

LAST ACT OF BOB BENNETT

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Another of my Smith/Bennett/Mayron unemployment stories.

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1.

Moving Day

Elizabeth Bennett held the front door open while her husband, Bob, son, Chris, and the owner of the Fairlane, Jonathan Mayron, struggled down the hallway laden down with heavy cardboard boxes.

â Take them down to the kitchen,â said Beth, â Last door on the left.â

â I knew it had to be too good to last,â said Jon, struggling around the ocean of crates and cardboard boxes that lined the narrow corridor.

Almost colliding into the back of Jon, Chris marvelled at the dissimilarity of the two men ahead of him. Bob and Jon had met through Bob's first wife, Mandy, who was now married to Jon. But that was where any similarity ended. Bob Bennett was short, dumpy, and fiercely blond; Jon Mayron was nearly two metres tall, agonisingly thin, with curly red hair. Mandy Mayron had once joked that from a distance Jon looked like a redheaded lamppost.

Inside the tiny kitchen, there was only a thin L-shaped walkway formed by the kitchen sink along the back wall, the gas stove and refrigerator conspicuously side by side at the end of the room, and the kitchen table along the front wall, one pace inside the room.

Jon placed the box he was carrying onto the table, and then pushed the box along a metre or so. He then stepped out of the kitchen, into the bathroom, to allow Chris and Bob into the kitchen.

â You can put that onto the sink,â said Beth after a quick look into the box carried by Chris.

â What about this one?â asked Bob, only half pretending to be collapsing under the weight of the box he was carrying.

â Onto the sink,â said Beth after a quick look into the box. â That should be about all of the pots and cutlery. Everything else can go onto or under the kitchen table, at least until I can decide where it all belongs.â

Beth backed out of the room, to allow Chris and Bob out of the kitchen. Then returning, Beth glanced at the cupboards under the sink, and the one small closet on the wall over the sink, and wondered aloud, â Where the hell will we put everything?â

Chris and Jon returned carrying more boxes; a few paces behind them Bob rounded the corner from the corridor too. Chris placed his box onto the table, then turned and took Bob's cardboard box from him.

* * *

â One more trip ought to just about do it,â said Bob ten minutes later, as they sat around on crates in the lounge room. They had cleared a space in the centre of the room, so they could relax awhile and sip slightly warm beer.

â I hope so,â said Jon. He ran the beer can across his forehead for a second, then opened the can and took a long drink of beer.

They lingered over the beer, the three men drinking straight from the cans, Beth from a glass she had located in one of the boxes.

Jon finished his beer, and then asked, â How do you get into the other side of the house?â

â You go around to the side door and knock,â said Beth. â The house has been sub-divided into two flats. A Greek family lives in the other half.â

â That's a bit inconvenient, isn't it?â asked Jon.

â It's a bloody nuisance,â said Bob. â But at least there's one consolation, they don't speak a word of English, so we don't have to worry about them trying to force themselves onto us.â

â Not like the bastard out the back,â said Beth.

â What bastard out the back?â asked Jon.

â Oh, there's an old dero living in the bungalow near the washhouse,â explained Beth. â The bastard's hooked up to our electricity too. The owner says he'll reimburse us for part of our power bills, but we'll believe that when we see it.â

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â There isnâ t a lot more to go,â said Beth. â Why donâ t you two collect the last of it? Chris can stay here and help me to start getting things straightened out.â

â Fair enough,â said Bob, following Jon out into the corridor.

â Now let me have a look at you,â said Beth. She held Chris at armâ s length as the Fairlane drove away. â You always were my favourite, you know,â she said, making Chris blush, then feel silly for blushing like a school girl. â And do you know why?â

â Because we look so much alike,â answered Chris. He had heard the answer many times before.

â Itâ s like looking in a mirror,â said Beth.

Beth and Chris were around the same height, perhaps one hundred and seventy-five centimetres; both had dark brown eyes, shiny black hair; Bethâ s close-cropped, Chrisâ worn to the shoulders, and both were very thin, Beth to the point of near emaciation.

â Help me to shift these boxes onto the floor,â said Beth indicating four boxes upon the sofa. â Then at least we wonâ t have our bums numbed by sitting on packing cratesâ

â Shouldnâ t we start getting everything sorted out?â asked Chris doubtfully.

