

## The Key

Celia stared at the key. She had just opened the drawer to look for her gloves, and there it was. She was sure it had not been in the drawer before. Where had it come from? She did not know.

What did it unlock? She did not know. Yet somehow the key struck Celia as important. It disturbed her.

She remembered her brother had called to see her the day before. It must be his key. But what it was doing in her drawer she could not imagine. She must have picked it up absent-mindedly after he had gone and tidied it away in the drawer. Yes, that must be it.

She called her brother before setting off to work. No, it was not his key. He checked; he had them all.

"It must be one left by one of your boyfriends," he laughed. "you've had so many, you've forgotten. I should just forget it."

"No," said Celia firmly. "You know quite well that I've been avoiding men – except you, of course – since that violent break up with that horrible Ken more than a year ago. I'm certain it's not one of his keys!"

"Well, Sis," he said, "just forget it. It's probably been lost for years and tucked away at the back of the drawer. You must have dislodged it. I bet whoever it was who had it has forgotten all about it."

"No," said Celia. "no, it is not that simple. I feel I should know the key – but I don't. It's as though the key presented itself just to be found."

"Now, stop being so fanciful, Sis," said her brother. "Get off to work and forget it."

Celia did get off to work, but she could not forget it.

Maybe she had absent-mindedly picked up someone's key yesterday and taken it home. It was not likely, she thought, but maybe she ought to ask around. So during the morning she asked everyone in the office if they had lost a key. No one had.

At lunch time she hurriedly bought a couple of sandwiches from the canteen and took them out into the park, where she sat alone, thinking.

She could not get the key out of her mind.

The work seemed to go slowly during the afternoon, but at last it was time to go home. Celia decided to call on her mother first before going back to her flat.

Her mother was surprised to see her, as she did not normally drop in straight after work. She was, of course, pleased to see Celia, and laughed when Celia explained about the key.

"Robert must be right," she said. "It's an old key that's been lost, probably for years, and you've dislodged it. Just forget about it. I'll go and make us a cup of tea."

But Celia insisted it was not just an old lost key. It may be old, but it was a special key, though she could not explain why. There was something about the key that troubled her.

"Don't be silly, dear," her mother said as she poured out the tea. "You're letting it become an obsession. But if it makes you any happier, I'll ask Dad when he comes in."

"Thanks, Mum," said Celia.

Eventually Celia went on back to her flat. There was the key, still there in the drawer, almost as though it were trying to tell her something.

Later that evening she had a phone call from her Mum. No, it was not Dad's

key. He had not lost any and thought she was making a lot of fuss about nothing.

Celia spent a worried evening. When she went to bed, she twice went around her flat, checking carefully that all the windows were locked and that the door to her flat was locked and bolted. She did not know why she was so worried, but she was.

She had a very restless night, disturbed by strange dreams that she could not remember in the morning.

The following day was Saturday, so she did not have to get up so early. As she lay in bed, wondering about her disturbed night, she decided to go over to her dressing table and check on the key. It was still there in the drawer but not, she was sure, in the same spot where she had left it. It had been moved; she was sure of that.

Carefully she checked all the windows and the door again. Everything was locked and there was no sign of any break-in. Yet she was sure the key had been moved.

She phoned her mother again that morning and told her about the key.

"Don't be silly, dear," said her mother patiently. "It must have shifted when you closed the drawer."

"I suppose it must have," agreed Celia. Yet she was certain that was not the case. She had closed the drawer carefully; there had been no jolting. She had not disturbed the key.

She wondered about mice. Maybe a mouse had disturbed it, she thought.

She did not like the thought of mice, but at least they were preferable to human intruders. But there was no smell of mice; she had remembered the smell from long ago when had stayed with her Aunt and Uncle in their farm house. No, there was no smell of mice.

She emptied the draw carefully; there were no signs of any mouse droppings anywhere. Besides, how could any mouse have got into the drawer? There was no room for even such a small creature to squeeze through.

She put everything back carefully into the drawer, except the key, and replaced the drawer. The key she kept out.

When she had showered and dressed, she slipped the key into a pocket and went into her kitchen to brew up some coffee.

After a light breakfast, Celia got on with her usual Saturday morning round of chores, dusting and keeping the flat tidy. Later in the morning her Mum called.

"I was worried about you, dear," she said. "I thought I'd just call round to see you before I meet Dad in town."

"That's very kind of you, Mum," said Celia. "but I'm alright - really I am. I'll brew us up some coffee. Or would you prefer tea?"

"Coffee is fine, dear," said her Mum, "and I've got some biscuits here. Now where's that key you've been on about?"

Celia felt in her pocket for the key, and was a bit alarmed not to find it.

"Oh," she said, "it was right here in this pocket earlier this morning. I can't find it now."

"It must have fallen out as you were doing housework," said her Mum, half wondering if there had really been a key at all. "I've got twenty minutes or so before I have to go to find Dad. We'll look for it."

They looked in all the places Celia had been that morning but they could not find the key.

"Well, I must go," said Mum, feeling a little worried. "Don't worry, dear; I'm sure it will turn up."

It did not turn up.

That afternoon both Mum and Dad called round.

"We've bought these lovely cakes, so we thought we'd just call round and share them with you over a cup of tea."

"Thanks, Mum, that's lovely. But there was no need really."

"That's alright," said Mum, "I'll go and put the kettle on."

"Now where's that key?" asked Dad.

"That's it," said Celia. "I don't know. I found it in the drawer here," she added as she went into her bedroom and opened the drawer in her dressing table.

She gave a start.

"What is it, love?" asked her Dad.

"The key - it's here. I don't understand."

"You must have put it back without thinking," said her Dad.

"I suppose so," muttered Celia, not convinced.

"Let's see the key, then," said Dad.

Dad looked at it. "I know that key," he said in surprise.

"There you are," said Celia, "I knew it would be one of the family's. I must've pick it up by accident."

"No, no," replied Dad. "I know the key, but it is not one of ours. It was more than forty years ago when I last saw it. It belonged to old Mrs Marchant - you know, the old lady who owned this house before it got turned into flats after she died. I used to do odd jobs for her - keep her garden tidy and such like."

"What's it suddenly doing here?" asked Celia.

"I don't know," said Dad. "It's almost as though the old lady wants you to have it."

"Why, what's it the key to?" asked Celia.

"To her old jewelry box, if I remember rightly," answered Dad.

"Not much use, then, without the box," observed Celia.

Just then Mum came in excitedly from the kitchen. There on the tray were three mugs of tea and an old dusty box.

"Look what I found," said Mum excitedly. "There was an old loose stone in that alcove where the fridge stands. I wriggled the stone out and found this dusty old box behind it."

"Well, I'll be jiggered," exclaimed Dad, as Celia put the key in the lock and unlocked it, revealing old Mrs Marchant's jewels.