, no. Things are different for dogs. They don't care about the yellow and black germs.

And the yellow and black germs don't care about them.

Hannah comes for a walk with me and Bailey.

Hannah and I are in our pod together so we don't have to be socially distant. But Hannah doesn't use 'socially distant' anyway.

Hannah uses 'faraway-friendly' instead.

And Hannah says she's been thinking of what to use when you're keeping away from someone you don't know at all. Someone you're passing in the street or someone who's beside you when you're buying frozen peas in the supermarket.

Hannah says she doesn't think you can say 'faraway-unfriendly' because that sounds a bit rude.

Hannah says she's been thinking and for the moment, she's going with 'faraway-not-friendly-but-very-sorry-about-that.'

And that's the day we see the bird. The Arctic Tern that travels from one end of the planet to the other. To get its summer.

I know it's that bird because I saw a picture of it in my book.

And it's perched on a wall looking at us. With its head to one side.

And I'm absolutely sure it's watching us. I know that sounds really strange but I'm absolutely, definitely, positively sure it's watching us.

Richard Daw

Harlequin Armitage wanted to know why I was going back to Australia.

'I need to finish my book', I explained.

'But can't you write your book here? Are you in a hurry back?'

I had to think about that. No, I wasn't in a hurry. No hurry at all, come to think of it.

And so we hung out together for a week or so, with Harlequin Armitage bringing me here and there, showing me where she'd picked up the bits and pieces that made up her nest.

It was fascinating.

And we had long conversations into the night about the right shade of grey to go with the right shade of orange and the right shade of red to go with the right shade of yellow and the right shade of pink to go with the right shade of blue and why brown and green were the most magnificent of colours.

‘Such a pity you’re going back’, Harlequin Armitage said at on stage. ‘If you were to stay here we could go into business together. You know, helping birds to upgrade their nests, using natural materials.

But no plastic.

Not one bit.’

And you know, it was a pity. Such a pity. But there you were. ‘Anyway,’ it suddenly came to me, ‘you’ll be heading off South soon enough to catch the summer down there.’

‘True’ said Harlequin Armitage. ‘That is true’.

So I was out and about one day, when I caught sight of one of the wingless creatures from my previous home.

And so, for old time’s sake – although it hadn’t actually been that long since I lived there - I followed the wingless creature back to my previous home.

Why not?

I snuck in through the bathroom window.

But couldn’t for the life of me find my cage.

I searched everywhere.

Everywhere.

And suddenly, there it was, behind the long, soft, chair that the wingless creatures like to sprawl on when looking at the rectangle in the corner.

No-one seemed to be around. The small wingless creatures seemed to be in other rooms and so once again for old time’s sake, I opened the door and hopped inside.

And there was only one thing to do.

Have a go on my swing.

Back and forth. Back and forth.

Still needs oiling, I thought.

I'm visiting the flat regularly now. When no-one's around, I slip in through the bathroom window and head to my cage.

Now, let's be clear here. I'm not a fan of cages. Not sure who came up with that idea but it's as good as barbaric. I'm sure those wingless creatures wouldn't like to be stuck in a cage, day after day.

Enough with cages I say.

It's odd, but I think I've actually missed the place. And particularly the swing. It was where I did all my best thinking.

One time, though, I almost got caught. I slipped into the cage when I thought no-one was at home and was swinging away quite happily when suddenly I could hear the telltale sounds of a wingless creature clattering about nearby.

So I grabbed the side of the cage with my wing and stayed stock still.

And the wingless creature who was hanging around the kitchen stayed stock still too. It was as if we were in competition with each other.

But after what seemed like a very long time, they went back to that all that clattering.

I've been thinking.

Australia is long way away. A very, very long way away.

And the truth is, I'm not sure I can go through that ship business again.

When Harlequin Armitage spotted me on the rail, I was quite probably, although far more likely it's quite definitely - and I'm sorry I have to share this with you - getting sick over the side.

I did that a lot.

It was my morning routine.

And sometimes at lunch.

And very often in the evening as well.

I think it's fair to say that the boat journey did not agree with me.

My biggest memory of that time is of me looking over the side of the boat at the waves going up and down.

And up and down.

And up and down.