Beth lifted a cardboard box onto the floor and said, â Thereâ s plenty of time for that afterwards. Bob and Jon can unpack everything when they return ... Itâ s been ages since weâ ve been able to sit down together and talk.â

Chris hurried to help. When the sofa was clear, Beth sat down, and patted the cushion beside her for Chris to sit also.

â We havenâ t seen much of each other the last couple of years,â she said in an admonishing tone.

â Well, it was so far to travel out to Glen Hartwell, when I only had the dole to live on,â said Chris.

â Well, all of that is going to change now,â said Beth, hugging Chris to her. â Youâ ll be able to pop in to see us all the time now.â She hesitated for a moment, then added; â I suppose some good has to come out of everything.â

â I suppose so,â said Chris uncertainly.

Beth removed the sticking tape from the top of one of the boxes near the sofa. She took a quick look inside the box and grimaced, then said, â Half of this junk should have been tossed out years ago. Itâ s only when you move house that you realise just how much garbage you collect during your life time.â

Chris sat watching Beth poke around in the box for a while, then asked, â How have the girls taken to the idea of moving house?â

â Collie is all for it,â said Beth. â She only has half as far to travel to school now.â

â And thereâ s a Uni close handy.â

â A technical institute,â corrected Beth. â But, of course, weâ ll be sending Collie to MelbourneUniversity or at the very least, R.M.I.T.â

â And Rosie too,â suggested Chris.

â Rosie?â asked Beth, surprised. â Oh, thatâ s right, you donâ t know, do you?â

â Know what?â asked Chris.

â Rosie isnâ t going on to university. Sheâ s decided to leave school at the end of next year, after she gets her HigherSchool Certificate, or whatever itâ s called these days.â

â But I thought both of the girls were going on to Uni?â said Chris.

â So did we,â said Beth, sighing, â but Rosie has made up her mind to leave school after next year, and no amount of arguing has been able to budge her.â

â Maybe if I were to talk to her?â offered Chris. â Tell her about my three years on the dole because of not having education?â

â Thanks, but no thanks. I appreciate the offer, but youâ d only be wasting your time. Rosie has made up her mind, and thereâ s no budging her ... maybe itâ s just as well with Bob out of work, and me only working part-time. We canâ t really afford to send both girls on to Uni, and letâ s face it; Collie has always been the brains trust in this family. Rosie has never failed -- apart from the one year in primary school, where that bloody bitch victimised her for being left-handed -- but she has never had an A-grading in her life. Whereas Collie usually picks up four or five Aâ s at each half-yearly grading.â

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â So youâ re not worried about Rosie leaving school?â

â Well, weâ re not exactly jumping for joy,â said Beth. â Particularly since thereâ s no guarantee sheâ ll get a job. We donâ t mind her leaving school to work, but we sure as hell donâ t want her to leave school just to go on the dole.â

* * *

A Few Hours Later

â It isnâ t just that they donâ t talk to her anymore,â said Bob Bennett, in the middle bedrooms lowering his voice enough to be out of hearing range of Beth in the kitchen. â But more the way they talk down to her now.

Starting to assemble one of the beds, Bob said, â Beth has always been such a proud person to begin with. At times sheâ s been a little too fond of keeping up with the Joneses.â He laughed then added, â Hell, nowadays we canâ t even keep up Jonesesâ doorman, with me still out of work after nearly a year ... that was the only reason I ever consented to her working even two days a week. Heaven help us if the CES ever finds out!â

Chris picked up one of the bedâ s conical legs and began to screw it into the base of the bed, which was on its side.

â Yes, itâ s really hit Beth, coming on top of having to move out of Glen Hartwell, where sheâ s lived all her life, for a cheaper rent district.

â And, of course, she has always liked to take a leading role in anything sheâ s involved in. Sheâ s always managed to be the chairlady or other dignitary in any club that sheâ s in ... It has come as a great blow to her to be so unceremoniously demoted. I remember her telling me, in tears, about them taking away her position as treasurer at one club, under the pretence she already had too much else on her plate. But all the time they were dropping sly, sneaking hints that perhaps she might not be able to resist dipping into the kitty to help out her own situation at home.â

â The bitches!â said Chris.

