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PART ONE

Something's Cooking

Fanning the Flame

CORINNE SMELKER



DEAR MOTHER,

I appreciate you sending the fire trucks last night after my panicked call to you, but really, everything is fine. The assessor says the damage to the house is not all that bad, and he thinks he can get our insurance to pay for it with little trouble. He did say he may “fudge” his report a tad, more to protect the innocent than to defraud the insurance company, for which Frank shall be eternally grateful!

You see, Mother, Frank decided to make one of his rare forays into my domain—AKA the kitchen—to make, in his words, a “slap up dinner.”

Immediately, I placed the kids on red alert because we all know what happened the last time he cooked. Although I heard recently from the campground manager that the burnt patch is growing back, and they were able to rescue some of the rarer plants.

Anyway, I digress . . .

Frank pulled out steaks and turned on the gas for oil to fry some chips. He was admonishing me for not believing in him enough when the cat entered the kitchen. Never have I seen a cat lurk so effectively as Blackie. Personally, I think he was shocked to see Frank in so strange a place. He’s used to curling up on Frank’s lap as they watch BBC at night.

Frank told me what happened next, as I was out in the garden enjoying a cup of tea at the time.

He had just pulled the oil off the stove when Blackie darted between his legs (to get a closer look, I think). Down Frank went, holding onto the pan, but the oil still managed to slop all over the floor.

Thank God for small mercies, it missed Blackie.

Oh, and it missed Frank too.

But some of it splashed up and hit the gas flame, which flared. Not thinking, Frank grabbed the nearest thing, which was Blackie, and was about to use him to beat out the flames.

Blackie didn't take kindly to being an extinguisher and scratched Frank quite effectively up and down both arms before clawing at his legs and making his escape.

(The Casualty Department said Frank should be all right. They administered an anti-tetanus shot and told Frank the scratches should not scar too badly.)

Why Frank didn't call out to me, I will never know!

He also didn't think to turn the gas off, so by then the flames were several feet high. A sudden gust of wind caused one of my curtains to flap over the flame, and before Frank knew it, the curtains were both on fire.

Unbeknownst to me, Frank was on the floor, writhing in agony from the injuries inflicted on him by poor Blackie, and my kitchen was merrily going up in smoke.

The first clue I had that something was wrong was when Mrs. Robinson from next door came outside to fetch her wash. "Wotcha cooking?" she asked.

"Nothing."

"Well, you could have fooled me. Have you looked behind you lately?"

I turned around and all I could see was smoke pouring out the open kitchen window. Mother, I have never run so fast in all my life!

Blackie darted past me as I ran in, giving me an "I'm never coming back here" look. Frank was still prone on the kitchen floor, and the flames had engulfed the stove and my curtains and were happily making their way to my kitchen table.

I yelled for the kids and together we hauled Frank to safety. Then I tried dousing the fire with water. That's when I called you.

The fire trucks got here pretty quickly, and as I said, the assessor said the damage was not too bad. Thank God.

He did ask what we should put down as the cause of the accident, but told me "stupidity in the kitchen" does not count. After some consultation, Frank and I have decided to leave Blackie out of the equation and go for simple "fat fire" for insurance purposes. I have assured Frank his secret is safe with me.

Well . . . me, the firemen, the assessor, you, Mrs. Robinson . . .

We plan on coming to see you next month, and Frank mentioned that he wants to make his world famous bangers and mash while visiting, but I just said "Blackie," and he kept quiet.

With love from your daughter,

Doris