

SLEEPING BAGS

The very ancient Mrs Dudds was left for some time outside the fish-shop on Patagonia Boulevard. It was a cold day, and she was wrapped up warmly, at her insistence, in three travelling rugs, of the sensible tartan variety and a large overcoat which had belonged to her Johnny. Her Johnny had been a lighthouse-keeper for many years and his great-coat had kept him warm when the blizzards from Iceland swept in over his station. So it was good enough for old Mrs Dudds that cool August day. The tartan rugs were in fact not merely sensible tartan but very sensible indeed; one could, had one so desired, have wrapped up a Napoleonic battalion on their retreat from Moscow in three such rugs and brought them safely home to their loved ones in Burgundy and the Ile de France. Mrs Dudds was once the Chairwoman of several local charities and so knew much about sensible rugs and tartans.

So Mrs Dudds was warm enough in her wheelchair outside the fishmonger's shop. Inside the shop, her son, fifty years old now but you would hardly trust him to go

out on an errand, was queuing for plaice and bream and haddock and herring and crab and lobster and fillet of sole and other such fishy delights, with which to make Mrs Dudds' favourite tea, a kedgeree with rice and boiled eggs and fish therein. Also inside the shop stood in line at least half of the town, it being a Saturday morning and Mr Sabado Domingo really should have given up the business by now to his three strapping sons, but he refused to do so and so continued to serve at his own pace. Mrs Dudds tutted to herself and roundly condemned Señor Domingo under her breath. The small child beside her, also parked in a push-chair, opened its eyes wide at what Mrs Dudds was saying and its nose quivered slightly.

"Impertinent child!" muttered Mrs Dudds, fidgeting with her many layers of warm woollen rug and the mufflers which kept her warm as the breeze wafted down Patagonia Boulevard. "Don't listen to conversations which do not concern you! Hasn't your mother taught you anything? Mothers these days...!" She contemplated the ways of the modern world for some minutes; and found the world unforgivably lacking in morality, standards, patience, wisdom and plain common sense. She muttered at her son, who had not succeeded in moving much into the shop at the back of the queue and she muttered at Señor Domingo for

being such an incompetent Spaniard and for having red-faced sons and at Mr Gambon the greengrocer for having dared to take two weeks' holiday last month. She muttered at the weather turning so much colder these days and at the noisy cars which passed by. She muttered at the unfortunate small child beside her, and the small child shrank a little more in its push-chair.

Although her son was now a strapping lad, greying at the temples, and owner of a large car, he seemed to be no good at pushing his way to the counter. "Dreadful shop," she said to those who had now joined the back of the queue, "Dreadful man, don't buy his fish!" Since everyone appeared to ignore her, she turned her wrath on the unfortunate child in the push-chair beside her. "What are you snivelling about, you little wretch? You should be running about playing football or something, not lazing around in a pram!" "Children these days," she muttered, looking round to see if there were any more such spoiled brats loitering near the fish-shop.

When she looked back, the infant in the push-chair had vanished. The push-chair was still there, but it was empty. "Run off, most likely," snorted Mrs Dudds, remembering that children used to run away from her when she was a school-teacher. Then a sudden thought struck her: what if the child had run out into the road? What if had gone off to play football and even now was

being kidnapped by some evil man in a large black car? Would everyone blame a poor old woman like herself for encouraging the wicked child in its waywardness? This would be an utter disgrace and a blot upon the House of Dudds; and she might not be able to show her face outside the fishmonger's shop ever again. Mrs Dudds looked around desperately. No sign of it; just the empty push-chair with its snug warm sleeping-bag attached. Childless.

"Oh Lord," she muttered. "Help! Help!" she shouted, weakly. The people at the back of the queue looked at her oddly. "Help!" she called more forcefully, "Help! Someone's taken the child!" There was a fishy commotion inside the shop, and then a woman came rushing out, panic-stricken, closely followed by one of the young Messrs Domingo clutching a plaice by its feet. Then, to the amazement of Mrs Dudds, the woman knelt down at the child's push-chair and extracted the child, like a rabbit from a conjurer's hat, from a cosy and dark hidey-hole at the bottom of the bag.

