



## **Herb Robert**

The old man catches my attention first. He is all nose and shrunken cheeks. His overlong body is hunched and swathed in mothball tweed. An anachronism on legs with the mind of a child wrenched by panic. We have them here a lot. The monastery gardens soothe them. He's not surrounded by gibbering adults in wheelchairs, however, but an overstressed blonde in sensible trainers.

A pushchair is thrust before her like a shield, containing a pigtailed princess in pink. Beside them, a sullen schoolboy. He is in the half term doldrums; scuffed toes kicking gravel, hands in jingling pockets.

What treasures does he have secreted in those pockets, I wonder, but I resist the temptation to pry. We must have some secrets between us, my victim and I. The hobgoblin's prey must retain some mystery, else where's the fun for old Hob? I suspect the usual smelly boy accoutrements: odd shaped stones, a glutinous bird's half egg shell. Maybe a hairy toffee. I would rub my hands together in glee, but I don't want him to hear the rasping susurrations my palms would make. I am squatting in the tree right above their heads as they pause to check their much folded site map. To familiarise themselves with my playground.

I am most delighted when I find out that the child is named Robert. I squeeze myself tight with pleasure. I knew he was the one!

Robert, Robin, Hob, all the same by definition and diminution. We are fellows in name. Robin Goodfellows. Kindred spirits and souls just waiting to be reunited. I set good stock in a name and I love a good portent when it's thrust under my nose. Oh, this boy is mine. He is bored. Not listening. The mother is distracted by the wandering old man, the whinging toddler.

My stage is empty. I lean closer to hear the prologue of my play, then it will begin. The Drama of the day. The disappearance of a much beloved son and brother. A tragedy for five actors in three acts. Myself, of course, both hero and villain of the piece, my versatility is legend.

'Where shall we go first, do you think? Natalie, stop crying, love, we'll get an ice cream at the end. Bob! Stay close, please, Bob. We don't want you wandering off and getting lost, do we? Robbie, what do you think? Where shall we go first?'

Fed up, Robert shrugs. He always has to decide. Scatty Natty is always moaning for something to eat or drink and Grandad Bob's away with the fairies most of the time. He feels the smooth plastic edge of his Dad's penknife in his pocket and runs his thumb over the concealed spine of the biggest blade.

'Let's just go, Mum. We'll just see it all as it comes.'

She sighs with relief. Finally a decision. She's never been any good at decisions and when she's faddled by the other two, there's no hope of her thinking for herself. Robert smiles at her, gently and her eyes fill with never far away tears.

He turns away abruptly so as not to encourage her. Not that she needs much encouragement these days.

'This way then,' he says stoutly and they are away.

He senses Mum gathering Grandad Bob to her and he grins to himself as the old man disgraces himself again by farting. Stinky Bob. Especially after a plateful of cabbage and sprouts. But Mum says he needs the fibre to keep him going. Like he's a worn out old toy that needs special batteries to keep his motor running.

Out of the corner of his eye, Robert sees movement across the gardens. Someone in a brown robe with a hood. He strains his eyes, but the figure is gone. He hadn't realised that real monks still lived here.

He turns back to the wattle walls of the different herb gardens and squints at the first label.

'Medicine garden,' he reads carefully. He knows that Mum will be proud of him. He really struggles with his letters sometimes and he knows it pains her, but at eight, he is finally making some progress. Medicine is a hard word, but he recognises it from the hospital. Nuclear medicine always sounds to him like you were going to blow the sick people up, but he knew now that it was really just about looking inside their heads and bodies to see what was wrong.

'Hello, may I help you? I am a museum guide. My name is Brother Andrew. I can show you around if you like.'

Robert looks up into an empty brown hood and his stomach gives him a sharp thrill of panic. Then long, spidery fingers come out of triangular sleeves and peel the hood away to reveal a sandy bearded, sandy faced middle aged man with thinning hair.

'We'd love you to,' Mum says decisively and she grabs Grandad by the arm and tucks him in beside the pushchair like a spare cardi.

The voice drones on and on and Robert doesn't really listen. He drifts in and out of the conversation, cataloguing his football cards in his head and wondering what might be for tea. It is fish and chips night, but it's unlikely that Mum could afford a day trip out and a take away tea both in one day.

There is talk of digitalis for helping hearts and mint for the digestion. Robert sighs to himself and becomes aware of Mum throwing him a sharp glance.

He tries to pay more attention after that and a phrase catches his ear and snags. His cheeks flare. The mild voiced monk has just said quite clearly, 'And here we have one of my favourites, Stinking Bob!'

Robert grows very still inside himself and his cheeks zoom full of guilty colour. Has the monk overheard his thoughts? Has he been foolish enough to let the words slip out past his lips?

He watches the guy bend his long body down over a bed of mixed foliage and trap a brilliant red leaf between two of his fingers. Robert grimaces. It looks like raw liver.

'Lungwort,' the monk says gently. 'Robin in the Hedge. Otherwise known as Herb Robert. Like your young man.' He smiles up at Mum in a way that makes Robert feel strange in the tummy. She smiles back too, the way she does sometimes to Mr Wintermeyer the vacuum cleaner salesman who lives next door.

Robert hates that smile. To change the subject, he kneels down in front of the herb bed.

'Why do they call it that? Lungwort, I mean?' his voice comes out squeaky and panicked, but the adults just smile indulgently at each other over his head.

The monk goes into a long explanation of the lung shaped leaves, the medicinal properties, the history of its uses, but before Robert can stop him, he is crushing the leaves in his big fingers and holding them up to Robert's nose.