Bob took a long look around the room, then said, â Give me a hand to get it all into place now.â

â Well, weâ ve been about as fair as possible,â said Bob, looking around at their handiwork. â But at least half of their furniture wonâ t fit into the room. Theyâ ll just have to share the wardrobe and fight over the dressing table. But in the end we might have to resort to separate rooms, although itâ ll be a nuisance not having a lounge room.â

â And then youâ ll have the lounge furniture to store somewhere,â pointed out Chris.

â Oh, Christ, I forgot about that,â said Bob. He looked around at the crates and suitcases that covered the floor throughout the room, â Just kick them under the beds for now, to clear a path, then if we can get back to known civilisation we can start in the lounge room. â Unless youâ d prefer a beer first?â

â Well,â said Chris ruminatively, â I guess I could force one down somehow.â

â You donâ t have to have it if you donâ t want it,â joked Bob. â I donâ t want you to feel you have to drink it on my accounts just because there are a few tinnies that have been sitting around in the fridge for the last couple of days, without anyone wanting to drink them....â

â No, no,â insisted Chris. â I donâ t want to seem antisocial so Iâ ll force myself to help you to get rid of them.â

â Weak bastard,â said Bob, cuffing Chris affectionately on the ear.

* * *

2.

A House-Warming Party

Bob sat upon the two-person sofa. Bob and Bethâ s two daughters, Colleen and Rosemary, Jon and Mandy Mayron, Pauline and Kevin Smith, and their daughters, Jamie and Joanne, and Chris Smith all sat on high-back wooden chairs around the room. Two other chairs stood vacant, ready for the latecomers.

â Norma,â Bob said, indicating his place upon the sofa.

â Thatâ s all right Bob, Iâ ll sit against the wall beside Jack,â said Norma.

As Jack and Norma squeezed through the small spaces between the sofa and the various chairs, Beth said,

â Normally we have a small, glass-topped coffee table in here. But itâ s madness as it is in here, with all

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of these chairs, in this tiny excuse for a lounge room.â

Without thinking, Norma said, â Oh, well, when Bob gets a job again, youâ ll be able to move to a house with a larger lounge room.â

Beth looked as though she had been slapped across the face. She turned to look toward Bob, rather than let Norma see how angry she was. Norma gritted her teeth and shrugged toward Jack, conceding that she had put her foot in her mouth.

After a few seconds, Beth calmed down enough to look toward Norma and say, â Of course, if Bob just canâ t find work, I suppose I can always increase my own work load. The people down at the employment agency are forever after me to work five days a week, instead of the two days that Iâ m working now.â

â Iâ m sure it wonâ t come to that,â said Bob, hoping to diffuse the situation before the two women came to blows.

â But if it does,â insisted Beth, â surely you wouldnâ t object to me working full-time?â

â Well ... as a last resort,â conceded Bob.

Triumphant, Beth turned to stare toward Norma and asked, â What about you, Norma? When are you going to throw off the shackles of male domination and get yourself a job?â

â There are no plans in that direction at the moment,â stated Norma. Although it was only a half-truth as far as she was concerned.

â No?â asked Beth, raising a questioning eyebrow. â Youâ ve got her well under your thumb, havenâ t you, Jack?â

â Of course, thereâ s no need for us,â said Norma, coming to Jackâ s aid. â Our situation isnâ t as bad as yours yet, with Jack still getting the dole, and Chris working now.â

Beth stood stock-still staring toward Norma, and Jack and Bob sat up straight on the edge of their seats, ready to pull the two women apart, if need be. Instead Beth said, â What a bad hostess I am, I should have asked what Jack and Norma would like to drink?â

â Just a beer for me,â said Jack.

â A sweet sherry, please,â said Norma.

â Iâ ll be right back,â said Beth, heading toward the kitchen.

â Iâ ll give you a hand,â said Bob.

â Thatâ s all right dear,â said Beth. â Iâ m not a total nong, I do know how to open a beer bottle.â

â You probably use your teeth,â thought Norma.

â I insist, honey,â said Bob. He followed Beth through into the kitchen.

Bob closed the kitchen door behind him; however, the people in the lounge room could still hear the sound, at least, of the argument raging in the kitchen.

â Poor Bob,â said Mandy, taking everyone by surprise.

â He seems to be holding up his end of the argument all right,â said Jon.

