

The Magnificent Gerda of XO-size

a short story Maggie Handsley

You'd think a tasteful set-up like XO-Size would have a quiet, discreet sort of lock but, honestly, it sounds like a Dickensian warehouse. My heart did a cartwheel whenever I turned that key. It was enough to spark a hypertensive episode.

I'd been hearing funny noises, you see.

Being manager, it's my job to open up, tidy the changing rooms and prepare the exercise machines before my ladies start to arrive about nine o'clock. But I was convinced there was something in there, a squatter, or burglar, and rats.... I come armed with a baseball bat every morning. If I could just catch whatever it was unawares... but it always managed to disappear in the nick of time. There was evidence though, fag ends, squashed chips and crushed cans by the back door. And what I'm convinced are, well, droppings. And they say you're never more than fifteen feet from a rat.

As I went through to the changing room with fresh box of Kleenex and a Mountain Air spray, I was confronted by the sight of a broken window. And, when I say broken, I don't just mean cracked. It was shattered. I came over

all of a dither and dropped down onto the locker seat. I just knew it was no accident.

'There you are, Christine.' Gerda heaved herself into the changing room. She's always first. She's ever so enthusiastic but never loses an inch, poor love.

'Omigod! What's happened?' She'd spotted the window.

'I don't know,' I wailed. It was the stress, you see. I'd heard the noises for weeks, and found the evidence, but nobody took any notice.

'Don't you worry, love.' Gerda muscled towards the door. 'I'll call the police.'

Of course I had to call Head Office. You can't go calling the police without calling Head Office. They said they'd send my supervisor.

Then Dot and Vera came. Dot had a tray of Vanilla slices in honour of her birthday. My ladies will eat Vanilla slices until the cows come home. And it's always *somebody's* birthday.

'Honestly, ladies,' I said, 'you'll be undoing all the good.' I have to remember my position and set an example. If I can maintain a healthy size eight then surely they could at least manage a size eighteen. I try to educate them, I really do, but the obstinately hang on to their bulk. I tell them it's a simple matter of cutting down and toning up but all they do is convert their fat into muscle. Some of my ladies have a lot of muscle.

Dot brewed a pot of tea.

'Ladies, the machines are ready when you are,' I said but they were settling down into a good old gossip. Not much exercise this morning, I thought, not when there's Vanilla slices all round.

The police office had an attitude problem. A pity, so early in her career.

'Are you going to find him?' I said.

'Hardly.'

'Well then,' I said, 'What's the point of calling you out?'

'Insurance,' she said in a tone of voice that implied I was incredibly stupid.

I managed to get the ladies onto the machines before my supervisor arrived. She can be nasty, can Millie, and I didn't want to get on the wrong side of her. When she walked in everything looked just as it should, except for the broken window.

'What's this?' she said.

'It's a broken window.'

'What have you done about it?'

'Called the police.'

'That won't get it mended, will it?' She can be very cutting. 'You'd better get some quotes and get it done today.'

'Today?' She must have known she was asking the impossible.

'You can't leave it like that overnight.' Well, I could see her point.

'By the way,' I said, as she headed towards the door.

'What?' She grasped the handle purposefully.

'I think you ought to know there's been an intruder. Could be a squatter (and rats?) and I'm sure that window's got something to do with it. I don't know where it will end. Can't Head Office do something about it?' I can tell you I was very close to tears.

'If you're so worried,' she said, 'call the police. Bye now.' She was off before I could draw breath.

Gerda noticed how fragile I was. She's a good sort is Gerda, the sort you'd want to have around when you unexpectedly gave birth in the middle of Tesco's.

'I'll get our Eddie,' She said. I was going to protest but couldn't summon up the energy. Eddie was feckless, underhand and self-promoting. Not one you would choose to do business with. On the other hand, if anybody were free to do a job today, it would be Eddie. Gerda told him to get his skates on. She's a shrewd enough a mother to know when he needs a kick up the backside.

The afternoon ladies were in by the time he arrived. Gerda stayed on to make sure he did a passable job. I didn't know what to do with myself. I kept fidgeting and

jumping every time the phone rang. I could do no more than pick at my alfalfa salad.

Millie called in about four o'clock to make sure I had everything under control.

'Oh, yes,' I said. 'I have a man on the job as we speak.'

'Well,' she said. 'Just be careful. You never know with men in ladies changing rooms.' Well, that was it; I just sat down and sobbed. I mean, you can only take so much, can't you?

'What's the matter, love?' Gerda's so reassuring. I told her about the squatter cum burglar plus rats.

'But nobody believes me,' I wailed. Now, anybody else would have told me I was letting my nerves get the better of me, but not Gerda.

'Leave it to me,' she said.

Whilst I saw Eddie off, Gerda rounded up the afternoon ladies. She soon had them settled down with a cup of tea and a gingernut. I got on with doing the books. I was putting the files away under the counter when it struck me they had been talking for quite some time. I looked up and had one of those wierd experiences when you can't believe what you're seeing. A circle of impassive faces turned in my direction; all grey perms and glasses above heavy shoulders and massive chests. I shivered. It was probably fatigue setting in.

