

Generosity

There's a police car parked in our street, like a flashing neon light. *Here's the criminal*, it says, *everyone come and have a look*. Just now, though, the car's empty. Where have they gone? They're somewhere up the street, aren't they, making inquiries about me. I know they're just biding their time.

How could I have been so stupid? I rub the cardigan's soft wool between my sweaty fingers, and I stare down, hating it. I think, this is the end. I'll lose my job for sure. And when I lose my job, I won't be able to afford the flat. Job, flat – both gone, gone in a moment of craziness. Worst of all will be Mum. What will she say? I'll have to move in with her, for God's sake. And of course, Mum's the reason I'm standing here, trembling like a wet dog.

Trembling. I've been trembling all my life, really. Almost my first memory is of when my sister Susie was little. She wasn't even old enough to realise that toys aren't for eating, but still Mum made me share my dolls with her, so they got slobbered on and had their arms pulled off. 'Why don't you learn to share your things?' Mum sneered. 'You should be more generous, Girl. D'you want to turn out like those children from Broken Homes?'

They were my ogres, the children from Broken Homes. They used to haunt my dreams, hiding in corners, creeping under the sofa, crouching in the wardrobe. Waiting to steal things, waiting to steal me. And if I didn't share, I'd be just like them.

Not that there was any chance our own home would be "Broken". Dad never left us – he wouldn't dare. Not till he died, anyway, and Mum stood by the cold graveside watching them throw the earth in, blinking, her jaw clamped shut like a vice. I sometimes think he did it to spite her.

I never figured out how it worked – how sharing your own things could mend something that was already broken. But it didn't matter. In Mum's eyes I could never be "generous" enough, never. It got so bad that I'd hide my treasures, or even throw them in the bin, rather than be called selfish. I had a little yellow comb with a handle like a pixie – I threw that out, and pretended I'd lost it. And I still remember the shock when Mum made me share an ice-cream, even though Susie already had one. And I'd been enjoying it so much, the softness and the cold and the crunch. She had to smack me over the head to make me give it up. But I was stupid, too. It took me years to wonder why Susie never had to share her things with me. And by then it was too late.

Nowadays I don't bother with ice-creams.

Still no sign of those police. No flashing lights either. Are they waiting for back-up? Ha. It's not like I'll put up much of a struggle.

I shake myself, and here's the red cardigan again. What's it doing in my hand? How did it get there? Because, I don't *do* things like this, I'm not that kind of person. I buy the *Big Issue*, I give money to charity. I'm the kind of person who visits her mother every day. A carer, I suppose. So how can this be me standing here, waiting to get arrested?

I can't swallow. I think I'm going to be sick.

I was warming the soup – only today, that was. Seems longer ago. Mum was ranting on about Ted again. I wasn't doing enough to get him back, she said.

'It's typical,' she grunted. 'You never think of anyone else, do you? What about the children, hey? And what about Ted, all on his own?' She dribbled tomato soup down her

chin, down her cardigan. Like blood. ‘That’s a Broken Home, you’ve got,’ she added. Then she winced, sucked in her breath, and breathed harder.

‘I don’t want him back, Mum,’ I said, sitting her up straighter. ‘And he doesn’t want me.’

‘Broken Home,’ she wheezed as I helped her into the wheelchair.

I turned her to face the door, gripping the handles hard. ‘I’ve told you,’ I snapped. ‘It finished years ago. We only stayed together for the sake of the children. Now they’ve grown up and left home, there’s nothing between us. Worse than nothing.’

We steered into the dingy sitting-room, the gas fire turned up high, the sofa ready for her afternoon of homes-in-the-country, faded antiques and endless soaps. ‘Have you *tried* apologising?’ she said over her shoulder. ‘Have you tried admitting you were wrong? Or,’ she sneered, ‘would that mean being generous?’

In my head, I told her to shut up. I wish now I’d said it out loud.

Back at the office, I couldn’t focus. All I could think of were the soup on the cardigan, the long-ago ice-cream, and Ted, and the wheelchair. I hated them.

I felt a migraine coming on, so I left early, and went to Marks. Not for anything in particular, you understand. I browsed through the underwear, I fiddled with the shoes and didn’t bother with the party dresses. But there, folded on a pile, was a cardigan, a cardigan with pearl buttons, a fluffy blood-red cardigan. One that wouldn’t show the stains. I looked at the label; the size was right. ‘*We’ll see who’s generous,*’ I growled, and the cardigan was in my bag before I knew it. I stomped out, hating the cardigan, hating Mum and knowing I should have paid. I hated them all – every surprised shopper, every assistant, every tailor’s dummy with its smug stare – every last one. I passed through the doors and no alarms rang – except in my head.

Fuming, exhilarated, swearing under my breath, I hurried back to Mum’s. I pushed and shoved through the crowd outside the post office, not caring whose feet I trod on, never excusing myself. I kicked at the broken glass on the pavement and yelled at the ambulance that wailed past me. At Mum’s house I banged the door open and stormed into the sitting-room. I’d meant to make her put it on, there and then. I’d meant to. ‘Here!’ I was going to yell. ‘See what I got you! See! Who’s generous now, hey?’

But she was asleep. Her head was tilted back; her mouth hung open and her breath came in long, choking hisses. She smelt of mildew and sweat, and that soup-stain was still there on her chin. Then I remembered the pain she was in. I remembered the hours on that sofa, the long years without Dad. So I got a flannel, wrung it out, and gently dabbed away the stain. Her lip tugged as I wiped. I slipped into the kitchen and made myself a cup of tea, and I was just looking for the biscuits when I remembered the cardigan.

So here I am, holding it as the doorbell rings. My throat won’t work, my legs can’t take my weight, and my belly’s like a fist.

I creep along the hall, feeling the grubby wallpaper under my free hand. I hear Mum waking up, her snores startled out of their rhythm. I take a breath, then open the door. There are two police officers, oilseed-rape-vests bulging with gadgets. I swallow. ‘Yes?’ I croak.

‘It’s all right, Madam,’ says one, and I see a woman under all that uniform. ‘Routine enquiries. We’d like to know if you’ve seen anyone acting suspiciously this afternoon?’

‘Suspiciously?’ I say.

'There's been a robbery, Madam,' says the taller one. And now I'm waiting for it. *Someone's stolen a cardigan from Marks and Spencer's, they're going to say, a red one. Aha, Madam, they'll say, can I ask where you got that cardigan in your hand?* But instead he goes on: 'the post office.'

I lick my lips, and look at the cardigan again, to check. 'Uh, the post office?'

They look at each other.

'Fraid so,' the man goes on. 'Cashier's been beaten over the head. Two men seen running away, about half an hour ago. We think the getaway vehicle might've been parked on this street.'

I can't speak. I'm wondering if the cashier had been eating an ice-cream, before she got beaten over the head for not sharing the money.

'So, Madam,' says the woman, peering at me. 'Have you seen anything? Anything that might help us?'

'N-no,' I manage. 'I've just got in. And my mum's an invalid, she lives in the back room.'

'Well, thank you, Madam,' says the man, as they set off up the path.

'Nice cardigan,' says the woman, with a grin.

I close the door, and stand there.

'Who's that?' calls Mum. 'Who's at the door?'

I blink, and go through to the kitchen. I find the carrier bags. I put the cardigan inside one, then that bag inside another, then another. Then into the kitchen refuse, then into the wheelie-bin. They'll collect it tomorrow.

Mum's still fretting. The teapot rattles as I miss the cups with the tea.

'Coming, Mum,' I call.