

## Lofty

I can't remember how my wife landed the plum job of going up into her father's loft but somehow I was left sulking at the foot of the Ramsay ladder. Lofts and their subsequent exploration have always been one of my duties. Initially by default because I was the only person in the house who knew where the torch was hidden and knowing that my wife loves a good rummage I've always frightened her off with menacing stories of cobwebbed horror. I floored the loft in our new cottage to give us extra storage space and of course so I could roam around in it without unwanted diversions like sticking my foot through our bedroom ceiling. So far all my wife has managed to get is one foot on the ladder.

"Careful!" I would shout as I leafed casually through a box of old books, "it's very tricky up here, lots of cobwebs and strange scurrying noises." Which made her squirrel-like ascent into her father's loft all the more surprising. Ostensibly she was up there to look for a mattress that we were borrowing for a few days. Forcing your grown-up children to bunk down on the floor when they decide to stay over for Christmas is one of the pleasures of living in a small empty nest. Even better still, is the thrill of seeing them bunk down on a mattress that's been hibernating in their Grandparents' loft long enough to become a family heirloom.

"You'll have to look after it," shouted Ian up into the twilight world of his lovingly dishevelled loft. But there was no reply. For all we knew my wife had already vanished through a wardrobe into the magical but faintly threatening snowy world of Narnia.

"Don't worry," I said, comforting Ian, "we'll feed and water the mattress every day."

I think that's what he was afraid of. After some time hanging around in Ian's narrow hallway with very little in the way of spectacle to occupy us we found our conversation had moved easily from one topic to another, until we began to wonder why we were standing holding a ladder that wasn't going anywhere. After about fifteen minutes we lost interest in what we were talking about and Ian remembered his daughter was up in his loft and he bridled as if someone had stirred him from a cosy nap.

"Have you found it yet?" he shouted. Frankly I was interested to hear the reply because I couldn't remember why my wife had gone up into her father's loft in the first place, apart of course for a good old rake. By the sound of all that interesting stuff being dragged and bumped around she was having a fantastic time.

"I think I'd better see if she's all right," I said starting to climb the ladder. But Ian gripped my arm and frowned darkly at me.

"Not so fast buster," he said, "I'm not having both of you doing a disappearing act."

“I’ll just be a minute!” shouted my wife, “I think I’ve spotted it. Look out, here it comes!”

The last time my wife said that I ended up concussed, so I stepped backwards into the bathroom and waited until the coast was clear. Ian meanwhile, rather bravely I thought, stayed put and watched with great interest as the loft hatch was completely filled with a giant roll of blue foam wrapped in horrible dusty polythene.

“What on earth’s that?” I asked meekly.

“A big roll of blue foam,” replied Ian flatly, “wrapped in dusty polythene.”

“Not a mattress then?” I said.

“Not the right mattress,” declared Ian shaking his head.

Whether it was the right mattress or not it didn’t take us long to work out it was jammed in the hatch like the pupae of a massive moth. Either that or the loft was giving birth. I shared these thoughts with Ian but he didn’t say much. I felt a Broons moment coming on. I was first up for a tug but the thing refused to budge. Even though the foam was sticking out by at least a couple of feet I couldn’t pull it any further because it was almost impossible to get a grip on the polythene. Ian meanwhile decided he didn’t have time for what he called ‘malarkey’ and stepped up for a three-second grapple.

“Look what your wife’s done now!” he puffed, red-faced and sweating.

Interesting I thought how his daughter gets transformed into ‘my wife’ the moment something massive and slippery gets stuck in the loft hatch. I gave it another tug telling my wife to push down on the foam as hard as she could but it wasn’t moving. I could just about hear her talking away and laughing hysterically above us like some madwoman locked in the attic. Telling her she had turned into Mr Rochester’s crazy wife didn’t help.

“Blimey,” I said panting, “it’s like a giant breach birth.”

Ian had now lit his pipe and was frowning at the big blue growth on his ceiling like a scientist bemused by an experiment that had gone horribly wrong. For a moment I wondered what we would do if we couldn’t unblock the hatch. Maybe my wife could snake her way out through the chimney.

“Hurry up!” she shouted suddenly, “I’m getting hungry and its cold up here.”

That settled it, the polythene bump had to go. I stepped up the ladder and grabbed at it with both hands sinking my nails in and tearing it open. Once I had a good grip I jumped off the ladder and pulled the foam down with me. It seemed to go on forever and about half way down it showered on me what some people might have thought were granules of burnt rice. Unfortunately I know mouse droppings when they hit me on the head.

The floor was quickly covered in droppings mixed with the crumbs of blue foam that were too big for the mice to take home with them. Ian regarded the scene with casual interest from behind the sanctuary of his pipe and told me under no circumstances would he ever allow mice in his house.

“So who do you think ate the foam?” shouted my wife from the hatch, “it certainly wasn’t me, although I was tempted!”

I took all this in my stride knowing that now I would be able to take my rightful place in the loft. First the giant foam pupae had to be transported to the garage, during which adventure I asked Ian to reflect on the possibility that someone had been boiling rice in his loft, burnt it and in an attempt to conceal the evidence had poured the lot inside a big roll of blue foam.

This seemed to be a more comfortable alternative to having mice in his loft.

“There’s nothing up there worth keeping anyway,” he mused grimly.

I’ll be the judge I thought. It took me five seconds to find the mattress we were borrowing and I spent the next half an hour sitting dewy-eyed over a stack of my old paintings and drawings.

“Find anything interesting?” asked Ian later.

“Not really,” I said, “but you’ve got some very artistic mice.”