Fairy Liquid: Val Hewson

I am 16 and have a holiday job in my local library, wearing a nylon overall which it is forbidden to remove.

As the most junior of assistants, I do what I am told in the Reference Library. Tidying books for an hour every morning before we open. Stacking broadsheet newspapers in date order and sending them off to be bound in dark green library cloth. Loading a scratched microfiche into the reader for a family history search. Checking the obituaries in The Times and making out index cards for notable deaths.

The Fairy Liquid? When I run out of jobs in the library, I am sent around the shelves to find dirty books. No, not naughty books, which are kept in the librarian’s office, but ones with plastic jackets grubby and sticky with use. I gather them up, using that librarian trick of jutting out my hip to balance a pile of books as high as my shoulder. Through the heavy wooden door in the corner of the Lending Library and down the steep stairs to the stacks. Here live the books not in immediate use.

In one corner, from floor to ceiling, are thick telephone directories covering the whole country. Down the centre of the room, steel bookshelves are mounted on tracks and compressed together to save space. To get a book, I check off the right shelf, twist a handle set into the end and let the shelves roll apart to form a narrow aisle.

Oh, Fairy Liquid. At the far end of the stacks is a scullery, with windows looking into a weed-filled area. In the world above, it is summer, but down in the stacks it is always cold. There’s a Belfast sink, with a bench and a tap and a bottle of Fairy Liquid.

Fill the sink, flip the top, squeeze the liquid, thick and bright green, into the water, wipe the book cover, rinse with care, dry, repeat. Carry the books back upstairs, re-shelve and start again. There are always more.

Yes, Fairy Liquid. It always takes me back to that library.