

## In the Cupboard

She juggled the shopping bags with the front door key, looked glumly up at the For Sale sign, thought about kicking it but dismissed the thought.

She knew she should slow down, haste never got you anywhere but in a muddle but the shriek sound of the smoke detector on the other side of the door insisted she hurried.

'Sod it.' She mumbled, throwing both bags onto the floor and ramming the key into the lock.

Jess stood beneath the detector wafting an ineffectual tea towel under its nose. A strong smell of something that had recently been cremated filled the kitchen and hallway.

'Jess, keep the front door open and it'll stop!' Shouted Sally as she stumbled through the door.

'It's cold out there though.' Jess whined, still flapping the tea towel as the alarm howled.

'Who was burning what?' Demanded Sally, leaving the front door wide open. The alarm admitted defeat and stopped screaming.

Jess pointed at her brother standing guiltily at the kitchen door.

Sally nodded, 'Since when is your 7 year old brother allowed the cooking rights in the house and where exactly is granddad?'

'In the cupboard.' Jess said.

'What cupboard?'

'Under the stairs.' Answered Jess as she began to climb said stairs, 'and he's locked it.'

Sally looked from her retreating daughter to the cupboard uncertain how to respond.

'Since when did the cupboard have a lock on it?' She demanded.

'Since grand-dad fitted one.' Shouted Jess in response.

'Right, that makes sense then.' She mumbled to herself and knocked on the cupboard door.

'Granddad are you in there?' Sally called, half hoping that his reply would come from his armchair in front of the telly – no such luck.

'Yes love, I'm in here. Getting ready for the war you see.'

'No granddad I don't see. We're not at War, haven't been for at least 70 years now.' She placed her forehead against the door and willed it to open.

'What if we pretend to be air raid sirens, will granddad come out then?' Charlie asked from his perch by the kitchen door and then proceeded to make 'waaa, waaa' sounds at the top of his voice.

'Charlie, that's not helping!' Shouted Sally.

'What you doing Charlie? That sounds nothing like an air raid siren.' Jess said scornfully making her way back down the stairs.

'Who are we at War with?' Asked Charlie.

'No one dear, we are not at War with anyone.' Answered Sally.

'Who were we at War with then?' He continued, Sally knew this could be a long conversation once Charlie decided he needed information.

'It was a World War, but we are not at War with anyone now.'

'What the whole world was at war?' Charlie looked incredulous.

'Except the Swiss!' Granddad's voice echoed from behind the cupboard door. 'They were too busy making cuckoo clocks to be at war with anyone.'

Sally slapped her palm against the cupboard door, 'Right, out now granddad, if you can make stupid jokes about the Swiss, you can get out of the cupboard!'

She swore she could hear him chuckling and took a deep breath to stop herself from kicking the door.

'Hellooo' he walked in through the open front door, 'Shit' thought Sally, 'why didn't I lock the sodding thing?' And what was he wearing!

A vision in tanned leather trousers with a collarless white shirt and matching leather jacket stood before her. His newly blonde bleached hair gelled in alarming peaks on his head.

"Mid life crisis anyone?" Sally thought but said 'What are you doing here James?'

'I called him.' Jess responded. 'I figured dad could help get granddad out of the cupboard.'

James smiled and the intense whiteness of his teeth almost blinded Sally.

'Some one dropped shopping bags at the front door.' He pointed.

"Why are you pointing, I know where the sodding front door is!" Sally wanted to scream but instead mumbled 'I know, it was me, the smoke detector ..' she tailed off, why was she explaining anything to him? Why couldn't he have picked the sodding bags up and brought them in? Worried he might damage his nails perhaps? Christ he was an irritating twonk, what did she ever see in him?

'Nice car dad.' Jess said carrying the offending shopping in.

Charlie ran to the front door 'Wow dad it looks like one off the telly. Can I have a go?'

Sally was looking at him coldly.

