

I

'We can't open that cupboard,' said Dad. 'I promised my father. Grandad locked it up many years ago and it's never been opened.'

'What's in it?' I asked.

'No one knows,' said Mum.

'But it's in my bedroom,' I said. 'I need to know what's in it. It could be anything.'

'I lived in this bedroom for nineteen years,' said Dad. 'And I kept my promise. That cupboard has never been opened. Now I want you to promise me that you'll never open it.'

They both looked at me, waiting for my answer. Suddenly there was a knock on the door downstairs. 'It's the removal van,' said Mum. 'About time too.'

Mum and Dad rushed down to help move in our furniture. I wandered around my new room. It was small and dusty with a little dormer window overlooking the tangled garden.

No one had lived in the house for years. It was high in the mountains, far from the city. The garden was overgrown. Ivy had climbed the gum trees. Blackberry bushes choked the paths and strangled the shrubs.

I walked over to the forbidden cupboard and gave the handle a shake. It was locked firm. I put my eye to the keyhole but everything was black. I sniffed under the gap at the bottom of the door. It was musty and dusty. Something silent inside seemed to call me.

It was almost as if a gentle voice was stirring the shadows of years gone by. The stillness seemed to echo my name, 'Shane, Shane, Shane...'

'Shane.' Mum shouted up the stairs. 'Come and help bring these things in.'

They were lifting a large machine from the van. The removalist man had one corner and there was one left for me. 'Quick, grab it,' said Dad. 'It's heavy.'

I helped lower the machine onto the ground. 'What is it?' I asked.

'A mulcher,' Dad told me. 'You put in branches and leaves and twigs and it chews them up into mulch. We're going to use it to clear up this garden.'

I stared around the tangled yard. That's when I saw the two lemon trees for the first time. A big one over near the gate. And a small, shrivelled up one near the back fence. The big tree was covered in lemons. But the small one had only two. It wasn't much of a tree.

Dad pointed to the big lemon tree. 'It's always grown well,' he said. 'Grandad shot a fox. He buried its remains under that tree.'

I gave a shiver. I knew that I would never peel one of those lemons. Or eat one.

I carried a box back to my room and started to unpack. I turned my back on the secret cupboard and tried not to listen to the gentle voice lapping like waves in my head. 'Shane, Shane, Shane ...'

Once again I peered through the keyhole. This time I thought I saw two points of light twinkle in the darkness. I shivered. This was creepy. I didn't really want to live in this room.

That night I couldn't sleep. Every time I opened my eyes I saw the cupboard door. After a long time I finally drifted off. I had

a wonderful dream about trees. The branches reached out and stroked me. They lifted me high into the air and passed me along the roof of the forest. I was filled with a wonderful floating power. The soft branches took me wherever I wanted to go.

In the morning I woke feeling wonderful. Instead of getting dressed I decided to move the bed. I wanted to sleep so that I could see out of the window. The bed was old and heavy. It wouldn't move. I could see that it had been in that spot for years and years.

I ran outside and fetched a long plank. I used it to lever the bed. After a lot of creaking it started to move. Inch by inch. Finally I had it up against the window. The place where the bed had been was covered in dust. I swept it up gently.

The floor creaked under my feet. I knelt down and looked. There was a loose board.

'Breakfast,' yelled out Mum.

'Coming,' I shouted back.

I tried to prise up the board but it wouldn't budge. Suddenly it gave way and sprang out. It was almost as if a hidden hand had heaved it up.

I stared inside. Something glinted dully. I reached down and pulled out a rusty key.

'Shane,' yelled Mum.

'Coming,' I called. I shoved the key in my pocket and raced downstairs. I bolted my breakfast down. I was sure that the key would fit the door of the cupboard. The cupboard I had been forbidden to open.

'You can help me today,' said Dad. 'I'm going to cut back the overgrown trees and put the branches through the mulcher.'

I groaned inside. I was dying to run up and try the key in the cupboard. Now I wouldn't get a chance until after tea. Dad was

a slave driver. He'd give me a big lecture about laziness if I tried to nick off.

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All day we worked; cutting down branches and feeding them into the mulcher. It roared and spat out a waterfall of woodchips. It was amazing how it could turn a whole tree into sawdust in no time at all.

'Are you going to cut down the lemon trees?' I asked.

'Yes,' said Dad. 'I'm putting in native plants. Go on, you can go now. Thanks for helping.'

