



*This story is told by Ruby Lennox, who as a young girl lived above the pet shop run by her parents. She has an older sister called Patricia.*

I'm glad to say that all the pets received a lot of attention from me on the afternoon of that fateful day. The kittens were fluffed up, Rags the puppy was stroked and the hamsters were allowed to run along the counter. I even attempted a conversation with the parrot. It was suddenly clear where my destiny lay – I was going to run a pet shop, like my father before me. In a few years the sign above the door would no longer read 'G. Lennox' but 'R. Lennox'. Here was my future! It would no longer matter that I was not allowed to have pets of my own because all the pets would be mine one day.

My father struggled through the door of the shop with an enormous can of paraffin in each hand, which he deposited with a clank and a slosh next to the barrel of sawdust in the corner. I hoped his cigarette didn't jump over there.

'Careful,' my mother warned as I entered the kitchen. She was making sausage, egg and chips for tea and her entire attention was concentrated on the chip pan as the sausages and eggs started to go black in the frying pan. 'Tea's ready,' she said, giving the chip pan a cautious little shake as if she would have been much happier with a fire extinguisher in her hand. 'Get Patricia.'

'She's not very well,' I told her.

Mother raised an eyebrow ever so slightly. 'Just get her, Ruby.'

The rest of the evening was spent quietly. Father was out as usual, Patricia was in her room reading, also as usual. I was also in my room playing Scrabble with myself while my teddy looked on. My mother was in the kitchen with only her piles of ironing for company. Eventually she abandoned the ironing and, clutching her forehead all the way up the stairs, she swallowed a double dose of sleeping pills and dropped into oblivion on her bed. I heard my father come in much later, tripping and cursing his way upstairs and I drifted into the night. I was dreaming about the end of the world and so it was in some ways.

Downstairs the abandoned, forgotten iron was demonstrating its faults. My mother wasn't to know that the thermostat wasn't working properly and that while she was snoring in her bed, the iron was getting hotter and hotter, scorching the cloth on the ironing board until the pad underneath began to sizzle and burn. The flames then found the wood of the ironing-board frame and were happy for a time but then the iron's melting lead fell to the floor and found the carpet and a particularly energetic flame stretched up and reached the curtains. Then there was no stopping it as the flame greedily gobbled up everything in its path, including the kitchen wallpaper.

In the end even that wasn't enough and the fire left the kitchen, popping its head out of the door and into the shop where there were wonderful things to play with – paraffin, sawdust and the whispering, rustling noise of fear.

'Ruby! Ruby!'

I open my eyes quickly, yet it's not like being awake. The air is thick and Patricia is veiled in



smoke. There is a smell like burnt sausages. 'The end of the world,' I murmur to Patricia. 'Get up, Ruby,' she says urgently. She pulls back the covers and starts tugging me out of bed but I don't understand until she doubles up with a fit of coughing and splutters, 'Fire, Ruby, fire.'

We make our way unsteadily to the bedroom door and Patricia whispers, 'I'm not sure we can go out there,' as if she didn't want the fire to hear. But she's not whispering. It's the smoke rasping her throat and making her hoarse, as I discover when I try to speak. We open the door very cautiously as if all the fires of Hell were behind it. We immediately start to choke and have to stagger back inside, gasping and retching, hanging on to each other. We're human chimneys.

Patricia starts pulling covers off the bed and stuffing them underneath the door. Then she flings everything out of my chest of drawers until she finds two school blouses which she wraps around our faces. In different circumstances this could have been fun. 'Help me,' she croaks as she tries to push up the window which is hopelessly stuck. I start to get hysterical and drop to my knees with a jab of pain and pray frantically to be saved from incineration.

Patricia, more practical, grabs the nightlight and smashes it against the window again and again until she's broken all the glass. Then she takes the bedside rug and places it over the broken glass on the window sill (Patricia really paid attention at Girl Guides, thank goodness) and we both hang out of the window gulping in great lungfuls of cold night air. Patricia turns to me and says, 'It's all right, the fire brigade will be here soon,' knowing that neither of us believes this.

There is no sound of sirens, no sound of life in the street and the rest of our family are probably little more than glowing cinders by now. Patricia's face is suddenly convulsed by a spasm of pain and she wheezes, 'Pets. Someone's got to help the pets.' It doesn't cross our minds to save the family.

'Here,' says Patricia, pushing something into my hands, which turns out, on closer inspection, to be teddy. Patricia then swings herself off the window sill and onto the drainpipe, pausing just long enough to say, 'Stay there, and don't move!' in a manner inherited directly from our mother. She looks truly heroic as she climbs down, wearing only her pyjamas. Halfway down she pauses, 'Stay there, Ruby, help will be here soon.' I believe her. You can trust Patricia. Within minutes a stocky fireman is outside my window and I am upside down over his shoulder and we are off down the ladder. Patricia is in the yard shouting encouragement, my mother is screaming while my father is shouting something to her (probably 'shut up'). I realise that if everyone is down there, then I have been alone in a burning building! What a story I'll have to tell in later life.

Meanwhile Patricia has been wrapped in a grey blanket and she is weeping uncontrollably and making horrible noises, partly due to the smoke and partly due to the fact that she has witnessed the ruined inside of the shop and smelt the unforgettable smell of toasted fur and feather. But then a miracle occurs. A little black dog runs into the yard, yapping itself silly, a limp, burnt ribbon dangling from its neck. Patricia frees herself from the blanket and runs to the dog. 'Rags,' she sobs uncontrollably and hugs his singed, smoke-blackened body to her grimy pyjamas.