'You've got a new car? I thought you had to sell the old one to pay for your rent, you know for the one bedroomed flat I've made you rent in dumpsville?'

James continued smiling like an over eager crocodile who happened to have an over eager dentist. Sally wished he would stop, the glaring whiteness was bringing on a migraine.

Charlie wandered down the garden path, keen to see the new car, the excitement of granddad being locked in a cupboard moving further down the list of important things in his head, just below the possibility of being at war. His eyes were round and huge taking in all the shiny details, like all small boys including grown ones he was dazzled by its beauty.

The passenger door opened and she eased herself out, she stood like an Amazonian ice queen glaring down at Charlie as he came within touching distance of the car. Charlie looked up at her.

'Hello, my name's Charlie, I've come to look at dad's new car. Who are you?'

'It's not your dad's car Charles, it' my car and who I am is totally irrelevant to you.' She replied looking over Charlie's shoulder towards the house.

'My granddad's Charles, I'm Charlie. My granddad's in the cupboard. What does irrelevant mean?'

'Of course he is.' She sighed and began to walk towards the house, looking back at Charlie she hissed 'leave the car alone Charles, it's alarmed. I'll know if you so much as breathe on it.'

Stepping through the front door, witnessing the domesticity in all its glorious colour – Jess sitting on the stair, head down, all concentration fixed on her mobile phone. James and his God awful drudge of a wife in the hallway arguing, a smell of something burnt cloyed at the air. "Oh my God" she thought "has someone been cooking fish fingers? Do people still eat fish fingers?"

Sally stopped talking, Jess's head lifted from her phone, both mother and daughter stared at the stranger who had walked into their home unannounced and uninvited.

'Can I help you?' Sally asked.

'Ah,' stammered James 'this is Jules, I mean Julia.' And he stopped talking as if just her name was explanation enough.

'Julia? You mean Julia from your office?' Sally said aghast.

'He means Julia his boss, yes. Close your mouth Sally, it's not a flattering look. Did James not tell you? No, of course not, why would he? We are coupling together.' Julia smiled regally and Sally wanted to punch her, hard.

Did she just say “coupling” – is that even a word? Sally looked at James, James looked sheepishly back.

‘So your grandfather, in the cupboard is he? Please don’t tell me he’s under the stairs, like an aged Harry Potter. James, get him out of there. We can’t have a sitting tenant, it would devalue the house. Of course, if he has a dementia then we can pop him in a home for people with that sort of thing.’

‘My dad is not demented!’ Sally cried, her hands bunching into fists.

‘Well why is he in the cupboard then dear?’ Julia asked not unreasonably.

‘Because of the war.’ Charlie replied stepping in to the house. ‘She won’t let me touch the car dad.’ He whined.

‘Of course, the war. Why on earth did I not think of that?’ Julia smiled, her eyes gleaming.

‘James, I forgot to tell you.’ Sally’s voice had taken on a dark edge that James recognised all too well, he took an involuntary step away from her. ‘The house, it’s not for sale, not now, not ever in fact.’ She smiled tightly at him.

‘But Sal, we agreed, we sell the house, split the proceeds. I get a place, you get a place. You don’t need all this room, the gardens will be too much for you. You won’t be able to afford the upkeep. It makes sense, you know it makes sense.’ He was almost pleading.

Sally took a step forward, James took another step backwards.

‘You too sweetheart.’ Sally indicated to Julia and began to usher them both out of the front door.

‘This house, it’s my house, mine and the kids and granddad’s. If you want a slice of it, then you will have to fight for it. Now go couple elsewhere.’ She slammed the door and leant heavily against it.

‘Go mum.’ Said Jess from her stair.

Sally walked over to the cupboard and tapped lightly against the door.

‘Cup of tea granddad?’

‘Yes please love, glad to hear the war’s started then. Knew you weren’t one to give up without a fight.’ The lock to the cupboard door slid across and granddad came out blinking into the light.