



# Nothing In The Cupboard

by Liz Betz

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Inside the smallest, oldest, but most immaculate house in the Alberta village of Kitscoty, Mona rocks from one foot to the other in front of her cupboards, a small tin of sandwich meat in one hand. Just outside a piece of plastic, from the neighbour's yard, has caught in Mona's lilac and it flutters against the window. Mona's free hand moves up and down in a panic of its own.

A whine, that she is unaware of, comes from deep inside her and it erupts into words that come out a high pitched keening.

"I can't think of what to take." In her face there is a sense of betrayal that her pantry could fail her. She has already looked at the cans of cherry and apple pie filling, a box of cake mix, a bag of gum drops, (which she slipped into her purse on the counter), and her collection of extracts.

She turns to rummage in the fridge.

Her husband, Clive with no other thought than to drive across the province to be with his son and his family, has retreated to the bedroom and Mona is alone in the kitchen. Clive has told her that it won't matter now. All misunderstandings will be forgotten. We will be welcome. He will, if he has to, add they may never be forgiven if they don't come. Through the years Clive hasn't always been as strong as he should have been, in part because Mona confused him, but he is sure now.

Mona wants to have something from her kitchen in her hands when they arrive. Something to extend, other than open arms, lest they be rebuffed. There has always been a place for food.

Mona is hugely sceptical of most things religious and the Royals have left her disillusioned but if she believes in anything, she believes in the power of moulded gelatine salad. It not only says we care, it says we understand. There were other appropriate dishes too. Casseroles to take to the house where illness has struck, squares to take to funeral luncheons held after the service and desserts too, just because we are neighbours and friends. Today, unfortunately, there has been some flaw in every food-equals-thoughtful gesture that Mona has considered. Every dish that she thinks of preparing could be saying 'the homemaker here is not good enough.'

She looks at the tin again, it is still in her hand, as if she does recognize something of it, (the size?) but seems to have no idea of how to open it. She puts it in the fridge and pulls out one of her many plastic containers, peering at the contents as though it were in another language. All her effort and knowledge cannot help her decide what to bring. Or whether she should bring anything at all. Both could be taken as an insult.

By herself, Mona takes up half of the available space in the tiny kitchen and Clive has to dodge both her and the chairs at the table to place the suitcase by the door. She is still dressed in the zipper front housecoat she slept in and will have to change. Clive knows that much, but has given up trying to understand the degrees and suitability of garments that Mona adheres to, gleaned in the day when women's magazines featured such information alongside photos of Queen Elizabeth's growing family and advertisements for wringer washers.

Clive has simply dressed in his gray and green golf shirt and matching green khakis that were a birthday present from their daughter, trusting that it would suit. Maybe Mona won't be happy with his short sleeved shirt that exposes his tattoo. Hadn't she lit into him about being too old and didn't he have enough brains to not encourage

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his grandson in such a manner and on and on? David had chosen the tattoo for his grandpa Clive- a leaping salmon and he had chosen David's - a single feather and they had joked through the pain about being blood brothers. Clive had never told that part of the story to Mona. He lightly touches his forearm as if to gain strength from the tattoo. He's ready. On his feet, however, are the heelless slippers, that have been his mainstay since returning home from the hospital.

Voice from the phone: "And while David lay on the side of the street unconscious, he was run over."

Why weren't his friends hauling him out of there? Or stopping traffic? Clive knows that David would have taken charge of a situation like his and directed the people around him. He had that type of sense, David did.

"There's nothing in the cupboards." Mona complains one more time. Clive knows why Mona stalls and he is gentle as he says.

"We can stop at the mall in Vermilion. We'll need something to eat by then anyway." But he has to place his hand on her arm so she sees him. And he has to repeat himself. He's known her long enough to know that despite how poorly things turn out, his wife can't help herself. She simply doesn't know that nothing in the cupboard can replace something from the heart.

Normally, Mona would prepare a lunch, reasoning that with her preparation there wouldn't be a repeat of the food poisoning -it was the little paper cup of coleslaw or the deep fried chicken or both. Who is more comforted by hand washing and cutting board bleaching is hard to say. But that doesn't matter today.

Mona brings herself out of the fridge and in doing so knocks the egg carton from its shelf. The carton bounces on the narrow end, pops open and the remaining three eggs fall on the floor and break. Mona stands and looks at the mess, while Clive gets the paper towels.

Clive kneels down to the floor, something that Mona's knees don't allow.

"It's all right, I'll just clean it up."

"Don't just wipe it dry - you have to use water." Mona's words roll off Clive's thoughts - he is already far away.

"There was an incident and David was struck. He fell onto the road,unconscious from the blow."

