

‘Last thing is create a nesting site, a compost heap would do the trick, and would also provide a habitat for the kinds of creatures hedgehogs like to eat.’

Dawn shook her head. ‘Apparently it’s the compost bin that’s attracting the rats. I’d better stop putting in food waste.’

‘No don’t do that. Everything that is biological should be composted.’ I saw her compost bin hidden in the corner of the garden. ‘Let me take a look, I can probably rat-proof it. I’m good with my hands.’

‘I like a man that’s good with his hands!’ The glint in her eye was suddenly pronounced.

I was saved having to respond by the doorbell.

She rushed inside. ‘Back in a mo hun, you do your thing.’

I checked out the compost bin. The ground underneath was uneven, which is where rats were gaining access.

When she returned, I told her my plan. ‘You could move the bin onto the paved area in front of your shed, then the rats can’t get in. That also makes it easier when you come to shovel out the compost from the bottom.’

‘It could go there, no problem.’

‘Then you use the area where it was to pile up old leaves and twigs to create a pile of debris for hedgehogs.’ I lifted the lid to take a look. It was almost full. ‘It would only take half an hour to empty out the compost, re-site the bin, and re-add the compost.’

She glanced up at the bedroom window and I wondered who’d been at the door.

‘That would be wonderful, thanks hun.’

Oh. I hadn’t meant to imply I was going to do it myself. I looked at Dawn’s silk pyjamas, and decided yet again to break the rules that Jo and I had laid down.

I sighed. ‘Okay. I’ll give you a shout when I’m done?’

‘If you’re sure?’

‘Do you have a spade?’

‘Here you go.’

I was conscious of her eyes on me as I bent over the bin and started digging out the compost and putting it in a pile. I hoped I didn’t have builder’s bum. I straightened up and raised my arms above my head to stretch out. Dawn’s eye strayed to a patch of hairy stomach that had appeared as my shirt lifted up in the stretch. I felt myself beginning to blush and bent over the bin again. I prayed fervently she didn’t plan to just stand there watching me work.

‘Okay, cheers hun. I’ll be upstairs. Shout when you’re done.’

Thankfully, she headed back inside. Lugging the top level of food scraps and grass cuttings over to the paving slabs took a while. I took the opportunity to shovel out the rich fertile compost from the bottom of the bin, and pile up round the back of her hedges, plants and trees. Once it was empty, I dragged it over to the paved area, and shovelled the top bits back in. Taking out the compost and putting it back in had probably done it good, creating pockets of oxygen that would help the process along. I noticed some lovely reddish-brown, wriggly worms, left on the ground and popped them back in. Earthworms should still be able to get access, but best to be sure. Job done!

I peered in the compost bin satisfied, and amazed, as always, by the chemistry that translates grass cuttings and food waste into rich, earthy soil that nourishes the garden. And it was all down to the humble earthworm. If I were ever to write a poem, it would be to the worm, that by its wriggling and slippery length (Jo wouldn't allow me to get away with that one) aerates the surrounding soil, allowing fertile energy of the remains to thicken and enrich it. Its tunnels of air, castings and water, that bring life and weaves it chemical magic. Its slimy undulations that turn the waste of the world and plain mud into rich textured soil, food from which the roses can grow. The humble worm! I replaced the lid and raised my arms above my head to stretch, then brought them slowly down, breathing in the invigorating autumn air. I dreamt of a world where we award this humble worm all the respect it deserves. I had a brief mental image of the worm with a medal round its neck, nodding modestly to the applause.

Pleased with this vision and my work, I trudged up the garden feeling the pain in my back from all the bending and shovelling. It was lovely working outdoors, but I wouldn't want to be a gardener. I rotated my hips clockwise and then anti-clockwise to ease out the kinks. As I gazed up, a net curtain twitched in one of the upstairs rooms. Was I just imagining that eyes were upon me?

I walked up to the back door and wondered whether to go in. 'Hello!' I ventured. No answer. I took off my boots and stepped into the kitchen. I was desperate to wash my hands, but the sink was full of washing up.

There were sounds of movement and a television from upstairs. Who else lived here? Did Dawn had a husband or family? Jo had berated me for thinking of people as hazards, but the fact is that after too many years dealing with numbers, I was finding it rather strange being in other people's homes.

I walked up to the bottom of the stairs. 'Hello! Er, Dawn!'

An upstairs door opened and the sound of the television was heard more clearly. Dawn's face appeared.

'Hi Dawn, I'm done, can I just wash my hands?'

'Of course hun, up here, the bathroom's on the left.'

I hastened up the stairs and into the bathroom to wash my hands. I emerged, and jumped in shock as I heard a piercing scream come from the bedroom. Dawn was standing in the doorway unperturbed.

‘Kerry and I like to snuggle up in bed and watch Agatha Christie.’

I nodded, heart still racing from the unexpected scream. I could hear Miss Marple in the background. ‘You are in dire peril my dear.’ Dawn was still standing there, gazing at me steadily with that glint in her eye.

‘Has the Wizard been in touch?’

‘Who?’

‘From Woolston.’

‘I’ve had a Geoff from Woolston.’

‘That’s him. Tell him I said ‘blessed be.’”

Oh my days! He wanted bats and frogs. What was he planning on doing with them? I remembered that one of the collective nouns for bats was a cauldron of bats. My wild imaginings were brought to a sudden halt by her next question.

‘Fancy coming in to play?’

Play? Monopoly? Scrabble?

‘Me and Kerry have been watching you from our bedroom and we think you’re sexy.’

So I hadn’t imagined the glint. The question crossed my mind whether Kerry was a male or female, but I thought it expedient not to ask in case for fear of being seen to commit myself.

‘Erm...’ I looked at my watch. Why did I do that? Now she’s going to think it depends on how much time I have. I was paralyzed. This was definitely one to tell Jo. What better example of potential hazards was there? Although, I already could hear the response ‘what’s so hazardous about someone wanting you to join in a threesome!’ Frantic sounds from the television ended my paralysis. ‘You had better get away from here as fast as you can!’ urged Miss Marple. I took her advice and ran.