

"I'm *not* panicking! I'm *not*, I'm *not*!" Mum was panicking. Granny was due to turn up in ten minutes, Granda and Grandma in half an hour and she had only just managed to persuade old Mrs Lurcher from round the corner that she should **not** come as well. The house was immaculately tidy, scarcely a cushion out of place. All the debris from the previous day was cleared away (woe betide anyone foolish enough to open the cupboard in the hall - an avalanche of boxes, wrapping paper and tinsel would surely smite them down!).

It was Boxing Day, and that was the day the ancient generation would come round for sherry and sandwiches.

"Look, Kats, Granny will be here in ten minutes and I can't find the picture she gave us last year - you know, that horrible one with the flowers which look like an explosion in a paint factory. See if you can find it - look in the Cardboard Box Room."

Kats leaped up the stairs two at a time. Most of the stuff which had to be set out was held in the wall-to-wall cardboard boxes in the Cardboard Box Room. A handy room - it also served function as her parents' bedroom. But sometimes things were just not there, had, for one reason or another, escaped their cardboard boxes; or had been taken out for a jumble sale and then not put back properly when it was decided that they should not be given away. She had only just succeeded in finding her Dad the cardigan he had been given the previous year by Granny, so that he could wear it for picking her up in the car. It was finally discovered in a plastic bag behind the bicycles, where Mum kept the stuff for giving to Oxfam. With only moments to spare, Dad had donned the bright red cardigan which looked like a life-jacket for a Sumo wrestler and dashed out to the car. The car already had Granny's cast-off travelling rug ("It came in very handy indeed when you were children, dear!") on prominent display on the back seat.

"Laurence! Laurence!" shrieked Mum, "Where are you?"

Laurence emerged from living room. "Here, Mum".

"What have you been doing - I need you now!" scolded Mum.

"I was putting the curtains up, like you told me - you know, the ones that Grandma gave us two years ago with the huge sunflowers on them."

"Oh yes, sorry, I forgot. Well, never mind, if you've done that, could you put away the scarves and gloves lying in the hall, and look out the rather tasteful ones which Granny knitted for your last birthday - you know, the ones with things like melting snowmen all the way round."

"Where are they, mum?" asked Laurence.

"Oh, I don't know - just look until you find them; they'll be in one of the cardboard boxes - and hurry! Dad will be back with her in a minute. Now, where on earth did I put the box with the sherry glasses that belonged to Dad's grandfather; Granny will never speak to me again if I don't put them out..."

Kats arrived back downstairs in triumph. "I found *all* the pictures, Mum. Look, all five of them."

Sure enough, there was a set of five pictures in ghastly lime-green frames, each with a different view of the disaster at the paint-factory.

"Oh, well done, Kats. Right, take our pictures off the wall, and stick these ones up."

By now, the dining-room was a mass of empty and half-empty cardboard-boxes, as sets of china, cutlery, sherry-glasses were unearthed from storage and set out.

Kats had only just managed to get the last picture up when she saw Dad driving up in the car, Granny on board.

"Here they are, Mum!" she shouted. There was a scream of panic from the dining-room.

"Don't let her in here!"

Laurence piled the gloves and scarves in the hall, put on his slippers with the barking dogs attached and opened the front-door.

"Merry Christmas, darling!" croaked Granny. "Where's my sherry?" Granny was escorted into the living room.

"Oh, how lovely!" she said, "You've still got that old footstool I gave you. Isn't the embroidery just lovely on that. And the pink goes so well with your green carpet. Here, let me sit down."

Granny heaved herself into the comfiest armchair and put her feet up. Laurence brought in the sherry bottle and the glasses and poured his grandmother a very large drink.

"Oooh! not quite so much, you'll make me tiddy!" protested Granny, seizing the glass. "Now tell me all about your Christmas presents." She gripped Laurence by the sleeve and imprisoned him for interrogation.

Dad came in, his cardigan blaring like a hazard signal for a nuclear meltdown. He looked around the room surreptitiously. His face suddenly blanched and he darted out again. In less than thirty seconds he came back, something concealed in the folds of his cardigan. Whilst Laurence shouted into Granny's hearing-aid, Dad crept round behind her and placed a rather weedy looking plant in a filthy pot-holder on the window-sill.

"Isn't your plant looking well, Mum!" he shouted. "Remember, that's the one you gave us at Easter two years ago?"

Granny turned round and looked. "Hmph!" she said, "I don't think you've been taking care of it. Looks as if it's been in a box for a year! I don't know why I gave you it!"

Just then, the doorbell rang. It was Granda and Grandma arriving.

"Now, Kats," whispered Dad urgently, "Put out all those cushions Grandma embroidered." "Hello, Grandma, Granda! How are you? Did you have a good journey?"

"Oh, where are my little darlings?" shouted Grandma, disappearing up the stairs in pursuit of Laurence. The boy only just had time to unbox and put on his knitted pullover as she swept him off his feet. "Oh, and he's wearing Grandma's pullover - just fancy! Is that your favourite?"

Laurence, the breath squeezed out of him, could only nod weakly.