Who delivered the blow? No one would want to hit David. He must have been defending someone, pulling a friend away from a bad situation, or stepping in between two enraged drunks. The blow must have been meant for someone else.

Mona sees the suitcase. And Clive tells her that he packed and he remembered toothbrushes, all of their medications and some clothes for both of them. Without saying a word, Mona goes to the bedroom and Clive hopes that she has just decided to change her clothes. He's a little bit afraid that Mona will bring load after load of clothes to lay out on the bed to decide what to pack, but clothes are just something to wear. Clive had tried to get it right.

He follows her into the bedroom where she is buttoning up her blouse. He watches her brush her hair. Can she be any slower?

Clive tells her it is time to go, and when she doesn't seem to respond, he takes her hand and leads her to the car. Mona is in no condition to drive, Clive thinks, but he

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might be ready. He used to be very steady and unafraid before his stroke. After he buckles Mona's seatbelt with its custom made extension, he slides into the driver's seat where he has already placed his cushion. He grips the wheel with determination as if that alone will stop his hand from shaking. Slowly he backs into the street, grateful the car is an automatic.

The old red Pontiac edges past Mona's marigolds. The unattractive and smelly flowers sit like unwanted relatives at a funeral, alone in a well-spaced row and among them is a shoe. The shoe most likely belongs next door, three young children live there and it takes a lot of energy for their mother to keep up. But any time some debris escapes the neighbour's yard, Mona pronounces that the straw tells how the wind blows. As if they have no shame and she'd be glad to help them find some.

Clive drives to the edge of the village and waits for a long break in the traffic before he directs the car onto the shoulder of Highway 16. He knows that he should speed up and enter the driving lane but he wants to get his sea legs under him.

Neither Mona or Clive can count the number of passengers whose dark hair flips out from the open window of the tiny black car as it speeds past and honks.

"They don't have to be so rude," Mona said, "but really Clive, you've got it coming. Get off the shoulder and into the right lane. When they say slower traffic - keep right, they don't mean the shoulder. That's for emergencies."

Clive glances down at the salmon tattoo on his forearm and signals that he'll be changing lanes. He'll need Mona to get the map out once they have turned south at Vermilion. They can save a few miles, going cross country to Red Deer but it's been long enough to forget the highways. If she looks that up, she'll let his driving alone.

"They say, the 911 call was placed at 9:45 p.m. It was one of David's friends sobbing into the phone that he'd been run over."

David was born in the evening, after hours and hours of labour. Clive remembers waiting by the phone for word. And the trouble had started then. Mona says she is surprised that a native girl would have so much trouble delivering a baby.

Clive glances at the speedometer. He's going 45 miles per hour. If he doesn't get a move on, it will take them forever. Then what does it matter, if it does take forever? That could be their penance, to be in this car for the rest of their lives.

Get Mona to look at the map, he reminds himself. He is about to speak when they meet a police car and Clive sees it turn around. Maybe it's for someone else, but the lights flash and Clive slows the car, stops off the highway on the gravel of a side road. The officer approaches their car. Mona searches the glove box for their registration and insurance holder. While reaching for his wallet, Clive shakes his head at the coincidence that they would be here at the end of the road that lead to their old farm. Where they all lived when David was a toddler. His pocket is empty. He pats at his other side. Shit.

"The police are still investigating the details. This is what they know. David was hanging out with friends. And while he stood on the sidewalk, a punch was delivered." They can investigate all the details they want. But the outcome will not change. What remains to uncover?

The police officer reaches their car. Clive does what he has to. He confesses that he has forgotten his wallet.

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“How far are you going?” the officer asks.

“Just to Vermilion.” Why lie? he wonders. Next thing he’ll be playing the sympathy card of their grandson’s death.

“Do you have your license, ma’am?” the officer asks Mona.

Clive answers for her. “We’ve had a shock - a death in the family - I’m not sure my wife can drive.”

The officer seems to be considering what Clive says. He goes back to the patrol car, they wait and then he returns.

“Okay.” he said. “Don’t poke along, like you were, and remember your license the next time.”

As they pull back onto the highway, Mona speaks; “That was decent of him.” Clive looks to see if she means it.

“Why did you say we were just going to Vermilion?” Mona asks.

“I don’t know.” Clive answers and they are silent as they draw closer to Vermilion. Inside the mall, Mona waits, seated sideways at one of the moulded tables with chair wings, and watches the people passing. Clive orders their lunch. He brings over the grilled cheese sandwiches, coffee and a piece of sour cream raisin pie for Mona - one of her favourites and a surprise find on the menu.