Robert reels back, disgusted. 'It smells like dead mice!'

'Robert!'

The monk laughs at Mum's horrified response. 'No, he's right. It reeks! Hence the nick-name Stinking Bob.'

Grandad laughs, too loudly, too harshly. Then he pokes Robert with his toe and tries to wink. 'Stinky Bob,' he wheezes, his cough starting deep in his chest. 'I'm Bob.'

He stops laughing then and his face grows still as if he has shocked himself. In a very small voice he whispers, 'I'm, Bob,' and he clutches at Mum's waterproof sleeve.

Natalie chooses that precise moment to set up her ice cream campaign again and while the monk reaches forwards to offer his services and his sympathy to the family group, Robert slips away.

So here is my opportunity and they have engineered it themselves. They have driven the boy away from their midst with their complications. He slouches off, barely looking back and before they realise he is gone, he is out of sight and out of range of their voices.

He is full of frowns. Sour smelling with anger. I hop from branch to branch lightly, occasionally catching his attention, but he squints up without focusing, then trains his eyes back on the ground. He expects to see a wood pigeon, or a squirrel, so that is what he will see if he gets a glimpse of me. Human brains amuse me.

They comfort themselves most when in the strictest danger. They are so easy to pick off.

Horses are my favourite, though. Stupid creatures afraid of their own tails. Cars annoy me. You can't turn a car off the track in the middle of the night and lead it and its passenger into a marsh to drown in the midnight mud. You can't make it rear and plunge and crack open its inhabitant's skull like a coconut on a rock. You can't stroke its pretty face and feel the heat of its fear blasting through hot nostrils to warm your icy cheeks.

But you *can* terrify a child.

Children are still partly prehistoric. Areas of their brain are still attuned to the flicker of flames in the cave entrance. The telling of tales. They can see imaginative plains that adults no longer even remember existing. It's this that excites my interest. The capacity for a child to terrify itself with the dark corners of its own slumbering nightmares.

I drop lightly to my feet in front of him. I stretch. Stand upright. Treat him to one of my more terrifying incarnations. As a shapeshifter, I have many choices at hand. As a sprite, I can move faster than light and am wittier than the most talented bard.

What I am not expecting is the look of sheer boredom on his face.

'What do you want?' he asks me mildly.

'What do I want?' I pull myself up to my full height, displaying purple ribs barely laced with rancid flesh. My frog-like muscular legs flex beneath me and my magnificent feathers shimmy on my neck like jewels. I plunge towards him with a screech. 'I want YOU!'

He blinks, very slowly. Then he folds his arms.

'And what do you want me for?'

I straighten. My claws scratch my sides when I rest them on scrawny, underfed hips.

'I might want to eat you.'

He shrugs. 'Not much meat on my bones. Not much more than on yours. I might as well say I'm going to eat you.'

I feel myself blinking rapidly, my brain racing. I consider a modification further down the scale of my sophistications. Maybe something scaly. Warty. Maybe something with fur and sharp teeth. While I consider this, he slowly unfolds his arms and ostentatiously reaches into his pocket for a yo-yo.

He begins to spin the thing slowly, almost lazily and I find myself watching the twinkling lights that flare inside the little sphere each time he snaps it back up to his fingers. It is most mesmerising.

'So what else can you do?'

I open my mouth, then stop myself. I can't justify myself to a child. He is meant to be cowering before me, giving up his sanity to me, so that I can leave him wandering and hollow, never to be returned to his wits. Instead, he just keeps up the slow blinking, the gentle hypnotism of the sparkly yo-yo.

'I can be invisible.'

'Show me.'

I fade and wait a moment. Clearly, he is unimpressed.

'Can you stay that way for a long time?'

'As long as I chose.'

He flicks his wrist and the yo-yo goes horizontal. It hits me square in the chest and makes me step back, slightly winded.

'Hm,' he says under his breath. 'That's no good.' Then louder. 'Can you be very small then, so no-one could bump into you? Or could you fly?'

I land on his shoulder, a tiny bluebottle-sized speck. 'How's this?' I murmur in his ear.

'Perfect,' he whispers and his quick little fist closes over me and I am covered in a film of salty human damp. I feel faint. Panic envelops me, but before I can gather my wits about me, he had dropped me into a tiny plastic box and closed the lid on top.

'There,' he says softly, his voice huge and echoing in its vastness around the edges of my world.

'You got my Grandad, you got my Dad, but you didn't get me and you won't get anyone else. I'm going to bury you underneath the Herb Robert and see how you like it down there with the real dead mice and the roots and the filthy soil.'

He puts the little box into the darkness of his pocket and I curl myself up tight and close my eyes.

I don't like the dark.

I don't like the smell of the soil and the coldness of the stones and the roots and the crunchy little bones of dead things. I try to stretch myself bigger and make myself seen and heard. I try a roar of indignance but all I hear in the echoey little space of this awful, soulless box is a whimper.

Maybe the cave has finally disappeared from the mind of at least one child. Maybe the flickering flame in this boy's head is no longer fuelled by superstition and fear.

I was right about one thing though, we are kindred spirits. Robin I'th'Hedge he has been all along; young Hob, come to steal away my crown and place it on his own clever head.

The mother still simpers up to the man in the robe, distracting him as the boy lifts me into the sunlight once more and begins surreptitiously to dig with his hands. The old man claps his hands with glee.

The darkness swallows me up and I settle down to sleep.

Until spring.

When the herb beds are dug over and tidied up for the start of the new tourist season.