Kats had discreetly placed the cushions on the free armchairs without Grandma noticing; luckily, Mum had come through with (Grandma's) tray with the sandwiches on (Granny's) plates, and was sitting talking about the lovely silk scarf which Grandma had given Mum as a present.

Dad ushered Granda in. "Take a seat then, Granda. Look, I think this is all that remains of the whisky you gave me last year - want some?"

"You won't get any out of me this year," muttered Granda grumpily, "I don't think you appreciate it!"

"No, no!" protested Dad, "It was great! I've only just kept this little droppie back so that you could have some."

Kats passed round the sandwiches, Grandma having released her grandson and returned. There was a lull in the conversation as false teeth worked away at the food and sherry was slurped. Dad sneaked away in the middle of it - he had just remembered that there should have been a nest of fake mahogany tables somewhere: Granda had, in a fit of unaccustomed generosity, bought them for when they had moved into this house. Somewhere there was a large cardboard box...

"Kats, my child," said Granny suddenly, "I see you're not wearing that hairband I gave you for your birthday - don't you like it?"

Kats heart froze. "No, no," she stammered, feeling at her hair, where she wore the hairband which Grandma had given her. "It's just that -"

"But Kats is wearing the hairband which *I* gave her for Christmas, aren't you, my darling?" said Grandma, bridling up and looking at Granny in a superior manner. "She can't very well wear two, now, Mrs Wallace, can she!?"

Granny humphed and turned her attention to her sherry-glass, where the level was dangerously low. Laurence grabbed the fast-emptying bottle and topped her up.

Granda eventually diverted his attention from the tv which he had switched on. "Last time I was here there was a bonny cherry-tree in blossom outside," he complained, "Where's it now?"

"Oh Kats, dear," said Mum, "Just nip out and put back the cherry-tree - I brought it in this morning to keep it out of the cold."

Kats darted upstairs. She had seen a box marked "Cherry Tree" up there. Now where was it...? There was a section marked "Plants", just beyond the "Uninterrupted Views" section ("Until they put that office-block up, I had uninterrupted views of..." - various items). "Plants" - probably in there. Sure enough, when she got the box down, there was a sweet scent of blossom and a tree inside with amazing white and pink flowers. She ran outside with it and stuck it in the garden.

"Aye, that's the one," said Granda with some satisfaction.

Just then, the door-bell rang. Dad muttered something quite unrepeatable and dashed to the front door.

"Oh, Mrs Lurcher, what a nice surprise!"

"What do you mean, surprise?" demanded old Mrs Lurcher, who was one of Granny's cronies, "Your wife invited me here for twelve, didn't she? And they're not the socks I gave you for your Christmas!?"

"Um, no... of course...come in..."

But it was no good - Mrs Lurcher had already pushed past. Dad went upstairs, a broken man. "Change my socks..." There was a sob in Dad's voice.

Downstairs, the sherry-bottle was almost empty. Mum fetched the next set of liqueur bottles from the box in the kitchen marked with a skull and crossbones - the Spanish blueberry liqueur which Granda had foisted on them some years back and which might have powered a fleet of polluting lorries, the bottle of vinegar with a grubby label from Granny last New Year (she thought it was a brandy) and Mrs Lurcher's home-made raspberry cordial with that lacerating

razor edge to it. Each of the guests nodded with approval as the bottles arrived; but noticeably avoided drinking any of them. Granny grabbed the sherry bottle to wring the last drops out, Granda and Mrs Lurcher between them went for Dad's best malt whisky, Grandma smiled beatifically over a cup of coffee.

Grandma looked around, then turned to Mum. "Now, didn't I once give you a - oh, what's it called again? - a..." Dad and Mum froze, panicking; Kats and Laurence got to their feet, poised like top athletes ready to race through the house in another wild search. "Ah yes, there it is, that lovely rug on the floor there. Doesn't it look nice?" Everyone relaxed again, the crisis over. Good old Dad, he had remembered the rug at the last moment that morning, and got it from its cardboard box and hoovered it as if it had always had a home.

"Aye, but," said Granda in that tone of voice which permitted no dissent, "Aye, but in my day it always snowed at Christmas. Not now though"

It was Laurence's turn. From upstairs there came the sound of boxes being opened up. Not these ones in the "Streets With No Cars" section, although they were great favourites of the older generation who could remember when cars were about two to a street. H'mmm - maybe in the "Warm Summers etc" box? - no, here we go: "Snows of Yesteryear". Laurence took the box down and carried it to the open window. He shook out the contents. Flurries of snow began to fall. "Oh, how beautiful!" exclaimed Grandma.

Outside, the trees turned white and traffic ground to a halt.

Laurence eventually came back down, his hands blue with cold. Dad patted him on the head.

Granny smacked her lips. "Well, that's the sherry gone. Jessie," she said, turning to her friend Mrs Lurcher who was wolfing the last egg sandwich, "I think it's time to go - you've still got some of that nice sherry from the corner-shop, haven't you? Well, my dears, thank you for a lovely time. You've still got a lovely house. But I think you might want to throw a few things out - your house is getting very crowded. Too many cardboard boxes, for one thing. Come on, Jessie, I hope your house is warm..."