

Preserved

The putrid stench hits my nose before I even knock.

I have learnt from previous visits that preparation is key, so hold a tissue dampened with tea tree oil over my nose. I am worried about causing offence, but she doesn't seem to notice.

I squeeze through the tightly packed boxes and newspapers which tower upwards, almost to ceiling height. Dog and human hair have combined with dust, forming static tumble weeds which cling to any visible skirting board. The high-pitched buzzing of flies irritates my ears, yet I cannot swipe them away as it means uncovering my nose.

Walking through to the kitchen, I try desperately not to vomit as the smell of dog food and excrement seep through my face covering. A waft of formaldehyde takes me back to my school science laboratory. The windowsill is stacked high with dirty plates and sticky pans, blocking the view of the garden.

Unbolting a door, she explains, 'The car hasn't been used since your last visit, but I want to keep the service manual up to date.'

In contrast to the house, the garage is immaculate. In pride of place stands a sleek, shiny, olive green 1926 Aero Super Sports Morgan three-wheeler car. The black upholstery is spotless. Feeling safe enough to remove the cloth from my face, the smell of fresh polish is evident.

I glance across at the shelving full of neatly stacked jars of jams and pickles. My mind spins as I try to comprehend the contrast between filthy house and flawless garage.

'Can I offer you tea?' I refuse politely. I couldn't eat or drink anything which had been prepared in that hovel.

I make polite conversation 'You've been busy cooking.'

'Yes, I supply the local farm shop with jams, the customers can't get enough of it.'

Really? How could that happen? Shouldn't someone have done a hygiene check? There are probably dead flies and dog hair in every jar.

As I check the oil and water, I tell her that my mother makes jam, and describe the huge pan and thermometer that she uses.

She replies 'I use the good old-fashioned traditional method. I put a plate into the refrigerator to cool. Once I think the jam is at setting point, I put a teaspoonful onto the plate and pop it back into the fridge. After five minutes, I push the edge of the jam with my fingertip. If it crinkles and gets little ripples in it, it is ready to jar.'

As always, the Morgan is in perfect order. I wipe my hands plucking up the courage to walk back through the filth. I tell her that I have never seen a more perfect garage. She explains 'Yes, my parents were hoarders. Their garage was a disgusting mess. As a child I vowed that if I ever had one, I would never let it become messy, so I scrub it daily.'

I rush away from the house's acrid stench, reflecting on the absence of the dog.