

Danger – Safety Warning – Do Not Use

Click. Click. Click.

Nothing.

Click. Click. Click. Click.

The tiny spark is doing its best. It's only there for a millisecond and then it's gone.

Click. Click.

I can hear the gas escaping. The sulphurous smell is starting to fill my nostrils.

Click. Click.

The spark catches and the flames leap out through the grill.

He's standing well to the side. Out of harm's way. He's practised at this.

"You know you shouldn't be using that fire."

He doesn't answer.

"What was the point of us putting in central heating, if you're just going to throw money away on that dangerous old thing?"

The gas fire has hung on the wall since they moved into the house three decades ago. Three decades ago, when he was able to run up the stairs. Three decades ago when his hands didn't rattle the crockery. Three decades ago when they were two.

"It's my money," he says. "You worried about your inheritance?"

I look round the room. A few trinkets. Some decent thirty year old furniture. Good frames but the seats have seen better days. Better days when they were two.

We both laugh. "Yep," I say, "that carriage clock has got my name on it and I don't want you taking it down the pawn shop to fund your gas bill."

He's standing now in front of the fire. So close that my throat closes. I know I shouldn't say anything. All those hours and days when he's on his own, he manages. He doesn't have an accident.

"Sit down, Dad." That's the closest I'll come to telling him what to do. "I'll get you...us...some biscuits."

In the back kitchen, I stand, clutching the counter. Worry wraps itself around me, a great, dark, suffocating gown of worry.

"Are you baking those biscuits or what?"

I open the bin to throw away the empty wrapper. Something yellow and red winks at me from the bottom of the bin. I reach in. It's a sign, 'Danger. Safety Warning. Do Not Use.'

I leave the biscuits.

"What's this?"

He doesn't answer.

"Was this on that fire? What's going on?"

"I'll tell you what's going on. Our Shirley went to Stevens in town and bought that sign. Told me the gas engineer had been in when I was at the Club last Thursday. And that they'd condemned the fire."

"And...?"

"Had they heck. Old Stevens is a mate of mine. Told me all about Shirley buying the sign."

He's waving a piece of paper at me. A safety certificate for the fire, dated a month ago.

"I'm old, lad. Still got all my marbles, though." He says it with good humour but I feel chastened. "You and Shirley need to watch it or I'll be leaving that carriage clock to the dogs' home."

We laugh again.

"Now, for goodness sake, fetch those biscuits. And while you're passing, turn that fire up."

I do as he says.

Click.