â No. I meant ... Well, donâ t get me wrong,â said Mandy, reaching over to take Jonâ s right hand in her left. â But there are times when I feel guilty, knowing that if I hadnâ t divorced Bob, he wouldnâ t have got lumped with her.â

â Itâ s not exactly your fault,â said Norma, looking toward Mandy. Norma had always felt that Mandy looked a little out of place amongst their crowd. Mandy looked as though she belonged in the centrefold of Penthouse or Playboy. She was a platinum bottle-blond, with huge breasts, huge hips, and a microscopic waist. Her only bad features were her eyes, which were a too little close together; also she had a slight squint. â Still they could get around that, I suppose,â thought Norma. â After all, who ever buys Penthouse or Playboy to gaze into the modelsâ eyes?â

The people in the lounge room eavesdropped for nearly ten minutes, trying to catch a stray word or two of the argument. Then, as the Bennetts stopped yelling at each other, the others quickly began to talk about that came to mind.

â What do you think of the football result?â asked Kevin, referring to the tied VFL premiership, which had been replayed. Although nearly two months ago, it would continue to be argued about for years to come.

â The whole thing was a put on,â insisted Jack.

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â Yeah,â agreed Mandy, â they only did it because itâ s an election year.â Kevin and Jack stared toward Mandy, but it was Jon who asked, â What the hell has that got to do with the football?â

â Do you want to drink this?â asked Beth, holding Jackâ s glass of beer over his head. â Or do you want a beer shampoo?â

â Sorry,â said Jack taking the glass from Beth, â I didnâ t see you return.â

â Yes, I noticed where you were staring,â said Beth. To Norma she said, â Perhaps you had better get Jack to change places with Bob, so he wonâ t have such a clear line of vision.â

â Nonsense,â said Mandy. â Jack was just smiling at me. Itâ s a long time since weâ ve seen each other.â

â Yes, I saw how he was smiling at you, like a starving man who finds himself at a banquet, and those knockers of yours are certainly what I would call man-size, bite-size. Not that Norma has anything to be ashamed of in that department,â said Beth. She handed Norma the second glass of beer. â Sheâ s easily got at least a six-course meal on each side of her chest.â

â Oh, no,â thought Bob, as he slumped down onto the sofa, â donâ t tell me sheâ s starting again already?â

* * *

8:32 PM

The four men and three women sat in the lounge room, sipping their drinks (lemonade in the case of Jamie and Joanne), and engaging in small talk for nearly half an hour, while Beth and Norma put the finishing touches upon the meal.

â I hope nobody minds eating outside amongst nature?â asked Beth. â But youâ ve got more chance of making out in the back of a Mini Minor, than you have of fitting nine people into our kitchen.â They buzzed their acceptance and moved toward the back door.

â Norma will show you out the back,â said Beth. Grabbing Mandy by one arm, Beth asked, â Would you mind helping to carry out a few plates of food?â

â No,â said Mandy almost in a whisper.

Beth looked back toward the lounge room. She caught a glance of Bob and Jon talking quietly. They stepped outside through a small roofed over access way, There were two other doorways in the access area: one leading into the main body of the second familyâ s half of the house, the other leading to a small room at the back of the house.

As Mandy and Beth carried plates of food out through the access way, they saw a small blond head peeping out from behind a floral curtain which covered the back window of the back room.

â Thatâ s the neighboursâ little girl,â explained Beth as they placed the dishes onto the table.

â Sheâ s a shy little thing, she wonâ t come out of there while weâ re out here ... The only problem is that she canâ t get from there directly into their side of the house. Thatâ s their bathroom, it was added on after the house was divided into two, so she has to step outside into the access area, then scurry in through their back door. Or else run all the way around to the side door.â

While they watched, the little blond head disappeared behind the floral curtain.

â The poor little thing,â said Joanne. â She could be trapped in there all night.â

â Maybe we should all go back into the house for a few seconds, to let her make a run for it,â suggested Jamie, to the obvious pleasure of Joanne and Mandy, who stood up, until being waved back to their seats by Beth.

â Donâ t be such bloody wimps!â said Beth. â That would only be pandering to her fears. By staying out here, weâ re helping to bring her out of her shell.â As the other four females stared toward her, Beth added, â Besides itâ ll be dark in less than half an hour.â

â Half an hour?â echoed Jamie.

â Donâ t worry,â said Beth. â Bob has taken care of everything,â pointing toward a great lemon tree which stood near the side fence, near the back-of the house. An electric cord ran from the kitchen window to a 250-watt floodlight, which was suspended three metres above the ground, nailed to the side of the lemon tree.