I ran up to my room and shut the door. Then I took out the rusty key and walked over to the cupboard. I put it in the lock and tried to move it. Blast. It didn't seem to fit. I jiggled and wiggled it. Then, just like the floorboard, it moved without warning. As if hidden fingers had twisted it.

The doorknob turned easily. I swung open the door.

The fox didn't move. It had been dead a long time. It hung from a hook at the back of the cupboard. Its body was flat as if it had been run over by a steam roller. Its long, bushy tail hung almost to the floor. Its eyes stared ahead without movement. They were made of glass. I could see that they were sewn on like buttons.

Suddenly the fox moved. Its mouth opened a fraction. My brain froze. The world seemed to spin. I was filled with terror. I gave a scream and slammed the door shut. Then I ran downstairs.

Tea was on the table. I didn't know what to do. Had the fox's mouth really opened? It couldn't have. Maybe I had disturbed it with the breeze of the door opening.

I wanted to tell Dad and Mum. But they had ordered me not to open the cupboard. Dad had lived in that room for all those years and he had never opened it. I could just hear him giving

me a lecture. 'One night,' he would say. 'You couldn't even go one night without breaking your word.'

I hadn't given my word actually. But that wouldn't make any difference. An order is an order.

As I ate my tea I thought about the fox. I'd seen it somewhere before. Then suddenly I realised. On the kitchen wall was an old photo of Granddad. Behind him was a hall stand. There were hats and scarves and umbrellas hanging on it. And a fox skin.

'What's that thing?' I said to Dad. I jumped up and pointed to the fox skin.

'A fox fur. It's the one Granddad shot. He preserved the skin and made it into a fur wrap for Grandma. But she wouldn't wear it.'

'Why not?'

'She said that she wasn't going to wear a dead animal around her neck. She felt sorry for it. She said it looked as if it was alive. Granddad was disappointed that she didn't like his gift.'

'What happened to it?' I asked.

'No one knows,' said Dad. 'I couldn't find it after Granddad died.'

'It might be in that locked cupboard,' I said.

Dad looked at me in a funny way. I went red. 'If it is,' he said, 'it stays there. A promise is a promise.'

We all looked at the picture. 'Pity the photo's only brown,' said Dad. 'That coat of Granddad's was bright red. And his eyes were the clearest blue.'

I wasn't really interested in the colours that weren't in the photo. I was in a real pickle and I didn't know what to do. I had to sleep in a room with a dead fox in the cupboard. Why had Granddad locked the door and made everyone promise not to open it? What was it about that fox?

That night I dreamed more dreams about trees. But this time it was lemon trees. Or should I say a lemon tree. A voice seemed to call me. It wanted me to go to the large lemon tree. The voice inside my head told me to go out into the night. And pick a lemon.

I cried out and sat up in bed. The cupboard door had swung open. The fox's glass eyes glistened in the moonlight. I thought it moved. It seemed to sigh gently.

Suddenly I knew I had nothing to fear. The fox was my friend. It was sad. Lonely. Lost.

I walked over and gently reached out. I stroked the soft fur with my hand. Dust fell softly away. A great sadness swept over me. The fox was like a beautiful empty bag. Its bones and heart and life were long gone.

And I knew where they were.

'All right,' I said. 'I'll do it.'

The fox made no answer. It hung limply like the moon's cast-off coat. I crept down the stairs. Mum and Dad were asleep. I walked between the shadows until I reached the large lemon tree. Where the carcass of the fox had been buried, many years before.

The ripe lemons drooped between the silvery leaves. I knew which one to pick. My hand seemed to have a life of its own. It reached up and plucked a lemon from high on the tree.

I tiptoed back inside the house and crept up the silent stairs. The cupboard was open like a waiting mouth. I wasn't sure what to do with the lemon. The fox skin hung silently on its peg. I gently opened its jaws and placed the lemon between its teeth. Then I shut the door and jumped into bed.

I pulled the pillow over my head. But even so, I could hear a gentle chewing, sucking, swallowing sound from behind the door.

The fox was feasting.

I finally fell asleep. Deep in carefree slumber.

In the morning I peered into the cupboard. At first I thought that nothing had changed. The fox fur still flopped from its peg. But the lemon had gone. I stroked the fox. I ran its tail between my thumb and finger. At the very tip of its tail I stopped. It was hard inside, as if a piece of a broken pencil had been inserted there. It was a small bone.

