Lovereading4kids.co.uk

Helping you choose books for children

0-5 5-7 7-9 9-12 12+

opening extract from

The Granny Project

written by

Anne Fine

published by

Corgi Books

All text is copyright of the author and illustrator

please print off and read at your leisure.

'Stupid and Greedy . . .'

A visit from the doctor

The doctor was having a hard time with the Harris family. He'd been around to their house often enough before, of course. He'd been their family doctor for years. He'd seen them bellowing red-faced in cots, or miserably picking at their chicken poxes, or coughing horribly in steamed-up bathrooms. He'd never seen them all together in one room, and well, before.

The noise was appalling. The four of them, two girls, two boys, sat round the kitchen table eating like wolves. There was much scraping of knives and grating of forks. All the plates rattled on the table top. They were, the doctor realized after a moment's perplexed reflection, all seconds, warped in the kiln and sold off cheaply in the market. The children didn't seem to notice the clatter, or that their plates were wobbling

horribly. They sat, hunched over, eating very fast. The elder boy's last sausage, stabbed too hard, spun off the plate onto the floor where he immediately swooped to stab it with his fork again.

'No need to kill your food. It is already dead.'

The beautiful Natasha Dolgorova spoke from where she leaned, distant and contemptuous, against the airing-cupboard door.

The doctor sighed. You'd never think she was their mother, he thought. She acted as if they were nothing at all to do with her, some horrible mistake, just for today, this houseful of children; as if the next-door roof had blown off in the night and she, a cool exotic childless woman, was just for once forced into looking after them.

'Nor is it poisoned. And so you need not spit it on the plate.'

'That's *gristle*, that is!'

'Tsssk!'

She hissed so fiercely, the doctor jumped. None of the children took the slightest notice. The doctor hurriedly went on with filling in the form in front of him.

'Osteoarthritis,' he muttered, scribbling in yet another large blank. 'Metacarpophalangeal joint

involvement leading to characteristic volar subluxation and ulnar deviation of the phalanges . . .'

'What?'

Henry Harris, the children's father, sunk in gloom beside the vegetable rack, was suddenly deeply suspicious.

'He says your old mother's fingers are bent.'

'Ah.'

'Degenerative changes in the cochlea . . .'

'And she goes deaf.'

'Right.'

'Impairment of brain tissue function with concomitant deterioration of cognitive functioning . . .'

'And stupid, too.'

'Natasha!'

'Tsssk!'

The doctor kept his head well down.

'She's still smart enough to get to the newspaper every morning before anyone else,' Sophie said.

'What's in a newspaper to interest you?' Natasha demanded of her elder daughter.

'Stuff. Stuff for projects. Any old stuff.'

Her brother, Ivan, laughed through his mouthful of chips.

'Everything interests me and Sophie,' he said. 'Now we do Social Science. Crime, Violence, Police Corruption and Consumer Protection, Race Relations, Suicide Rates, Sex Statistics—'

'Tsssk!' Natasha Dolgorova hissed at her son who, grinning, tossed his dark curls back at her and calmly went on sopping up leftover ketchup with his bread.

'Projects! Pah! Such a school! I'll take you out of it! *Projects!*'

'There's no specific ambulatory problems, I take it.'

'The lazy old woman can still walk, yes. If she is truly hungry.'

The doctor winced.

'More of a shuffle, really,' Sophie said.

'Well, that's because she stole my bedroom slippers,' Henry Harris explained to the doctor mournfully. 'They're several sizes too large for her feet.'

'Her dietary intake?'

'The woman can eat *anything*.'

The depth of Natasha's scorn was unmistakable.

'It's true,' Henry Harris had to admit.

'She ate the leaves off Sophie's geranium last week,' Ivan said, troublemaking. 'And Nicholas

and Tanya caught her chewing feathers this morning.'

'You did?' Natasha asked the younger pair.

'A few,' said Nicholas, playing it down.

'Lots,' Tanya declared, exaggerating.

'See! Stupid and greedy, that is what she is!'

'Natasha! Please!'

'And she should know the *cost* of pillows.'

'Ssssh.'

'*Tssssk*, yourself, Henry Harris! She is not *my* mother!'

The doctor, folding back another side of paper, suddenly spotted the end of the form. He cheered enough to say:

'One further manifestation, should we seek it, of the proven versatility of the human gastro-intestinal tract.'

'Just what I said,' Natasha Dolgorova claimed. 'The woman can eat anything.'

The doctor rose. He tapped the forms.

'I'll see that these get to the right place,' he said. 'But since there's no immediate problem—' Catching one of Natasha's venomous looks he hastily amended this to – 'Since Mrs Harris isn't actually ill at present, results may not be immediate, you understand. But I'll do what I can.'

The children all stopped clattering to lift their heads and look at him. Then Ivan said:

'What does he mean? Results? What's going on? Are you two thinking of putting Granny into a Home?'

'Thinking is finished,' Natasha told him. 'It is decided.'

'Dad?'

Henry Harris blushed.

'*Dad?*'

'Your mother and I are finding Granny an enormous strain,' he began.

'You're never sending Granny *away*?'

'Nothing's *decided*,' Henry Harris said uncomfortably. 'Nothing for you to worry about. Let's wait and see.'

Natasha hurled the dirty dishes into the sink.

'Шила в мешке не утаишь,' she said darkly.

'What? What did she say? Dad, what did she just say? What was that?'

The panic was traditional. Natasha's proverbs were notorious.

Sometimes it appeared to Henry that the only thing his wife had brought with her when she moved west across a frozen continent was a seemingly inexhaustible supply of ominous sayings.

'What did that mean, Dad?'

'Nothing.'

'*Dad!*'

Henry Harris dropped his head in shame, and translated:

'You can't hide sharp steel spikes in soft cloth bags.'