

House Warming Gift

by Juliet Robinson

My boots tracked mud up the stairs behind me. As I ascended the staircase and I started to feel a giddy sense of excitement. Clutching my rucksack to my chest I smothered a giggle. I needed to be quiet, I needed to go unseen.

Arriving on the fourth floor I pushed through the fire door into the main corridor. It was pristine, soft grey carpeting stretched away down the hall. Inspiration took me and I stepped back into the stairwell, and as quietly as possibly I trotted up another flight of stairs, now trying to trail mud behind me. I pushed the door open, chose a flat at random and marched towards it leaving muddy tracks in my wake. Then with great care I removed boots, turned, and walked back to the stairs, creeping on quiet feet, satisfied that I had laid a false trail.

Back on the fourth floor I made my way to flat 4C. Pausing at the door I pressed my ear to its cool surface. I heard nothing, but I supposed I was unlikely to. Earlier I had watched Chris leave, so I knew she wasn't in, but what about Katie? Could she be in the flat?

Fuck it, I had come this far, and the bottom of my rucksack was beginning to feel soggy. I took the key I had pinched from Chris' locker at work and slipped it into the lock. For a moment I hovered, it wasn't too late, I could turn back. A cold sweat prickled my spine. Then further down the corridor someone opened the door to their flat, the sound of a television set spilled into the corridor, and I acted instantly. The key turned easily in the lock and in I slipped in, carefully closing the door behind me.



Immediately I knew the plan wasn't going to work. The flat was empty, utterly empty. No curtains, no furniture, not even an unpacked moving box. Just a wide, bare space filled with light that flooded in from the high windows. They nearly covered the entirety of one wall, this was nothing like our old dingy tenement flat on the other side of town.

Jealously twisted my gut. Not only had Chris found someone else, but she had also moved on and up to this. This pristine, fourth floor palace. I strode into the centre of the room, not really worrying that their neighbours may happen to see me if they glanced out of their window. I assumed they would just believe me to be a removal man or a tradesman, I was certainly dressed as such having come straight from work.

I was utterly stunned by the palatial scale of this place. The opulent nature of its crisp, newness. Bet they wouldn't have rats visiting them in the winter here, bet their windows wouldn't steam up with condensation, bet they wouldn't have to wander around in layers of clothing and a crusty old fleece blanket. This was the sort of place that aspiring people lived in, people who went to gallery opening nights and rode one speed bikes.

Time was ticking. I hadn't a clue how long Chris was going to be away, and my plan had unravelled. The fish pieces that filled my bag needed to be stowed somewhere. But where?

There was nothing here. Not a loose floorboard, not a cupboard, not a sofa. The only thing in this ridiculously white room was a tall radiator. I wouldn't even be able to stuff the fish bits behind it as its columns were open. Useless. What to do, what to do?

Groaning, I threw my head back in frustration. And that is when I spotted the floating ceiling. A ridiculous feature, one I would normally scoff, but ... in this instance it drew a rare smile from me. I could make this work after all. I just needed to get up there.

I glanced around, but I already knew there was nothing here that could help me. Begrudgingly I looked at the radiator, perhaps it wasn't as useless as I had first thought. I opened my rucksack and pulled out the rancid bag of fish bits, checked that it was still securely tied, then walked to the radiator. I glanced behind it, looking at the bolts that secured it to the wall, no way of telling if they were strong enough to take my weight, I was just going to have to risk it.

I reached up and placed the bag and its rancid content on the radiator. It dripped ever so slightly; my rucksack would need a ride in the washing machine after this. Then in a burst of movement I grabbed the top of radiator and pulled myself up. I wedged my foot behind it to help, shoving it into the narrow gap, glad I had taken off my boots, I wouldn't leave any tell-tale dirty marks. I then somehow managed to untie the bag and hoisted myself further up to peer into the void of the floating ceiling.

Perfect. I smiled darkly; they would never be able to fish my secret gift out of the gap between the false and true ceiling. Not without removing the pompous feature. Trying not to gag I plunged my hand into the bag and pull out a fist full of fish bits. This was going to smell.