



The Label by Alex Cotter



"Hello, everycan!" cried Prunes as she was pushed onto the cupboard shelf. The door closed behind her, casting the closest labels in shadows; the popular tins claiming the front row as usual: Baked Beans, Chopped Tomatoes, Chickpeas.

"What did the humans win at the tombola this time?" Chickpeas let out a watery sigh. He made "win" sound like "lose".

"Eww, disgusting!" said a can of Fancy Olives, eyeing Prunes' label with an oily sneer.

"She doesn't even have a ring pull!" booed Baked Beans.

Prunes wanted to stick up for herself. But it was hard to be heard above the canned laughter.

"Send her to the back," Chopped Tomatoes ordered loftily. "She'll never get chosen."

Prunes didn't protest - she was used to it - as they rolled her tin to tin, until she reached the back of the cupboard. Where she joined the usual Fruit Gang (Grapefruit Segments; Peach Halves; Pineapple Chunks).

And a Miaow Meats. "Help! I'm in the wrong cupboard!"

And a customary lone strand of spaghetti. (Right, like they speak).

"Alas, tinned fruit is the last resort of pudding options!" Grapefruit Segments consoled Prunes. "Unless there's a Christmas trifle."

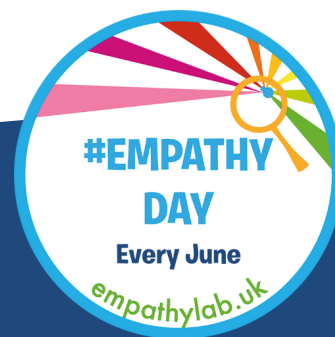
And Prunes didn't mean to be prun-ish, but she wasn't trifling material. Besides, this cupboard, this time ... she'd so hoped things would be different.

"Don't cry, you'll only make your lid rust." Miaow Meats displayed theirs.

"Only pray one day you'll be chosen." Peach Halves turned Holy.

"Better still, tell Chopped Tomatoes they're actually a FRUIT!" shrieked Pineapple Chunks (always the joker).

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"I beg your preserved-pardon?" bellowed Chopped Tomatoes from the front row.

The Vegetable Gang moved closer. The Fruit Gang squeezed forward.

"You're just jealous because you'll never be stirred into a veggie chilli!" The Vegetable Gang.

"You're just bitter that you'll never swim in custard and cream!" The Fruit Gang.

Then, before anyone knew what was happening, a melee of metal was afoot in the middle of the cupboard; a tussle of tin, a cacophony of can.

Until - pause - a metal-sharp murmur spun round the cupboard shelf. You see, a can's actions always has consequences.

In the rowdy rustle ... a label had been completely torn off.

Gasp.

Chopped Tomatoes ... was naked.

"Avert your eyes," ordered Grapefruit Segments.

"Without a label!" Baked Beans let rip, "you could have anything inside."

"Cauliflower; cabbage; cherries!" offered Fancy Olives.

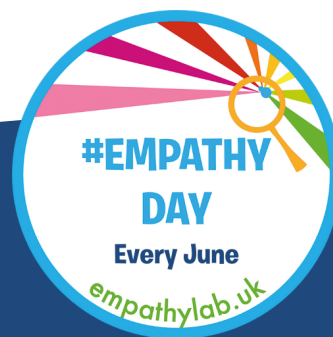
"Cat food!" - from the back.

Chopped Tomatoes would never get chosen now. Not for mealtimes, not for a tombola, not even the Harvest Festival. So he didn't protest as he was rolled, tin to tin, towards the back of the cupboard. There, Chopped Tomatoes looked at Prunes. With new eyes.

And Prunes looked at Chopped Tomatoes. With forgiving eyes.

They knew what the other can was thinking.

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They were canny like that.

Pineapple Chunks (always the comedian) stepped in to try and make Chopped Tomatoes laugh. Miaow Meats shared his tale of whiskers and woe to show she understood. And they all explained kindly: Ah, you won't get conversation from Lone Spaghetti.

Meanwhile, Prunes got to thinking - Surely, shelf-life should be different - before she shouted, for everycan to hear: "Without labels we're all the same!"

"Trifle or chilli, solo or stew, we all just want to be opened ... and eaten. Don't we?"

A tinny silence. Now everycan took time to think.

And so it was that when the cupboard door next opened, the cans had been rearranged. Fruits in front of Vegetables; Vegetables next to Fruits; tins stacked upon each other - like layers of Fruit and Veg: no trifling achievement.

And there, in the middle, as if it were taking centre stage: a mystery naked can.

That might contain anything. How exciting.

But as we leave the cans to celebrate their new unity, listen hard; you might just hear a strange sound above the tinny dim. Faint and starchy.

Which every Spaghetti strand in the land will know to translate as: "Err, and what about me? Just because you're one strand and don't say anything, doesn't mean you can't have a voice!" Which is how Lone Spaghetti gets the last word.