Please excuse me for a moment. I'll be back in a.....

Ahem, so where was I?

Ah, yes right. So the more I began to think about it, the less enthusiastic I became about leaving the country.

Of course, Harlequin Armitage doesn't need a boat. She can travel all the way North and all the way South without sneaking on board anything. In fact, a boat would probably slow her down.

But life is not so easy for a budgie.

And if I were to stay here maybe we could actually go into business together? Maybe we could help birds to upgrade their nests?

But with natural materials only.

And no plastic.

Not one bit.

'What if you took over for the time I'm not around?' Harlequin Armitage was perched on the edge of her nest looking at me with her head cocked to one side.

It was very tempting.

What indeed?

But where would I stay during those colder months. Her nest was fine during the summer but no good for a budgie used to warm weather when the winter came.

'Well, what if you were to go back to those wingless creatures? And come and go from there?'

I had a long think.

'They will need training,' I said, 'They will need a substantial amount of training'.

Tommy

Mam says that the person at Johnny's work has definitely decided to get a bird - maybe a budgie or a canary or a parrot - so we need to take the cage out from behind the sofa and give it a bit of a clean.

So I go to the back of the sofa to get the cage.

Ok, if you're standing right now, I think you'd better sit down.

And you should have a cup of tea. People say cups of tea are very good for anyone who's had a big surprise or a bit of a shock and they're probably good for anyone who's *about* to have a big surprise or a bit of a shock as well.

You know the way grown-ups sometimes say 'Well, that took my breath away!?' Like they're so surprised or so shocked that they can't breathe for a tiny second?

And they do a gasp instead?

Just remember that for a moment.

So, I go to the back of the sofa to get the cage to give it a bit of a clean.

And Richard Daw is sitting there.

Inside the cage.

With the door closed.

And I can't breathe.

And I do a gasp instead.

A really loud gasp.

And Richard Daw looks at me and puts his head to one side and says 'Outside drainage'.

Mam must have heard my gasp because she comes running to see what has happened.

'Are you ok?' she says, looking all worried.

All I can do is just point at the cage.

I can breathe again.

But I can't talk.

Not one word.

Mam looks at the cage and says 'WHAT?'

And then Hannah comes running into the room. And she looks at the cage and says 'HOW?'

And then Johnny comes running into the room. And he looks at the cage and says 'WHAT? I mean HOW?'

Suddenly the whole room is full of 'WHAT's and 'HOW's.

We put the cage on the kitchen table.

Nobody says anything.

We just stare. Stare at Richard Daw.

And Richard Daw stares at us.

'Maybe Richard Daw really and truly is like Lassie and he found his way home!', Hannah says after a really long time.

'I think that's as good an explanation as anything else' Mam says.

I want to know if we should go to the guards.

But Mam says we can't go to the guards with a budgie that's not lost.

That's sitting in his cage.

And looking right back at us.

And so, we find the stand for the cage which is in beside the ironing board and the cover of the cage which is at the back of the hot press.

But I can't sleep that night. I can't sleep one wink.

I lie in bed looking at the ceiling.

I know this is a mad thing to say but I want to ask Richard Daw loads of questions. Buckets of questions.

Where did he go?

Why did he go?

Did he meet someone?

Does he have a friend?

But I fall asleep and have a dream about budgies and they're in a rock band playing budgie music.

And the budgie music is really bad.

The next day, I'm sitting looking at Richard Daw in the cage. And I'm thinking maybe Richard Daw is a kind of budgie superhero.

And then I have to go to the loo and when I come back into the room the cage door is open and Richard Daw is sitting there at the opening.

Ok, I think to myself. I didn't close the door properly.

And so I close the door properly.

And I look at Richard Daw and Richard Daw looks at me.

Hannah

One morning I go into the kitchen and Richard Daw is sitting in the cage with the door closed.

And I go out for a moment to get my purple and blue scarf with the orange flowers.

And when I come back in again, the door to the cage is open.

Wide open.

Richard Daw is sitting in the cage and the door to the cage is open.

This is happening more and more.

'Maybe the door to the cage is broken' Mam says.

So we put the cage on the kitchen table and open the door and close the door. And open the door and close the door. And open the door and close the door.

And it seems ok.

Absolutely ok.

