

Storm in a Teacup

There should be something special about the love between sisters, but Maggie had never felt that she and Judith had it – which was a shame, because as children they'd been inseparable. With only a two-year age gap between them, they were always best playmates.

Of course, they'd had their childish squabbles, which swiftly led to early teenage rage – with the world, as well as each other. But there had never been anything serious – until today.

Maggie stood in her kitchen, the slamming of the back door still echoing in her head. She stared out of the window into the back garden.

The afternoon light was disappearing fast and it had just started to rain. There was a blinding flash and then a deep, low growl of thunder marked the beginning of a storm. Big, bouncing blobs of rain bashed the petals from the delicate pink miniature rose in the rockery. This had been threatening all week, and at last the clouds were releasing their tension.

Sadly, Maggie realised now that the tension between her and Judith had been threatening for a long time, too.

She turned to face the kitchen, leaning back against the sink. It was in such a mess! As was every other room in the house. And she'd been so determined to be organised.

Her well-thought-out house-moving plan had involved weeks of packing and labelling of boxes with a thick black marker pen, summarising the contents of each in large capital letters.

She'd been so proud of her efforts – and then just two weeks before the moving date, her mother had been taken ill with breathing difficulties. Just days later, the old lady died, leaving the whole family shocked and unable to think straight.

Maggie could remember reading an article about stress in a magazine. There had been a chart which clearly showed that moving house was one of the most stressful events in a person's life. The death of a close relative was high up the list, too – and here she was, trying valiantly to cope with both at the same time.

Somehow, they'd managed to arrive here today, in their new home, all four of them – Maggie, Bill and the twins, Joel and Kenny, who were soon to be starting school full-time.

Maggie looked around with tears in her eyes. Boxes everywhere. Apart from the ones Maggie had packed before her mother fell ill, there was no logic whatsoever to the contents. Pillows had been packed with cornflakes; toiletries were in the same box as the Christmas decorations, a dozen or so paperbacks and the kettle.

The television and video were already sitting in their designated places, but goodness only knew where the remote controls were. She couldn't find anything.

With slightly shaking hands, Maggie made herself a mug of coffee and sat down at the kitchen table. The mugs were old and chipped, but they were all she could find. It was the slightly catty comment she'd made earlier to Judith about not being able to find anything better that had sparked the argument.

Maggie gently cupped the mug in both hands. How she wished she knew where the biscuits were!

Mugfuls of coffee and digestive biscuits. She always associated those things with Mum. As she sat in doleful silence, thoughts of her mother came flooding into her mind, taking her back to a time long before today's fiasco.

Just over ten years ago, when she was twenty-eight, Judith married Pete and they went to live in a brand-new house on a brand-new estate over seventy miles away.

The same year, Maggie decided that she, at thirty, was too old to be living at home with her Mum and Dad, and so she rented a tiny flat just minutes from their house – although she continued to spend almost as much time at her parents' house as before. She usually visited a couple of evenings a week, every Sunday lunchtime and most Saturday afternoons.

It was the Saturday afternoon visits she was thinking of now. They'd seemed ordinary enough at the time, their cosy get-togethers, just Maggie and Mum. But retrospectively, and with a sudden sense of shame after today's commotion, Maggie realised how special those Saturday afternoons had been.

Her parents had lived in a very large old house, much too big once both daughters had moved away, but they had been there all their happily married life and had had no desire to move.

The kitchen was a particularly big square room, light and bright but still cosy. In one quiet corner there had stood a comfortable old sofa and a small, low table.

Dad would be comfortably ensconced in the lounge, watching the sport, which held no interest for Mum, so by the time Maggie arrived, her mother would have prepared two steaming mugs of coffee and looked out a packed of biscuits.

Sometimes, as an extra special treat, she would make hot chocolate, complete with a dollop of cream, and they would have chocolate biscuits "to match". Biscuits were always eaten straight from the packet, which had been cut in half as equally as possible.

Maggie and Mum would slouch on the sofa and there they would stay for the rest of the afternoon. Occasionally they would raise their eyes to the ceiling at the sound of Dad cheering wildly to himself when his team scored, or his horse won.

They would chat about what was going on in their respective lives, talk about the news, the sales in town and perhaps arrange a shopping trip together. Then they would

rib each other over whose turn it was to make the next cup of coffee. Any leftover biscuits would be used to negotiate the deal.

Maggie smiled to herself at these affectionate memories. How she'd love to be able to have another of those afternoons with Mum.

Inevitably, she began to think of the sharp contrast with the times when Judith visited. On those infrequent occasions, the table would be laid with a fresh cloth, and out would come the best china and, usually, a specially bought cake. Even the biscuits were laid out on a plate.

For a long time Maggie had tried to deny how it irritated her, the way Judith let Mum fuss over her as though she were someone special. She seemed to lap it up!