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â Talking about Bob,â said Kevin, looking around the faces of the people at the kitchen table, which had been set up in the back yard, â I wonder whatâ s keeping him?â

â Oh, he and Jon will be along in a moment,â said Beth, then to Mandy; â Donâ t worry, love, they havenâ t got a woman hidden away in there. There isnâ t anywhere to hide her.â

â I didnâ t think...â began Mandy, uncertain whether or not to take it as a joke. Receiving a reassuring nod from Norma, Mandy decided to concentrate her attention onto the plates of salad, cold meat, and bread, which lined the table.

â I hope everyone likes garlic bread,â said Beth, then giggled and said, â If not, then all the more for me.â

â You could do with a few extra pounds,â said Norma, â you always look as though you donâ t know where your next meal is coming from...â She stopped in mid sentences suddenly realising how close to the truth her words were.

* * *

Inside the lounge room, Jon slipped a fifty-dollar note from his wallet, and handed the note to Bob.

â Itâ s only until I get back on my feet again,â assured Bob.

â Thatâ s all right,â said Jon, writing the money off.

â You know Iâ ll pay you back as soon as I can,â said Bob, belabouring the point. â But thereâ s the wife and two girls.â Jon was nodding his head as Bob spoke. â Those bastards down at the dole office donâ t give a bugger. And thereâ s no work around anywhere at the moment, none. But as soon as I do get a job, Iâ ll pay you back. Youâ ll get your money, even if you have to wait a little while for it.â

â Just pay me back whenever you can, thereâ s no rush.â

â I knew I could count on you. Anyway, letâ s not keep the others waiting,â said Bob. â Iâ ll just get a couple of bottles from the fridge and weâ ll be right.â

* * *

â Perhaps Iâ d better go and see whatâ s keeping them?â suggested Jack, standing up.

â No, no, sit down and get stuck into your food,â said Beth. â Youâ re a growing boy. Theyâ re probably just getting us something to drink.â

â Then they must have walked home to Glen Hartwell to get it,â said Mandy, drawing giggles from Jamie and Joanne, and a glare from Beth.

Jon and Bob walked across to the table, carrying two bottles of beer, and a bottle of Riesling.

â Mandy was afraid you had a woman in there,â Beth said to Jon, drawing a glare from Mandy.

From behind the two men, a beautiful Greek woman in her late twenties strode from the left hand half of the house, and knocked on the door to the bathroom, calling out in Greek.

â And there she is,â said Beth pointing.

â Thatâ s the woman from next door,â Bob explained. â Not bad either, I would mind going a few rounds with her.â

â Careful mate, she might hear your,â warned Kevin.

â No worries,â said Bob at the top of his voice, â she doesnâ t understand a word of English.â

â You might be surprised, mate,â said the Greek woman, leading the little girl from the bathroom, as the others laughed at Bobâ s embarrassment.

* * *

â How are things going with you and Jack?â asked Pauline Smith. She was leaning with her back against the sink in the kitchen. Norma had propped herself in the right angle between the sink and the service counter.

â Oh, not too bad,â said Norma. â Jack hasnâ t been able to find any work, but Chrisâ money helps a bit.â

â Yeah, youâ re lucky,â said Pauline. â Kevinâ s been two years without the sniff of a job, and itâ s only a matter of time before the bastards throw him off the dole. They seem to be on a bit of a spree at the moment. Thereâ s been your Chris, Bob Bennett and at least half-a-dozen other people we know.

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â And we canâ t expect any rent money from the girls for a few years yet. Joanne insists she isnâ t going on to Uni., but even if we canâ t change her mind about it, sheâ ll still be at school for at least another two years. Thereâ s no way weâ d allow her to leave school with less than HigherSchool Certificate to her name. Jamie will be doing HSC next year, but sheâ s got enough sense to go onto university afterwards, so sheâ ll be at school for at least another four years.â

â Just be thankful your two girls have some sense,â said Beth, walking across to the refrigerator. She took a can of Ouzo and coke from the refrigerator and said, â Both of our girls are talking about quitting school next year.â

â Both of them!â asked Pauline. â I thought Colleen was going on to Uni.?â

â So did we, up until a few weeks ago. Bob still doesnâ t know yet, and Iâ m not going to tell him. He can find out in February when she doesnâ t go back to school.â She opened the can of Ouzo and cokes then asked, â Norma? Pauline?â

Norma shook her head.

