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The Family

by Martin Bourne

I have to remind myself to breathe - - almost to remind my heart to beat. I'll go home tonight smelling of this place and my wife will say,

"You've been out on a fire claim today haven't you?"

She can always smell the residues of soot and smoke on my clothes. Bloody fires, I hate them, the cause can sometimes be interesting but not this one, this was a simple chip pan, the old fashioned type that no one uses anymore - - well no one in their right mind. And the place stinks, not just of the fire, but cats pee. A heavy, eye crossing, nose wrinkling, overpowering odour of ammonia filling every room in the house.

I got the notification as I was making my way home. It was 3pm in and I said to my manager,

"I've got a really early call in the morning, so I'm going to call it a day now and get on the road home, try and get ahead of the rush hour."

He didn't really have much choice and he knew I wasn't a piss taker so he said, "OK."

So just as I'm heading for the Godstone turnoff of the M25 to take the A22 south, I get a call from Anne to head into Croydon.

"Jeff, we've just had an urgent fire in. It's in a house that is attached to the back of a small Co-op store in West Morland Road, do you know it, you used to live in the area didn't you?"

"Yes, I know it," I replied.

"Well, it's the Co-op and we want to impress them. You know they are self-insured through Milgate don't you?"

On arrival I put on my overall, boots and face mask to counteract the dust and soot, but this was ineffective against the pungent stench.

The accommodation was unusual. An aged couple, the Jamesons, who were former Co-op staff lived in the house on a peppercorn rent. The building was constructed in 1920, and what was originally a four bedroom house had gradually been subsumed by the store which had started life as a corner shop. The house had shrunk and in its reduced state consisted of a kitchen, bathroom, lounge and bedroom, with all remaining areas partitioned off and taken up by the store.

The store appeared to have benefited from several refits and upgrades over the years but the house was in a sorry and dilapidated condition made worse by the fire.

The fire brigade were clearing away their hoses and the Jamesons and I were allowed in. I kicked around the ankle deep ashes in the kitchen and saw what I thought was a piece of burnt cable only to find it was an elongated cat turd.

I wrote up my notes of the damage in the kitchen and proceeded to the hall where I found the walls, ceiling and floor caked in soot. Mr Jameson was carefully taking down a picture from the wall. He started to wipe it tenderly with a hankie. His wife wept,

“Oh, Ted, please tell me the family are OK?”

“Yes, Milly, they’re fine, just need a polish up.”

He was holding a small print of a farmyard scene. Two donkeys with their heads leaning over a stable door were looking down on three little piglets.

He turned to me

“You’ll think us old fools,” he said, “but we found this in a charity shop sixty years ago and my wife said, ‘That’s us Ted, we’re the donkeys and the three muddy little piglets are our three girls’ right little tomboys they were, so we bought it and since then we’ve called it our family.”

“I don’t think it foolish at all,” I said, “which one of your daughters will you leave it to.”

“Sadly all three of them died in a car accident when they were young,” his voice cracking as he shared a look with his wife which in a moment covered the decades.