

There was only one thing in the cupboard, or rather there was only one thing that shouldn't have been there. This was the cupboard where her mother kept her emergency stores, although Emily could not imagine any emergency that would unleash a passion for tinned tapioca on a scale suggested by the quantity of tins on these shelves. True, the emergency store included more plausible items - baked beans, tomatoes, stewed steak, peaches - but even these were wrapped in garish, faded labels that marked them out as gasping survivors from a long gone decade. The thing that did not obviously belong was shoved to the end of the lowest shelf. It was a battered, black, square steel box with light rust erupting from below the edge of its lid.

Emily, on all fours, reached into the gloom, hooked the four fingers of her left hand over the black box and pulled it a few inches towards her. Its weight surprised her. She withdrew her hand doubtfully, turned and shouted over her shoulder.

"Mum! When you said there was only one thing in the cupboard, did you mean a rusty black box?"

"What's that?" her mother's voice shrilled from the front of the house. Emily sighed, reversed from the cupboard and stood up cautiously, reminding herself of the painfully low headroom in this corner of the kitchen.

"Only one thing!" she repeated. "You meant the little black box, not the three packets of pre-war cornflakes?"

"There aren't any black socks in that cupboard!" came her mother's firm and infuriatingly confident reply. "No socks of any colour. You'll only find the barest essentials in that cupboard."

Fury flared through Emily, and she suppressed it instantly. She crouched again, scooped the black box into her ruined hands, and straightened up. This time her head made sharp contact with the underside of the sloping ceiling. "Owwwww!" she yelled, hanging onto the pain longer than necessary, that one extended yell charged with resentment of her mother, her irritation with her brother and her need to let the world know that she was not the one who should have to be doing this. Then her fury went out like a puffed candle.

"Just Summer lightning," her mother used to coo as she wrapped Emily in her arms after one of her tantrums, stroking her hair, soothing her. But that was before the fire. In the old life.

"You alright dear?" her mother now asked as Emily came into the living room cradling the black tin.

"I'll live." Emily knelt on the rug next to her mother's slim, wing-back armchair, the tin on her lap. "You've really got to clear out that cupboard. There's no point settling down for a nuclear war with out-of-date food." Her mother ignored her. Across the road Joe came out of his house with Tom. She watched as Joe opened the rear door of his car and helped Tom get strapped into his seat.

"Anyway, what do you want with this old box?"

"Open it. Oh, do you want me to do it?"

"No, I can manage." Emily folded her fingers the best she could over the rim of the lid and forced it up. She looked in and burst into tears. Grief, relief, loss, love - all these emotions were released by what she saw there.

"Oh, darling," purred her mother, reaching down and rubbing Emily's back and neck. "A real Pandora's box, isn't it?" There was sympathy and warmth in her mother's voice, but even through her tears Emily recognised satisfaction too: pride in the classical allusion.

The box was full of pebbles, each painstakingly decorated to resemble an insect. There was a bee, two beetles and a number of indeterminate cartoon-like creatures. Emily's tears stopped, replaced by dry sniffs that were rather like hiccups. She reached over the open lid and curled her stiff fingers around a pebble, lifting it out.

"Trevor," she murmured. "Trevor the snail. Carl spent so long on Trevor. He must have spent days on his eyes alone. Just look at them, peering up at us so mournfully, like someone's about to step on him and he's begging them to be careful. Trevor *was* Carl really. There was always so much going on in his head, even though we never knew exactly what it was."

"Keep it," said her mother. "Keep it all. I meant to give it to you after the funeral, but I forgot with everything going on."

Emily tipped the tin and allowed the pebbles to roll out onto the carpet. They were exactly as she remembered them. They were beautiful. They suggested permanence, undeniable achievement. Despite their crude simplicity - perhaps because of it - they confirmed the deep worth of their creator. Yet Carl had not been valued. His silence, his obsessions, his inability to communicate had disappointed and embarrassed their father and brought out his mean, spiteful side, but Emily had loved her brother since the day he came home from hospital on her fourth birthday. She had never had a better present before or since.

"Do you remember the day we collected the pebbles on the beach?" Emily asked.

"I'm not sure I do, dear."

“Oh, you must do. It was Carl’s third birthday and his first visit to a beach. He just stood with his arms stretched out, puffing his cheeks and bellowing ‘ooooooo!’ Dad kept trying to pull his arms down and get him to sit. You must remember that. In fact it was only a couple of weeks before....before...before what happened.”

Her mother didn’t reply. She was looking out of the window again, stretching a little in order to track Mrs Sharma’s uneven progress along the pavement.

“In the end we got him settled, and he started gathering all the pebbles he could into a pile that got bigger and bigger. In the end he jumped up and ran all over the beach collecting pebbles to add to the giant pile.”