I gasped. That bone had not been there the day before.

The next night I visited the lemon tree again. Again I fed the fox. And again his tail grew firmer. Strengthened by another bone.

Each day I helped my father chop the trees and feed the mulcher. And each night I fed the fox from the lemon tree.

At the end of two weeks the fox was round and plump. Its fur had lost its dust. It glistened, strong and full. It was a fine fox. But it still hung from the peg. Its head flopping near the floor.

My work was nearly done. On the second-last night I placed my hand on its chest.

I can't describe the thrill that ran up my arm. The fox's heart was beating. It was alive but not alive. It still dangled from the peg. But its nose was wet and warm. A red tongue trembled between its teeth.

I had done my work. The lemons had given back what my grandfather had taken and buried beneath the tree. I opened the cupboard door wide. 'Go,' I said. 'This is your chance.'

The fox didn't answer. Didn't move. Something was wrong. The glass eyes stared without life. The eyes. It needed its real eyes.

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I stared out of the window at the first signs of the day. The last two lemons glowed redly in the sunrise. The tree stretched upwards from its roots. Its branches were like arms offering gifts from below.

'Tomorrow,' I said. 'Tomorrow I'll get your eyes.'

I closed the door and snuggled down into my bed. I fell asleep for many hours.

The sound of the mulcher drilled away at my slumber. There was something wrong. In my dreams I knew it. I sat upright and listened to Dad feeding branches into the hungry machine.

'No,' I yelled. 'No.' I ran to the window. 'Stop,' I screamed. 'Stop.'

I was too late. The lemon tree was nothing but a pile of wood chips. I ran down the stairs in my pyjamas and bare feet. 'The lemons,' I shouted. 'Did you save the last two lemons?'

Dad looked up in surprise. 'No,' he said. 'They were green.'

Tears ran down my face. I thought of the blind fox, still hanging in the blackness of the cupboard that for so long had been its coffin. I stood there and sobbed.

'They're only lemons,' said Dad. 'For goodness' sake. What a fuss.'

I couldn't tell him. I couldn't say anything. I trudged back to my room. 'I'm sorry, fox,' I said. 'Now you'll never see.'

A voice floated in the window. It was Dad. 'This little lemon tree still has two lemons, Shane. If you want lemons, why don't you take these?'

I stared sadly down. That tree wasn't any good. It wasn't growing where the fox had been buried. Still and all, it was worth a try.

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I waited all day. I waited until the sun had set and the moon filled the evening. I walked slowly. Not really hoping. But wanting so badly to give the fox my last gifts.

The lemons seemed to tremble. They dropped into my hands as I reached up. As though they had been waiting.

What was inside? For a moment I wondered what I would see if I peeled the lemons. Two eyes? Or just pith and pips and lemon pulp? I shuddered.

I placed the lemons between the white teeth of my friend the fox. And shut the door. I heard nothing. No sighs. No chomps. No swallows.

I had failed the fox.

Slowly I walked downstairs to supper. Dad and Mum tried to cheer me up. 'Are you ill?' said Mum.

'Yes,' I said. 'I think I am. But you can't fix it with medicine.'

Dad looked up. 'What was that?' he said. 'I thought I heard something upstairs. Someone's in the house.'

We all ran up to my room. The cupboard door was open. The window was open. Dad looked at the empty cupboard. And then at me. I nodded my head. I didn't care what he said or what he did. I was happy in a way that I had never been happy before. I picked up the two glass eyes that lay rejected on the floor.

'Look,' shouted Mum.

On the edge of the garden, under the little lemon tree, stood a magnificent fox. Its tail glistened in the silver light. Its shoulders shivered. Its ears pricked and pointed towards us. It took our scent and turned and gazed.

We all gasped. 'Look at its eyes,' whispered Mum.

The fox stared at us. Unafraid. Its large blue eyes drank us in. They looked deep into me. I knew what they were saying.

'Thank you. And farewell.'

My eyes were moist. I wiped away a tear.

When I looked up, the fox had gone. I never saw it again.

In the morning the little lemon tree was dead. Every leaf was curled and brown.

'It's never grown well,' said Dad. 'And it should have. Because we planted it on Grandad's grave.'

I'vee Cheeig - Looking for Yams

Fiona Doyle