

Que Sera...Needn't Be!

a timed exercise

by Judith Horth

Dust flew in an all-enveloping cloud, bringing with it a smell of... cat pee? Something ghastly anyway. "Those bloody people – they were pigs," I grumbled as I pulled the rotten old carpet away from the vicious gripper rod.

We'd bought the new house at auction. Couldn't afford much, so when we saw this Victorian three bedroom semi going for a song we knew we had to snap it up even if we spent the next thirty years making good anything that was wrong with it. Surprisingly, so far there had been little that needed doing apart from giving it a good clean. The previous owners – an elderly couple who had both died in the house a couple of years ago – had done little to update it, or clean it, and what with the time it had been vacant, dirt had accumulated to legendary degrees.

The first thing that simply had to go were the carpets, hence me here, on my knees, ripping up the one in the sitting room. Andy had, of course, got a prior engagement – down the pub with his mates. I could see how this was going to be – he loved the thought of renovation, but the practicalities would all be down to me.

The carpet came away easily, and it was then that I saw the trapdoor. The auction pack had mentioned nothing about a cellar – what could it be? There was a small brass ring in the trapdoor, and after a moment's hesitation, I pulled it. The door opened smoothly and fell back with a loud crash.

"Jesus!" I shouted. My heart was going like the clappers. I peered down into the space. Was I imagining it, or was there a slight movement? Rats? Ugh, I hoped not. I would need a torch.

When I finally found one, I shone it into the hole. To my surprise there was a staircase leading down into what was a far deeper space than I would have thought possible. Gingerly, I climbed down, and shone the torch around me.

It was then that the voice spoke. "Hello, June."

Dear God alive! Who – or what – could be down here, under our sitting room floor? And how the hell did they – it – know my name?

I flicked the torch round the space and there... there in the corner, a shape materialised. Vague at first, it came and went, before it solidified into the figure of a thin, grey-haired, elderly woman, floating in a lilac-scented mist which eddied and swirled about her. She was bent double, careworn, and listless. There was something vaguely familiar about her, but I couldn't place her.

"Who - what are you?" I stammered. I'd never been so scared. My mouth was dry, and I felt sick. "How do you know me?"

"Don't you know *me*, sweetie?" she asked. "Look again."

I moved closer and shone the torch in her face. "Nope. No idea."

"June, dear, I'm you. I'm June, forty years from now. This is what you become. This is what Andy allows you to become."

I laughed. "Don't be daft! You're nothing like me! What are you doing in my house?"

She laughed too, a thin, bloodless laugh. "Oh darling, this house has taken the best years of my life. The time and money I spent on it after Andy left!"

Left? What was she talking about?

"Oh yes – he was never really committed to doing it up. Far too much effort for a lazy sod like him. Where is he now? Down the Pig and Whistle? Just gone for a swift half?"

I gulped. For one thing, the idea of a ghost swearing shocked me, and for another, I knew that that was exactly where Andy was.

"Don't let him leave you to do all the work," the ghost said. "Leave him, darling. Get out as soon as you can. Promise me you will?"

I nodded, and she faded away. I certainly had something to think about.