“Now I remember. He stopped collecting pebbles and started ordering all the ones in his pile into a long line, smallest to largest.”

“He spent the rest of the day on his pebble line. It must have been fifty yards long. And he was grinning like we’d never seen before.” The tears were flowing again. Beside Emily on the floor the steel box was still open. Inside, below where the pebble insects had been, lay a wad of photos. Emily picked out a few and shuffled through them, wiping her eyes on the back of her sleeve. One of the photos showed her brother on that very day, bending over his pebbles, comparing sizes and shapes.

“I wish Carl could have stayed with us and never gone into that home,” Emily announced, her eyes on a photo of two-year-old Carl sitting on a step ladder beneath the loft hatch of the old house.

“I couldn’t look after him anymore. I was on my own and Carl was a big, strong boy. A man really – he was very nearly eighteen when he went to Sunnydene.”

“You weren’t on your own. I was still here.”

“I knew you wouldn’t be here much longer. I had to look to the future. I couldn’t depend on you.”

Emily studied her mother’s face that was still focused on the window. She sensed an accusation that her unreliability was not just historical: it was ongoing. She was the daughter who left as soon as she could and rarely returned; the daughter who still failed to put her mother first.

“I do remember the cornfakes.” Emily had no idea what her mother was referring to. Her mother was still looking through the window and Emily wondered if she was expecting a delivery. Her mother turned to her. “The cornflakes. You know. You must remember that. Carl must have been about ten then. You’d have been...”

“Thirteen. The cornflakes! It was right here on the floor. You and I came in together and there was Carl on the floor surrounded by cornflakes. He’d tipped them out and he was sorting them into size order.”

"It was a brand new packet. All ruined."

"He spent hours sorting them. He was so happy."

"And then when he finally finished he got up with a big grin on his face and promptly tripped over his own foot..."

"...and stamped on a section of his cornflake line, and then he..."

"Oh, he did, didn't he? He gathered up the fragments and started all over again."

The two women were laughing together. Emily, on the floor, leaned her head for a moment on her mother's good leg, as though shared mirth required this.

"But he was so angry when you told him it was time for bed. He stood with his arms out and bellowed and thrashed."

"He was a big boy even then." For a while they had nothing more to say. They knew that they blamed each other for letting Carl down. Their mutual unforgiveness never allowed conversation to run very far.

"Oh look!" Mrs Griffin suddenly shrieked. "A rainbow." Flecks of coloured light were scattered around the walls. A rugged chunk of glass glared where it hung in the window.

"Dispersive prism," Emily said automatically. "Your window pendant. It splits the light into its separate spectral colours."

"Scientists," her mother sniffed, as though lumping Emily in with estate agents, homeopaths, hedge fund managers and other dark arts practitioners. Emily knew not to respond.

Through the window Mrs Griffin watched as a battered red Peugeot backed into a space opposite. A tall dark-haired man in his early forties got out, locked the door and began to wander up the road towards the Pratts' pale blue front door. He stopped as though something had occurred to him. He walked back to the car, opened the rear door and dragged out a large and filthy bag. He took this with him back to the blue front door, which promptly opened. Mrs Griffin didn't see who opened it. The man went in and the door closed smartly behind him

"How is your leg?"

"Hmm?"

"Your leg. You know: the one with the new hip at the top?"

"Do you know, I really don't need a TV. There's nothing ever on anyway. I'm much happier looking through the window. It's all so much more interesting. Never a dull moment out there." A fat man wearing a paper delivery bag walked past and glanced in. Emily's mother waved.

"So, your hip? And what's this about your ankle?"

“Oh, I’m making as much progress as can be expected, I think, under the circumstances. Of course, it’s not always easy - being all on my own. Yes, I have got a couple of sores on my ankle. I don’t know how I got those. I must have grazed it when I went down. Anyway, the nurse has it under control.” Emily waited. “She’ll be here again on Monday. I can always count on her.” Yes, there it was again. “Great big fat girl. You should see her! She sits on the floor, legs akimbo, with all her bits and pieces in front of her. She puts my foot up on the little stool she brings with her and she unwraps my bandage and changes the dressing. She’s ever so good. Can’t do enough for me.” Emily remained obstinately silent. “Do you know what she said to me the last time she came? She said, ‘Mrs Griffin, I can’t believe you’re the age you are. You really don’t look it. A marvel, that’s what you are. I hope I’m as well-preserved as you are when I’m your age.’ That’s what she said. She did. And you should see her hair! You’ve never seen such orange. I don’t know what her boss must think! ...”

It was Emily’s turn not to listen. Her attention had been drawn back to the picture of the small boy sitting on the stepladder beneath the loft hatch, the boy who had spent so many hours, tongue out, painting the pebbles that ended up as precious keepsakes in the black box. She felt herself falling back through the stone and steel depths of the past, until she was back in the old house. And in the fire.