

Car boot sale find

'Come on, get up, we need to be there early if we're to get any bargains'.

They didn't need any more stuff, but Kim and Bob had got into the habit of going to the car boot sale on a Sunday morning. Kim enjoyed the smell of mashed grass, and the sight of people sitting in deck chairs, surrounded by the contents of their lives. Garages, lofts, house clearance, who knows where these things come from, and who knows where they go to.

Bob and Kim parked in their favourite spot.

Most of the sellers had unpacked and were waiting for the morning rush. There was a quiet sense of anticipation. The dealers had already swept through, snapping up the few items of any value. The rest of the morning lay ahead. Kim knew a lot of the sellers by sight, and a few by name.

Half-way round, Kim called Bob over. 'Look, an old camping gaz stove, still in its box'. The box included a manual with a picture of a happy family having a picnic at the back of a car.

Bob picked up the stove and inspected it. Bluet, from around 1970. Pierceable cartridge, which was missing. It looked a bit corroded and there was no way of knowing if it worked. The seller didn't know either – it was in her parents' shed, that's all she knew.

Kim: 'Oh well, we don't need a camping stove anyway'.

Bob agreed, but he was intrigued.

The method was simple. You put the cylinder in the bottom and screwed the burner on top. But if you couldn't get hold of those cylinders, the burner was useless. The cylinder was held in place at the bottom by a plastic disc. By now that was almost certainly brittle. If that went, the whole thing was dead. In any case, who would want something with such a heavy steel body: too much weight to carry, and why would you take it in the car? No one went 'touring' these days, not with motorways and sat navs.

Bob and Kim moved on.

Four stalls later, Bob was rummaging in a cardboard box of miscellaneous items. At the bottom was a paper covered tube: three old gaz cylinders. They were almost certainly the right size for the bluet stove. Now that was interesting. If he put these pieces together, he might be getting somewhere. 'Kim, come over here.'

Without the burner the cartridges were of little value. Bob handed over two quid, picked up the tube of cylinders, and went back to get the stove.

To his dismay, an elderly man in a green Barbour jacket was about to put the stove in an old shopping basket. 'Wait' said Bob, 'Wait there – I was going to buy that'. 'Too late' said the man in the green jacket. But Bob was not deterred. 'No, hang on, I can offer you a good price'.

So that's how the bidding war began. A small crowd gathered to watch.

Bob: 'Ten'.

Man in the green jacket: 'No'.

Bob: 'Ok, fifteen then. You can't get the cylinders these days'.

Man in the green jacket: 'No, I said no, and in any case, what's that you've got in your hand?'. Bob looked down at the cylinders. The crowd laughed. Bob could feel sweat forming at the back of his neck. He *had* to get that stove.

At thirty pounds, the man in the green jacket finally gave way: he'd only paid a fiver for the stove and to be honest his camping days were over. Bob, who was caught up in the thrill of the moment, handed over the money and got the burner he now so urgently desired.

Kim was sceptical. 'What did you do that for?' she asked as they drove home. Bob was still ecstatic. 'We've got a stove that works and for less than the cost of a new one: what's wrong with that? If I hadn't got the stove, we'd have ended up with a set of gaz cylinders that we couldn't use.'

Back in the garage, Bob fitted one of the cylinders into the base of the stove and lit it. The stove burned well, for about five minutes. Bob tried to light it again, but again there was just a tiny flame: barely enough to cook a slice of bacon. 'Damn' he said to himself 'it must be the valve'. Ruefully, he packed the stove back in its box and stowed it away. What an idiot he'd been!

Bob and Kim lived to a ripe old age, and when they died, the task of clearing out the house fell to Chris, their youngest son. When Chris finally got to the garage, he found the stove with a cylinder fitted and ready to go. He tried it, and it lit but it didn't have much power. Perhaps there was no gaz left, or perhaps the jet was blocked? Chris rummaged around for something to use to clean the jet. He knew this was a daft project. The whole thing should just go in the skip and in any case, there was so much more to do, but still he went on. Finally, he found a thin bit of wire and scratched around the tiny hole. It was hard to see what he was doing and impossible to wiggle the wire into jet. Chris gave the stove one last try before moving on, and to his amazement and delight it roared into life.

He put the old bluet aside. He'd take it home for Gail and the kids. Maybe one day they'd go on an adventure like the family in the picture.