And I say, let's do an experiment because we do experiments in school all the time.

Let's close the door and leave the room. And see what happens.

And so we close the door and leave the room.

Except Tommy and I peep back into the room to see what happens.

And it's very simple.

Richard Daw pecks and pecks and pecks at the door.

And the door opens.

And then Richard Daw looks over at us, right over at us, hiding behind the kitchen door and says 'Outside drainage'.

Mam says we have to have a family meeting.

'Should Richard Daw come to this meeting?' I ask.

'I suppose he should' Mam says.

So I put the cage on the kitchen table and we all sit around looking at Richard Daw, who's perched in the doorway with his head to one side.

'Ok', Mam says. 'First things, first, what do we know?'

'Well, we know Richard Daw is like Lassie,' Tommy says.

'And we know that he can open the door of the cage.'

Everyone nods.

And then Richard Daw flaps his wings and flies all around the kitchen. All the way around the kitchen and lands back on the doorway and hops into the cage.

'I think Richard Daw is telling us he wants the door open', Tommy says.

'I think that's exactly what he's telling us,' Mam says.

Aoife

I take Bailey to Hannah's flat and he runs around the place, sniffing here and sniffing there.

Hannah's Mam picks him up.

'He is such a cutie', Hannah's Mam says, 'such a cutie'.

Hannah says that when Bailey gets older she'll be able to practice her dog hair-dressing on him. She'll be able to cut his hair really short or maybe leave it really long and brush it nicely so it has some curls.

We're going to make lockdown cookies. Hannah's Mam says it doesn't matter that we're not in a real lockdown right now. We can still make lockdown cookies.

I go over to Richard Daw's cage.

When Hannah told me Richard Daw was back, I thought she was joking.

Absolutely, definitely, positively joking.

So I go over to Richard Daw's cage and Richard Daw is sitting there in the doorway. Hannah says they leave the door open now as he likes it that way. And anyway, he seems to have figured out how to open the door.

I go over to say hello. But Hannah says good luck with that as he's back to saying 'Outside drainage' all the time.

'Hello, Richard Daw', I say. 'Hello, Hello'.

'Hello there', he says right back.

Hannah

Everything goes crazy when Aoife and Bailey visit the flat.

Not first. First of all, it's nice and calm and Bailey is sniffing around the place.

And then Aoife goes over to Richard Daw to say hello and he says hello right back.

Right back at Aoife.

Tommy and Mam and me can't believe it.

But then Richard Daw is doing so many strange things right now that one more strange thing isn't that surprising.

Anyway, things are fine until Bailey spots Richard Daw and starts barking.

And barking.

And barking.

And Aoife goes to pick up Bailey but he manages to dodge Aoife and dive under the table. And then he kinda gallops, kinda bounces over to the cage and jumps up on the stand that the cage is on.

Now, he's not strong enough to knock it over but with all the barking, Richard Daw gets a bit of a fright and flies onto the shelf beside the kitchen table.

And Aoife is still chasing Bailey around the place, and by accident brushes up against the stand. And the cage comes clattering down and falls on the floor really close to Tommy.

And Tommy jumps out of the way and his arm hits the container with the flour for the lockdown cookies and the flour lands over Tommy and Bailey. And some of it floats up in the air and gets Richard Daw as well.

And all of this happens really, really, really quickly. It's like a tornado suddenly appears in the flat, goes spinning around the place and then out of the green, disappears.

So suddenly we're in the kitchen, with Bailey and Tommy and Richard Daw covered in flour and Bailey barking and barking and everyone just staring at each other.

And then we all burst out laughing.

Well, I'm not sure about Bailey or Richard Daw but the rest of us definitely do.

Absolutely. Definitely. Positively.

Tommy

Richard Daw has disappeared. He's gone again. He flew out the bathroom window and is gone.

Completely gone.

It all happened so quickly.

One minute he was there and the next minute he wasn't.

Mam grabbed a tea towel.

And I grabbed a tea towel and we tried to wave Richard Daw away from the window but he was too quick.

Far too quick.

Mam says well maybe he'll come back.

After all, he went away before and he came back.

Mam and Hannah and I decide to leave the cage on the stand. We decide not to put the cage behind the sofa and the stand in beside the ironing board like before.