Weren't mugs and biscuits from the packet good enough for her? Who did she think she was to deserve such "special guest" status?

On top of all that, Maggie was ashamed to admit, even to herself, that she was perhaps a little jealous of her sister. She couldn't help wondering why Mum never brought out the fancy trimmings for her visits – not even once.

As time went on, Maggie began to dread Judith's visits. She found herself seething days before. And once her sister arrived, she often just sat there brooding, the effort of conversation sticking in her throat.

But, of course, Maggie never said anything. Somehow, she managed to keep her silent fury buried safely below the surface. Until today.

Earlier that afternoon, Judith had paid a surprise visit to welcome the family into their new home.

Maggie was at first surprised at the apparent thoughtfulness of her sister, before she began to feel a glimmer of suspicion at her motives. She'd probably come to look down her nose at their homely junk, she'd thought bitterly.

“You’ll have to make do with whatever I find, modom.” With her head deep inside a tea chest looking for some crockery, her voice had been muffled. “I don’t possess any Royal Doulton – and I’m never likely to, come to that!”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” snapped Judith.

The sharpness of her sister’s response brought Maggie swiftly out of the tea chest. A little too swiftly, actually, she realised as she tried to refocus on Judith’s angry face.

For a few long seconds they stared at each other, years of angry questioning hanging in the silence.

At that point the words were unspoken, but even so there was no going back. Maggie’s nerves were already frazzled from the move, and she was still trying to come to terms with her mother’s death. At this moment, she could do without having to placate a sister who was full of her own importance.

“What I meant was, even though you’re used to being waited on hand and foot with the best china and linen, I’m afraid I don’t possess any. So you’ll just have to slum it like the rest of us for once!”

Maggie was in full swing now and she wasn’t going to stop. All the years of bitterness at the way her sister expected, and was given, preferential treatment, were being channelled into this one moment.

“And I’ve no doubt that Mum’s bone china dinner service will be passed on to you. So as I said, I’m never likely to own any!”

Just as abruptly as she had started, Maggie suddenly seemed to run out of ammunition.

But Judith was already squaring up for the return fire.

“I don’t want the china!” Judith’s anger appeared to be more controlled than the ranting of her sister but she was struggling to remain calm. “I don’t care if I never see it again,” she said firmly.

Maggie sensed there was more to this statement than Judith simply not liking the pattern on the admittedly rather gaudy dinner service.

“You never seemed to mind eating off it,” she snapped. “All those years you had Mum fussing around you as if you were royalty.”

“I never wanted to be fussed over like that! How do you think I felt, being treated like a guest by my own mother? Like I was a new neighbour or a distant relative? All that politeness and formality.

“And I saw the two of you, those times when you didn’t know I was coming – sitting there snuggled up on the sofa with your mugs of coffee and packets of biscuits, chatting away like two best friends.”

Judith stopped and looked to her sister for understanding, but all she saw was Maggie’s blank face staring back at her.

“No, I wouldn’t expect you to understand.” She was shouting now as she crossed the kitchen, let herself out and slammed the back door behind her.

Maggie sighed, a long, slow, deep sigh. Not a very nice start in their new home, she thought, as she glanced around the kitchen at all the unopened boxes, their contents pulled about where people had been rummaging. Maggie smiled weakly as she spotted a couple of packets of biscuits nestled in the folds of a bedroom curtain.

She was thinking over what Judith had said. Guiltily, she remembered how her feelings of resentment had been eating away at her for all those years. It was obvious to her now that she’d got it all completely wrong.

The back door opened again, very gently this time. Maggie turned towards it, expecting to see her husband.

But it wasn’t Bill, it was Judith. Maggie faced her, relieved that her sister had returned, although not entirely sure why.

They stood together in wary silence for a few seconds.

“Any chance of a mug of coffee?” It was Judith who spoke first.

“Yes, of course.” Maggie grabbed the kettle and began refilling it. She reached over to one of the boxes and dipped into it, retrieving the two packets of biscuits.

“Look what I found. We’ll have one each, as it’s a special occasion.”

Judith gave a friendly laugh and smiled.

“I think Mum was only doing what she thought we both wanted.” Maggie handed Judith a mug of coffee.

“I know. I suppose because I didn’t visit very often, she thought she had to make a fuss of me. It was lovely of her really.”

“Whereas I was there so much, I was like a piece of the furniture!”

They both laughed.

“It never occurred to me – “ Maggie began, but Judith held up her hand to silence her.

“I know. It’s OK now. Perhaps you and I can take over where you and Mum left off?”

“Perfect. As long as when I come to visit, you lay the table with Mum’s best china?”

“It’s a deal.”

Judith looked out of the window.

“At least the rain’s stopped. I can see blue sky up there.”

“Yes,” Maggie agreed, placing a hand on her sister’s shoulder. “I think the storm’s finally over.”