Pauline said, â No thanks, Iâ m driving tonight.â

â Again?â asked Beth. â You always seem to do the driving these days.â

â Yes, Iâ m starting to think Kev must have a two-headed coin. Next time Iâ m calling heads, and weâ ll see what he says.â

* * *

Bob and Jack stood together near the apple tree, toward the end of the backyard, trying their best not to be seen by anyone.

â I really hate to hit you like this,â said Bob, â but Iâ m desperate, even a twenty would help.â Jack counted through the six \$2 notes and five \$1 coins in his wallets, and said, â All Iâ ve got is seventeen.â

â Thatâ ll do,â said Bob, â if itâ s all youâ ve got.â

Jack handed over the seventeen dollars, and wondered how he would survive until his next dole cheque arrived in the mail. â I guess Iâ ll have to walk when I go after work,â he thought.

â Iâ ll pay you back as soon as I can,â said Bob.

â I know,â said Jack, realising he would never see the money again.

Bob pocketed the money, and the two men walked along the side fence toward the back door.

* * *

â Me? Oh, I donâ t intend going back to school next year at all,â said Colleen Bennett to Chris, as they stood together in the kitchen, helping themselves to potato chips from plastic bowls upon the counter near the kitchen sink.

â But I thought I heard your dad say you were going on to Uni.?â said Chris.

â Oh, I was,â agreed Colleen, â but I donâ t want to be a burden on dad, now that heâ s out of work and off the dole. Besides, if I canâ t get a job with HSC, Iâ m not like to get one with a degree.â

â Oh, I donâ t know,â said Alex Bennett.

â And your mum and dad donâ t mind?â asked Chris.

â Itâ s none of their concern really,â said Colleen sulkily. â Mum knows, dad doesnâ t. But itâ s my life after all. Itâ s not really any of dadâ s business.â

â What isnâ t any of my business?â asked Bob, walking through into the lounge room.

â Nothing, dad,â said Colleen sulkily.

â It canâ t have been nothing,â insisted Bob, â or you wouldnâ t have bothered to say it was none of my business.â

â Oh, Dad!â

â Donâ t â Oh, Dadâ me,â warned Bob. â What is none of my business?â

Colleen stood and turned to walk toward the back door. Bob ran after her and grabbed Colleen by the arms.

Turning her toward him, he said, â Donâ t run away from me! Iâ m still waiting for an answer!â

â Oh, for Godâ s sake, dad!â said Colleen. â Iâ m leaving school next year, all right!â

â No, it is not bloody all right!â

â Look calm down, dad,â said Alex Bennett. He walked over to Colleen and Bob.

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â Donâ t tell me to bloody calm bloody down!â said Bob.

Colleen wrested loose from her fatherâ s grip and walked toward the back door, where she almost collided with Jon and Kevin who were coming inside. Turning, she walked quickly down the corridor to the lounge room.

Bob followed Colleen through to the dining area.

Realising things were about to turn nasty; Pauline and Mandy stood up together and headed off toward the kitchen.

Colleen sat on the sofa and resolutely looked toward the wall. However, her father refused to be snubbed and grabbed her by one shoulder. Colleen shrieked, as he ruthlessly turned her around to face him.

â Youâ re going to Uni. next year and thatâ s final!â declared Bob.

â It is not final!â shrieked Colleen.

She struggled against Bobâ s grip for a few seconds, before breaking free. Then ran out into the hallway and down toward the back door, where she met a train of people -- Pauline, Mandy, Beth, Rosemary, Norma and Jack -- coming into the kitchen.

Hearing her fatherâ s footsteps behind her, Colleen followed the other people into the kitchen.

â Oomph!â said Norma as they all squeezed into the small room, just thankful at least that the kitchen table was out in the back yard. â Now I know how a tinned sardine feels.â

â I suppose youâ ve known about this all along?â Bob accused Beth.

Turned to face Beth, Colleen said, â I told him that Iâ m leaving school next year.â

â Donâ t blame me. Itâ s not my fault if the little twit wants to throw her future away,â said Beth,

â Iâ ve done everything I could to talk her out of it.â

â Donâ t blame her, dad,â said Colleen. â Iâ m only thinking of you.