Just in case.

Just, just in case.

And then one night, we go to bed and Richard Daw isn't there.

And we wake up the next morning and he is.

He's sitting there in his cage with the door open.

I think we will have to invent a new word for all of this. 'Crazy' isn't good enough. It doesn't do the job.

So we have another family meeting and we put Richard Daw's cage on the table.

Mam says she has never heard of a budgie who just comes and goes like that.

Johnny says that he's never heard of a budgie who just comes and goes like that.

I don't think there's anyone in the world who's heard of a budgie who just comes and goes like that.

Hannah and I say we'll do some research. So we take out the laptop and put 'budgie who comes and goes' and then 'budgie who flies out the window and comes back' into the search bar.

But all that comes up are loads of things about budgie food and then some stuff about what to do if your budgie flies *into* the window but not *out* the window.

So Hannah and I have a bit of a talk and we come to a conclusion. After a lot of talking.

Although we don't really come to a conclusion. We more or less land right on top of it, instead.

'Richard Daw is a budgie-dog, because he's like Lassie', Hannah says.

'And Richard Daw is a budgie-cat because he's well, like a cat', I say. 'He likes to come and go as he pleases.'

'So', we both say together, 'Richard Daw is half-budgie-dog and half-budgie-cat.'

'And we just have to deal with that', I say.

Richard Daw

The training is going reasonably well.

I think the wingless creatures are beginning to get the hang of things now and are leaving the door to the cage open.

At one stage, I was quite frustrated. At one stage, I actually considered taking out my notepad and drawing a picture of the door closed and a sad looking budgie and the door open and a happy looking budgie.

Or clearing my budgie throat and saying 'Excuse me, could I just get straight to the point here. I'd like the door of the cage to be left open. I can, as has been proven on numerous occasions open the door myself but it just makes life easier for everyone, I do believe, if we cut through all the nonsense and leave the door open all the time.'

That's the speech I had in my head. But I didn't actually say it.

I hung on it there, instead. I persevered.

And they came around to leaving the door open. Eventually.

So now it's time for the next stage.

While they're sitting at the kitchen table, I fly around the room and into the bathroom and out the window.

Well, I can hear the palaver when I'm making my exit.

They're running around, waving tea towels although I'm not sure what that's about.

Anyway, once I get out the window, I make for the nest of Harlequin Armitage.

Harlequin Armitage says that she spotted one of my wingless creatures out walking one day, with a wingless creature around the same size and another smaller, four-legged variety.

She says she watched them for a while.

Harlequin Armitage has made a point of getting to know, well let's call it my second nest and the wingless creatures that live there. She says that when she returns from her travels, she'll need to know where I might be just in case there's any problem.

She says that day she saw the wingless creatures together, the four-legged version was so much bouncier than the others.

So much bouncier and so much jumpier and so much noisier.

I put my wing to my head.

'Tell me about it,' I say.

Hannah

Tommy and I want to call RTE or upload a video to Youtube.

We could be famous. We could sell tickets to see Richard Daw.

We could have a sign outside the front door with 'Half-Budgie-Dog, Half-Budgie-Cat Living in this Flat!'

People could queue outside on the footpath and we could put those yellow stickers on the ground to keep them all faraway-friendly from each other and also faraway-*not*-friendly-but-very-sorry-about-that as well.

Richard Daw is sitting in the doorway of his cage. We're having another family meeting to decide what happens next.

We've never had so many family meetings.

Never.

Ever.

'Maybe Richard Daw likes things just the way they are.' Mam says.

So I decide to ask Richard Daw. 'Do you', I say looking straight at him. 'Do you like things just the way they are?'

And Richard Daw puts his head to one side, puffs out his chest and says 'Okey, dokey, Up Fairview Road, lockdown, lockdown, QU-AR-AN-TINE!'

And not one of us, not Mam or Tommy or me is even the teeniest bit surprised.

I don't think it will be possible for any of us to be surprised again.

Ever, ever again.

Because if you have a half budgie-dog, half budgie-cat living in your flat, nothing can surprise you.

And for a tiny moment, we look at him and he looks at us.

And then Richard Daw puts his head to one side and says 'Outside drainage!'

THE END