'We've got an idea,' said Gerda.

It sounded good at the time, if a little unsophisticated. Still, I had no help from any other quarter and, I must say, it was a relief to have some support.

After locking up, Gerda, Joan and I settled down in the lounge. The next thing I knew, Gerda was poking me.

'Did you hear that?'

'What?'

'Shh...'

I strained my ears above the noise of my pounding blood and churning stomach. There it was, the same underhand rattling, scuffling sound I'd heard so many times before.

'That's it!' I reached for the baseball bat as a surge of adrenaline pushed me to my feet and, by the pale illumination filtering through from the streetlights, I crept towards the noise that seemed to be coming from the changing rooms. Gerda was right behind me, breathing purposefully. As I reached the door, I suddenly felt a powerful urge to sneeze. I held my nose and took deep breaths in an effort to compose myself. Gerda pushed me aside with a flick of the wrist and, as I collided with the coat stand, she flung the door open, simultaneously flicking the light switch on. If anybody had been there, they would have been terrified.

Disappointment mixed with relief. A gulp of laughter reached my mouth but soon dispersed when I saw the knife. It was lying below the window, just where it had been dropped.

'Look,' I squeaked. 'It's a knife! There could be somebody in here.' Gerda searched the showers and the lavatories. She returned holding something at arms length, with a look of disgust on her face.

'A fag end,' she said.

'Somebody was in there, using our facilities.' I shuddered.

'It was one of the ladies.'

'No! My ladies don't smoke. They wouldn't.'

'It's got lipstick on,' she said, looking closely. The tip was definitely pink. Too pink for my liking. So pink as to be vulgar.

'Alright, it must have been one of the ladies.' I made a mental note to look in to it. We can't do with closet smokers. Not now we've got a Clean Air Award.

'But there's still the knife.' That was solid evidence and I meant to make the most of it.

'Go get the keys,' said Gerda, 'and unlock this back door. Let's see what's outside.'

On the back doorstep were half a discarded McChicken burger and the dregs of a strawberry milk shake.

'There, you see?' I said. 'It's a squatter leaving rubbish, attracting rats. He picks the window lock with his knife and uses our facilities. He probably sleeps here.' She was beginning to look convinced.

'Let's put the light out and stop in here for a bit,' she said, 'and see what happens.' I agreed. I didn't call Joan. She was fast asleep in the lounge. It was a shame to wake her.

I lay down on the locker seat. It was very unforgiving. Gerda couldn't do that if she tried so had to resort to the carpet. (Actually, I *had* been over it with the carpet sweeper.) All in all, it was probably the best option.

'Christine, listen!' hissed Gerda, sometime in the early hours. I listened. Deliberate, hesitant footsteps walked this way and that. My heart started on its jumping frog routine. I grabbed the baseball bat and made for the door.

Don't ask me why we did what we did. There was no plan, as such, but Gerda and I became as one. She unlocked the door and flung it open. I followed close behind, wielding the bat. Gerda launched herself into the darkness like an international prop forward. I looked wildly around to identify a target. Then she re-appeared with a man draped over her shoulder. I hadn't seen anything like it since Uncle Albert used to watch all-in wrestling on Grandstand.

The poor man was quite bemused. He didn't behave like an intruder at all. Gerda plonked him on the floor where he sat smiling up at her.

'Well, I've never had a night like it in my life,' he said.

'Who are you and what are you doing sneaking around at this time of night?' I said, trying to inject some normality into the situation.

'Horace Smith. Looking for my cat. I can't rest until she's in at night. She once had a bad experience with a firework.' We could sympathise with that, of course. 'I heard a noise coming from inside here,' he said. 'It sounded like Fluffy growling.' Just then, Joan must have turned in her sleep. She let go a full-throttled snore that tore through the building like a remote controlled aeroplane.

'That's her!' He got up and lurched towards the lounge, only to be confronted by the sight of Joan. He almost collapsed with disappointment but Gerda was on hand. She soothed him, fed him strong coffee and sent Joan and me to search for Fluffy. We found her outside the back door, eating the McChicken burger. Horace was radiant with relief.

Then the heating system began to rev up for the day. Horace sprang to his feet.

'Your insulation's loose,' he said 'round the heating vents. Can't you hear it?' Of course we could. It was an underhand rattling, scratching, scuffling sound... He soon had it fixed.

'Look, Christine,' said Gerda, emerging from the changing rooms, 'I think this is Eddie's putty knife. We probably let our imaginations run away with us.' Well, I must say! I wouldn't go as far as to say that.

'Well,' I said. 'What about the garbage on the back step?'

'There's garbage everywhere,' said Horace. 'By the way, did you know, you're never more than fifteen feet away from a rat?'

I hardly see Gerda now. She's much too busy with Horace.