Even without a clock anyone could tell it is noon hour. Groups of teenagers, four or five in each bunch jostle their way down to the center court of the mall. The hungry ones place orders at the same counter as Clive had, while others flop down with exaggerated tiredness, their legs stretching for miles beyond their seats.

“David had so many friends and they all knew about his reconstruction surgery. How his skull was held together with metal mesh. He came close to dying in his car crash, four years ago. His friends came to visit him, in the hospital, droves of them.” Tribes of them, Mona called it, but Clive thought it good that David knew his mother’s people and was welcome among them.

Mona nibbles at her sandwich, her mouth pinched as she watches the rambunctious behaviour. Clive eats without looking at Mona or his meal. He reviews the highway scene with shame and then anger. What if the police have radioed on ahead and they get stopped again?

The mall music is part of the general hum and the little lunch counter is quite busy. Another teen, who appears to be alone, gets his order. He passes to an available seat, then suddenly he is tripped and his fries go flying.

“You shouldn’t do that!” Mona is on her feet and shaking her finger at the boy with the black dyed hair and legs stretched out.

Clive grips Mona’s arm and hisses, “Sit down.” Then he turns to the young people.

“Sorry about that.” He apology only receives a shrug and a dirty look from the youth.

Clive glares at Mona, who answers his look defiantly. “What? If I don’t speak out

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they won't know."

"Just eat, already. Just eat so we can go." Mona, who has never needed encouragement to eat, complies and they make their way out of the mall with no further incident, Clive glancing back at least twice. Clive stops Mona from searching the grocery store - to find a gift of food to bring along.

David was quick with his fists too, but after his accident he was careful to avoid confrontation. The doctors had warned him that his skull was too fragile to sustain another blow. He was tough and fearless. He never went looking for trouble, but he didn't back down if it found him.

While Clive watches out for trouble from the teenagers, Mona notices the flat tire on their car. The rubber is relaxing onto the pavement, like a heart that has just learnt the worst possible news.

Mona says, "That tire is flat."

"What did you say?" Clive comes closer to his wife to catch what is she talking about.

"The front tire on my side is flat." Mona says, her voice louder.

This flat tire, should be a minor inconvenience, Clive thinks. And he imagines the fuss and disturbance it would have made yesterday, how he would be flattened himself, just looking at it. He feels slightly stunned. Maybe this flat tire is enough, they could get it fixed and go home. They shouldn't have to face this. They could say that the trip was just too much. They're old.

They stand and look at the tire, trying to decide what to do. The mall doors swing open and out pour the teenagers, their laughter and noise, a shot of spring fever.

David had a big heart. He was tough and fearless, and sometimes he got in trouble but if he seen how he could help someone, he was the first to do it. No questions asked. There should be questions. Why David? Why so young? Why not someone like his Grandfather? The stroke could have taken Clive, just as easily as not. Then David could have lived.

Few of this young generation would help like David did. Even from his own grandchildren, there might be two who would help. Two out of seven. No, out of six, a grim calculation.

Clive shakes his head as he surveys the tire. Mona has gone to sit inside the car. Then Clive turns and strides towards the building. He can phone a garage for help. Then, suddenly, he is surrounded by the teenagers, both boys and girls.

"Got a problem, old man?" The boy with the black dyed hair asks him.

"Gee that's too bad." another taunts. "We have something for you, though."

"What? What do you mean?" Clive hopes they aren't about to beat him and when he sees the first egg lobbed towards the car, he almost laughs. Splat. Mona looks around. This time the window by her face receives the hit. One girl holds the egg carton open while the rest take eggs and fire them at the car. Some from a distance with exhibit baseball pitches, and others close to their target. They become a blur of bodies in a tribal ceremony, while fractured egg shells rolls down and away from the yolky sliding globs on the windows. More and more eggs are hurled at the car until

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Clive can no longer see his wife, and yellow yolk streaks the car like war paint.

“You old bitch. You fat cow.” The face of the young person is a ugly contortion as he shouts into the car at Mona. Then they are gone - running to the mall’s brick siding - through the entry - to disappear and claim innocence.

Clive reaches the car and opens the door, his feet crunches the eggshells on the pavement.

“What have I done to deserve this?” Mona wails. And Clive doesn’t have to ask what she means. And he can get the tire changed and he can get the car washed and they can go to be with their son and his family. And none of them deserved to loose David this way.

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**Liz Betz** is a retired cattle producer from Alberta Canada. She has a range of publication credits, unfortunately with now defunct small presses such as *Green’s Magazine* and the online *PlumRubyReview*. Her work was also included in an anthology from Smoky Peace Press and has been aired on CBC’s *First Person Singular*. “Nothing in the Cupboard” is her first publication in a while.

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