

THE MUMMY OF MULBERRY AVENUE

BY SUSAN KASSABIAN

CHAPTER 1

The odd thing was that when they talked about it afterwards no one could recall ever having laid eyes upon the book before that fateful morning. Where it came from was a mystery. Mum did admit, when pressed, that she just might have scooped it up accidentally with an armful of cookery books at the Christmas Jumble Sale. But she couldn't be sure. And anyway why, if that was case, had no one noticed it during all the intervening months? It was a bulky book, bigger than all the others on the shelf and according to Katie (who was the one who found it) you couldn't miss it in middle of the bookcase.

Anyway, fact is that nobody did remember seeing it until after Katie had made her shocking discovery in the sitting room that Sunday morning...

A little before seven a.m. the peace and tranquillity of number 17 Mulberry Avenue had been rudely interrupted by a series of banshee-like wails coming from downstairs. Dad, whose custom it was to sleep in late on Sundays, had come to with a start, sat bolt upright in bed and, finding himself awake, chucked the duvet off in rage.

'What in the name of sanity is going on downstairs? Who's that caterwauling?'

‘It’s Katie!’ Mum was already heading for the door, pulling on her dressing gown as she went. On the landing Josh and Andy, still half asleep, stumbled, shell-shocked, towards the stairs.

They found Katie in the sitting room, slumped in misery on the floor. Mum dropped down on her knees beside her. ‘Whatever is the matter love?’

The answer was a burst of sobs.

‘Tell us why you’re bawling can’t you!’ said Andy. ‘Now you’ve woken everybody up!’

Mum pressed a wad of tissues into her daughter’s hand. ‘Blow your nose love.’

Katie ignored the tissues. Eyes and nose streaming, she gulped back her tears: ‘He’s *dead!*’ she wailed and started to weep again.

There was a swift exchange of glances over her head.

‘Who’s dead?’

‘Freddie! *Poor, poor Freddie!*’

‘Oh is *that* all?’ Josh snorted and flung himself down on the sofa.

‘But he *can’t* be!’ said Andy. ‘We’ve only had him a *week!*’

All eyes turned towards the big glass bowl on the sideboard. But indeed, there seemed to be no doubt about it: Freddie was floating, sideways up, on top of the water. He was definitely dead.

‘There, there, love, never mind,’ soothed Mum. ‘We’ll get you another one – maybe two – and a lovely big tank to put them in. Wouldn’t that be nice?’

But Katie didn’t seem to think that would be nice at all. Mum’s sympathetic words were drowned by yet another wave of weeping. ‘N...O...O...O! Don’t *want* another one! Want *Freddie!*’

‘Well, you can’t have him!’ snapped Dad. Having

despaired of ever getting back to sleep Mr Ridley had come downstairs to deal with things himself. ‘The fish is *dead*. And that is that!’

‘Yeah,’ smirked Josh, putting his feet up on the sofa, ‘like the one you had with chips last night. Only you weren’t upset about *that* one were you?’

There was a brief pause as Katie considered this remark. Then the dam burst.

‘That was COD!’ she shrieked, going dangerously red in the face and proceeding to howl at twice the previous volume.

‘Josh, how *could* you!’ scolded Mum. ‘What an *awful* thing to say!’

‘Cod. Goldfish. What’s the difference?’

‘Apologize to Katie! That was most unkind.’

He shrugged.

‘Go on!’

Josh mumbled something inaudible at the ceiling. Then, sulkily: ‘She’s such a *baby*.’

‘Yeah,’ said Andy, agreeing with his brother for once. ‘More like four than seven.’

‘You be quiet!’ said Mum. She was really angry now. ‘One more word from either of you and you’ll be sorry!’

She turned and glared at her husband. ‘And *you’re* as bad! No consideration at all for Katie’s feelings!’

Dad looked a bit abashed. ‘Well...I mean...’ he faltered, ‘the fish is *dead*. If she doesn’t want another one what would you suggest we do? Have it stuffed perhaps? Or preserve it in formaldehyde? I mean... what *can* we do...?’ His voice trailed off.

And then, quite suddenly, so did Katie’s too. Like turning off a tap she just stopped crying. Her face became a mask of calm. But her eyes were wide

with excitement. She looked as though she'd had an inspiration.

'You've just reminded me of something!' And she was smiling now – almost beaming – at her father. 'Something we've been learning about at school. I know what we can do to help poor Freddie.'

'Well *that's* good news,' said Dad. 'Now maybe some of us can go and get a bit more sleep.'

'We'll give him a funeral,' she announced. 'A *special* funeral to send him to the afterlife.'

