

Pretty Meh!

by Juliet Robinson

The drain cover was heavy which had been expected, but the stench that rose out of the darkness was far worse than Kit had imagined, rotten eggs mainly but also dead fox. A precise smell, but one they were familiar with, as a fox carcass had been rotting behind their wheelie bin for months, mouldering and collapsing in on itself, empty eye sockets staring at the ever-changing sky.

Breathing through their mouth Kit descended the ladder on shaky legs. Down here it was hot and damp, with a humidity reminiscent of botanical hothouses. The air clung to their skin and thickened in their lungs, where it failed to satisfy. When Kit reached the bottom of the ladder, they were sweating and out of breath.

They were in a wide tunnel which was oddly luminescent at its centre, but its edges were crowded with shadows - deep, black and busy as if they hid unseen entities. Kit eyed them sure they could hear voices muffled seeping from their velveteen depths.

The tunnel stretched into the distance, not inviting, but somehow inevitable and with resignation they started down it, their footsteps sounding alarmingly loud.

The shadows, simmering and broiling, followed them and every so often just at the corner of Kit's vision they seemed to shape themselves into beings. Not people, but things, familiar yet twisted in a way that they teased the edges of Kits memories. Voices hissed from them, sometimes with a mocking giggle, others with snarling menace.

Kit kept their eyes firmly on the path and started to hum softly in an effort to distract from everything. It worked for a while, until they started humming, '*always look on the bright side of life*'. Which proved impossible to hum, so it became a whistle and then they were trying to remember the words, but it turned out they only knew the chorus. Kit trudged on with faux determination, singing the chorus on repeat. The words bounced back at them from the curved walls, and then shadow beings picked them up and played with them, the tunnel became busy with noise, as Kits voice was echoed but the tunnel and the parroting shadows built up their harmony.

Unable to cope with the chaos of sound Kit stopped singing, but a trick of the tunnel kept their voice echoing round and round. They wondered about stuffing their fingers into their ears, but somehow, they knew that wouldn't drown out the endless repetitions of *always look on the bright side of life*, so they just kept walking.

At some point a clear, strong voice joined the song, though Kit couldn't have told you when, for they had been in a state of numb disassociation. The chorus ended finally as the singer knew the rest of the words and they carried the song forward.

The tunnel turned a corner and Kit found themselves in a cavernous room, lit by thousands of candles. Wax cascaded from them in a molten river, flowing down the walls and across the floor. At the centre of the room on a throne of sculpted wax sat the singer. He wore a sharply cut suit, all angles and lapels, his hair raven black and his smile was hungry and a small part of Kit longed to be swallowed by him. The singer took their time, dragging the song out and when it eventually ended, they turned to Kit.

'Well, my pretty Kitty.' His voice was slick and coiled, like a snake, rearing and preparing itself to strike. 'Everything is ready. I remind that once you pick it's a done deal.' He clapped his hands, it was a dry ringing clap and behind him two rope ladders unfurled, one the colour of golden straw, 'You're all too familiar with where this ladder leads ...' shaking his head sadly he frowned.

Kit considered the golden ladder; it was uncomfortably familiar. Yes, they knew where that ladder would take them, what it would return them to.

The singer gestured to the other ladder, which was midnight blue. 'This will take you where you want to go and it will give you what you want,' a honeyed tone sweetened his voice momentarily, 'but once your life is done, you're mine. I've had a peak and I promise you that the life at the top of this ladder will be anything but ordinary.'

Without hesitation Kit strode forward and started to climb.