â Thinking of me? You mean to tell me your whole life revolves around knifing me in the back?â

â Oh, for Godâ s sake, dad. I mean, I know you canâ t afford to send me on to Uni. So whatâ s the point in making a big deal about it?â

â Weâ ll manage somehow!â insisted Bob.

â How?â demanded Colleen.

â Donâ t interrogate me!â shouted Bob. â Iâ m not the one who has to answer the questions!â

â And I donâ t have to answer any of yours!â responded Colleen.

â Donâ t speak to your father like that!â said Beth.

â Look, donâ t you think you should settle this after we all go home?â asked Pauline, receiving the shush signal from her husband, Kevin.

â No! Weâ ll settle it right here and now,â said Bob. To Colleen he said, â I donâ t care how much it costs, youâ re going to University next year, and thatâ s an order!â

â You canâ t order me to go to school!â shouted Colleen. â Iâ m seventeen, so by law I can leave school with or without your permission!â

â Not while youâ re living at home, you canâ t,â said Beth.

â Thereâ s no law saying I have to stay at home,â said Colleen. â After the age of sixteen, I can leave home without your consent!â

â So now youâ re going to tear my heart out, by running away from home to live in some squalid slum, eking out a paltry living on the dole for the next forty-three years, until you can move to the old age pension,â said Beth.

â Oh, mum, donâ t be so bloody histrionic ... like always,â said Colleen, pleading with her mother to be reasonable for once.

â Donâ t smart talk your mother like that!â shouted Bob. â Youâ re not too old to go over my knee!â

Colleen flushed red in embarrassment, too angry to speak, however, Norma came to her aid, saying, â Look donâ t you think youâ re going a bit far, Bob? After all, sheâ s old enough to leave home and leave school, so it is really only Colleenâ s business what she does.â

â Shut up! You keep out of this!â shouted Beth. â Itâ s certainly none of your business.

Youâ re probably the one who talked her into leaving school in the first place!â

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â What?â said Colleen and Norma at the same time.

â Thatâ s right!â said Beth. â The same way you talked Chris into leaving school too soon, so heâ d ruin his life. Just because heâ s my son, not yours!â

â I think weâ d better be going,â said Pauline.

â Youâ re not wrong,â agreed Kevin, following Pauline out into the back yard to call to Joanne and Jamie.

â I didnâ t talk Chris into leaving school,â insisted Norma. â I wouldnâ t do something like that, I love Chris, in spite of the fact that heâ s your son!â

â It wasnâ t enough for you to steal Jack away from me!â shouted Beth. â Then you had to destroy my sonâ s future!â

â I didnâ t steal Jack away from you!â

â The hell you didnâ t!â

â I left you before ever meeting Norma,â said Jack. â The only reason I ever left you is because youâ re bloody crazy.â

â So now he calls me crazy! You really have polluted his mind against me,â said Beth. â And now you want to drive Colleen out of school, to ruin her future as well!â

â That had nothing to do with me!â insisted Norma.

â Yes, mum!â agreed Colleen. â She didnâ t know anything about it.â

â Do you really expect me to believe that?â demanded Beth, focusing her attention onto Colleen, then Norma. â Youâ ve probably been seeing her behind my back, the way you sneaked behind my back to get custody of Chris!â

â We got custody of Chris,â shouted Jack, â because you were too bloody crazy to be able to look after yourself, let alone Chris as well!â

â Look itâ s my life, mum, why canâ t you let me live it?â demanded Colleen.

â Yes, mum, you didnâ t kick up this kind of a stink when I told you that Iâ m not going on to Uni.,â said Rosemary Bennett.

â Of course not,â said Beth. â What does it matter if youâ re not going on? Youâ re too bloody dumb to be able to pass at university level anyway! But Colleen has got enough brains to get a degree with honours!â

For a moment Rosemary sat silently staring at her mother, then standing, she ran sobbing into the lounge room.

* * *

â I ... I didnâ t know there was anyone here,â said Rosemary, between sobs, seeing Chris and Jon sitting on the sofa, watching television.

As she turned to run out of the room, Chris ran across to put his arms around Rosemary, saying, â Thatâ s all right, we couldnâ t help overhearing.â

â Sheâ s a bitch!â said Rosemary. She buried her face against Chrisâ

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