"How on earth did you do that?" gasped Mrs Dudds in sheer astonishment. "Oh! Oh! You nasty child – what a fright you gave me. Oh Johnny! Johnny!" With the shock old Mrs Dudds subsided into a fit of heavy breathing and sobs. Soon there was a large crowd around her, some taking the side of the unfortunate

small child in this matter, others standing up for the right of old ladies to take issue with the world, others merely professional spectators of the Human Condition. At last young Bill Dudds managed to fight his way through the crowd to his mother.

“Where were you!?” she demanded of her son. “It’s been simply awful out here. I’ve had such a horrible fright!” She shook her fist weakly at the small child in the push-chair beside her. The child was relieved that, just then, its mother stowed her shopping away and set off with the push-chair down the windy Boulevard. Leaving Mrs Dudds to find out that her useless boy had lost his place in the queue and had still not got the fish which were required.

Young Master Dudds re-joined the end of the queue and slowly inched his way back into the shop. He wondered, as he did many times a week, why he still put up with the behaviour of his mother. Sometimes he wished No, that was not a filial thing to think. No, he didn’t wish that at all. But sometimes he wished—

Ancient Mrs Dudds fidgeted once more in her wheelchair. Although the sun was now out and shining warmly, oh but there was a cruel breeze! “I’m getting too old for all this,” she thought to herself. “No one wants me any more.” Her old eyes filled with tears as she thought of all the changes in the modern world: the

shops that were closed or taken over by arrant fools and knaves; the newspaper editors who jumbled up all the pages in the daily paper; the supermarkets which put everything on shelves out of reach; the Council officials who were never there when you needed them. The world was all upside-down and gone to the dogs. Too much for an old lady like herself. And she knew that her son resented her. What was a poor mother to do...?

When Bill Dudds finally emerged from Sabado Domingo's shop, exhausted and hungry, clutching the two small kippers, which was all that Señor Domingo had left at that time of day, he was startled to find his mother's wheel-chair, complete with its blankets: but no mother! He looked up and down the pavement – no sign of her. Had she wandered off into the road? – no sign of a commotion, nor ambulances nor any grave-looking policemen. He began to get nervous: what could have happened?

He decided that the best plan was to go down to the police-station and report a missing mother. He stowed the two kippers in the string shopping-bag and set off pushing the abandoned wheelchair. As he went, he knew he was depressed for the two kippers seemed to weigh a great deal.

At the police-station, the officer behind the desk at first refused to believe him. "Perhaps she's gone home?" he proposed, annoyed at having had to leave his cup of tea. "Did you look in the library?" he quizzed, knowing that many old people end up there on a summer's day. "Have you tried the bowling green at the Park?" he demanded to know. What about the pub? The Cyber Café? The shop round by the station which sells corsets? The police-officer was admirable in the breadth and scope of his imagination. But, after about twenty minutes, even he had to concede that there might be a case for recording the ancient Mrs Dudds as a Missing Person. There were forms to complete, several in triplicate. Bill Dudds had some difficulty in filling them in: "Physical Description" was a tricky one. "Any Distinguishing Features?" was not so difficult, but he ran out of space and had to ask for a second sheet of paper. While he filled this extra one out, the policeman read the first sheet and muttered "Sounds just like my old mum..." and sighed.

After about an hour, Bill Dudds and the police-officer had done as much as they could do. Every panda-car had been notified and were scouring the very streets, parks and public-houses of Inverarity. All that Bill Dudds could do was take the wheelchair back to his mother's house and consider the kippers for lunch.

Just as he was put the key in the lock of Mrs Dudds' front-door, there was a stirring under the blankets on the push-chair, as of some large cat fighting its way out of a sack (a not uncommon occurrence in Inverarity). Startled, Mr Dudds watched. The sensible tartan blankets heaved and tossed, sharp objects appeared to poke them from beneath. Finally, the upheaval subsided and all went quiet. Cautiously Bill Dudds approached the wheelchair, and carefully peeled back the blankets. And there was his mother, weak, eyes red-rimmed, but with a smirk on her face. "There," she said triumphantly, "You were worried, weren't you?"