'That's a wonderful idea Katie!' Mum said brightly. 'The boys can dig a hole in the garden and we'll pop him in and say a little prayer. Is that the sort of thing you had in mind?'

'Not exactly,' said Katie.

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All was quiet in the Ridley household over breakfast. But not for long. Dad, who had been prevented from having his usual kipper out of respect for the deceased, munched sulkily on his toast and marmalade. He reached across the table for his spectacles. The Sunday papers sat in an inviting pile in front of him.

Opposite sat Katie. She was making drawings on the box that Josh's new trainers had come in. It was with great difficulty that she had got it off him. It had a cool, fluorescent logo on it and he had been keeping his DVDs in it at the time.

She had stuck plain paper over the logo. Now she was busy covering the box with pictures that she was copying from an old book she had propped up in front of her. When the box was finished she would fill

it up with all the things that Freddie would need in the afterlife: pebbles from his bowl, what was left of his packet of fish food, his little castle, his water plants and the jam-jar she had brought him home in. She knew that Freddie wouldn't exactly *need* the jam-jar, she had told Mum, but she thought it might have a certain sentimental value for him.

She had wondered whether Dad would be cross about the handkerchief but Mum had told her not to worry. It had been one of his new Irish linen ones that she had cut up into strips. She hadn't felt it would be respectful to use one that he'd already blown his nose on, even if it *had* been washed and ironed. The bandaging had been the tricky part – fiddly and slippery – but in the end she thought that she had made quite a good job of it really.

'What in the name of...?' Dad was staring into his open spectacles case. He gingerly drew out a tattered parcel that rapidly began unravelling itself.

'What is a *dead fish* doing in my spectacles case?' He glared at Katie but she was quite unfazed.

'I'm trying it out for size,' she said. 'I thought it would make a good coffin for Freddie. But I had to make sure it'd fit him when he's all bandaged up...'

'Bandaged up?' Dad surveyed the heap of linen scraps. 'Is that one of my handkerchiefs?'

Katie ignored the question. 'He really ought to have his insides taken out and put in special jars – but Mum said she wouldn't do it and Andy promised to but now he won't and I don't want to either so it's just going to be the bandages...'

‘Do you mean to say the whole family has been encouraging you in this gruesome exercise?’ Dad looked appalled.

‘Not me!’ protested Josh. ‘Mum *made* me give her that trainers box and now she’s ruined it with her stupid little drawings...’

‘They’re not stupid!’ said Katie hotly. ‘And it’s not a trainers box. It’s a *sarcophagus*.’

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No one much liked the idea of having a mummy in the garden shed but in end there was nowhere else to put him. Katie insisted that Freddie was not to be buried in a hole in the ground and Mum drew the line at having him back in the house.

‘He’ll start to stink in a few days,’ said Dad, ‘and then we’ll have every cat in the neighbourhood round here.’

‘Oh she’ll lose interest in him before that, you’ll see,’ said Mum. ‘Then we’ll pop everything in the bin and she’ll be none the wiser.’

But Katie didn’t lose interest. On the contrary, every day after school she went to visit Freddie and had a little chat. Five days went by and next-door’s cat took to sunning itself on the shed roof.

On Friday Katie had a swimming lesson. She had been trying to get her backstroke right for weeks and, as she explained afterwards, she thought it might be a good idea to talk to an expert on the subject.

‘That girl’s beginning to worry me,’ said Mum, as she watched Katie disappearing down the garden. ‘In that shed for ages every day. It isn’t healthy. What does she *do* in there?’

‘She sits and talks to herself ...oops sorry ... talks to the fish,’ said Josh.

‘She’s all right Mum,’ said Andy, ‘she’s still a bit sad that’s all.’

‘*Sad*’s the word,’ said Josh.

‘It’s only because we haven’t got a proper pet,’ said Andy. ‘If we had a dog and it died you wouldn’t be surprised if she went and visited its grave would you? Like when you go and take flowers to grandpa at the cemetery.’

‘Don’t start *that* again!’ Mum flung the potatoes into the sink and began peeling furiously. ‘With three kids and a job I’ve got no time to take a dog for walks!’

‘*We*’d do it!’

‘*Oh* yes,’ Mum’s voice had that familiar sarcastic ring. ‘*You* didn’t even remember to feed the flipping fish!’

‘That was only one day and it was Josh’s turn,’ said Andy. ‘How was I to know that he’d forget..?’

Josh frowned, opening his mouth to protest – a full-scale row was in the offing – when suddenly all three were transfixed. From the bottom of the garden, shattering the peace of a perfect summer’s evening, there came a scream fit to freeze the blood. A moment later, and for the second time in a week, the Ridley family went hurtling to the rescue.