

TALES from TESSA WOOD

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How it is—by
one of life's
potentially
organised
working mums

**"The man is a prawn," I said to Cynthia,
"and you are a bigger one"**

No one loves a rat, except perhaps another rat. Katy pushed someone called Oliver off the climbing frame at school and couldn't face the world the next day. "My chest is sick," she said.

I pushed Cynthia out of the ivory tower she's been in since the collapse of her romance and now my chest is sick too. I said to Katy, "I'm sorry you're sick," and gave her a cuddle.

My heart went out to her and I'm sure her heart would have gone out to me if I'd been able to confide in her. But I couldn't on account of the bad example she already didn't need. I turned to George who said, "You should think before you speak."

George is perfection when it comes to thinking and speaking. He always gets it in the right order even if it never amounts to much. I let Katy stay in bed today and did as I would be done unto. I smothered her with affection.

I don't know why she attacked Oliver. All she will say is he was being horrible. Cynthia was also being horrible but no one can vouch for either of us.

Floss says when she collected Kate yesterday she was crying her head off and Pat said, "She's had a talking to. She can't go round kicking people in the neck."

What prompted me to lash out at Cynthia was weeks of hostility. It's astonishing what love and rejection can do to a no-nonsense former civil servant who places decorum above hurrying but not, apparently, above revenge.

She thinks I alienated Warren's affections but nothing could be further from the truth. Warren only pursues ladies who are running away. It's a condition he's learnt to live with but Cynthia can't.

She can't forgive me for running the minute he cast his slimy eyes in my direction. And she will never forget that I was at the receiving end of his flowers the very day she discovered his dalliance with Cathy in reception.

I didn't want his rotten flowers or any of his rotten attentions. The man is a prawn of the first order. But you can't tell that to a lovelorn boss of her first suitor in years.

"The man is a

prawn," I said to Cynthia, "and you are a bigger one. Warren never loved you, or Cathy, or anyone else. He doesn't know how to." And she burst into tears.

I didn't rush to console her. She isn't a woman you naturally want to hug. I stomped off to the ladies and when I came back she was gone. I was pleased. It was late and I didn't feel like apologising.

Work has been unbearable with her poncing about like Greta Garbo with indigestion and a squint, clutching her bosom and eyeing me with hate. It's disturbing in a woman of her age and height.

But by the time I'd recovered the children from Floss and assured them Kate wouldn't be charged with attempted murder—a notion Christopher was enjoying—I was beginning to feel decidedly uncomfortable myself in the chest area and the pain worsened overnight.

Katy's symptoms improved during the day. I know you can't run away from problems but when your chest is sick bed-rest, under lots of blankets, can help. When she had recovered her strength I tackled the subject of Oliver.

"Isn't he your friend?" I asked. She shook her head.

"You shouldn't kick people in the neck when you're on a climbing frame," I said.

"I don't like him," she explained. "Even if you don't, you should say you're sorry."

"I did," she said. "But Pat shouted at me." Her lips trembled.

"Is that all?" I cried. "That's nothing. All you have to do tomorrow when I take you to school is say sorry again but louder." She smiled weakly knowing it wouldn't be easy. It never is, returning to the scene of a scene. You can't pretend it never happened. You just have to pretend it hadn't quite finished then rewrite the ending.

Having soothed Kate I telephoned Cynthia and apologised with my chest about to explode. There was a terrible silence. Then she said,

"That's all right. I'm sorry too."

Tomorrow Kate and I brave the world together, no longer rats, but mice. Some people don't like mice either but more people like mice than rats.

