

The House on the corner of the street across from the park with the squirrels

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Home is where the heart is

For nearly one hundred years, I was a corner shop. A shop rooted in tradition and certainty, when you came to me, you knew what you were going to get.

Those were good days. I had something for everyone. My shelves were stacked with groceries and treats for the mothers with children in pushchairs, and cigarettes and snacks for the fathers off to work. Most important of all though, I had supplies for those going to The Park across the road. Sweets and bottles of drink, two-pence back on the bottle. I had balsawood airplanes powered by elastic bands, kites that would catch in the trees and tear, and even, in autumn, forbidden fireworks. I had it all, and all came to me.

I was part of a route, the most important part. Maybe I didn't have the subtle warm smell of Maskell's the Baker, nor the bright efficiency of Frobisher's the Butcher. I though, I knew how to welcome people in. I loved my bell, its joyous ring. As it sounded, I would make my door swing easily and soften or increase the echoes from the walls as fitted the customer. For the youngsters I would brighten the shadows in my corners. For the older ones I would bring the scents of their childhood from my floorboards and watch their faces grower younger.

It was never simply a case of buy and sell with me. I was the last call on the route around The Shops. I was where they all would stop to chat and to check on the world and put it to rights. I was a centre of the community.

Sometimes I think it was all those lives passing through my doors that woke me up. Other times I think back to my early memories, the haunting call of the air-raid siren as it howled from the roof of the Working Men's Club around the corner. Then I'll find how that memory is swamped by the sound of shouting of children, rushing to the park to pretend they were winning the world cup.

That was then though, and this is now.

Mr and Mrs Mathews are gone now. My lattice framed windows are gone, tight sealed double-glazing replacing rotten frames and cold glass. Curtains hide my interior, no more jars of sweets to tempt and taunt those passing by. My door has a sturdy lock, and the bell is screwed outside, a small sad nod to my past. Inside I have been torn apart. Space opened where shelves and store cupboards once stood floor to ceiling, Bright lights and modern furniture have been brought in, fitted kitchen and central heating changing all beyond recognition.

It is what it is, but not what it was. Now I have only my memories, and The Barringtons.

"Six months already," they will say. "Hasn't the time flown by?" If they listen, they might hear the wind sigh louder as it crosses my closed-up chimneys. Even three years would hardly be a breath of the time I have stood here, I and the park, I and the streets. Six months is hardly a nod and a hello, and it isn't time enough for me to begin to forget what I was. Nor time to mourn what is missing.

This evening, New Year's Eve, my door has been opened and closed a dozen times, Yes, today, I, the house at the corner of Holland Street and Carlyle Road, am the place to be. But this is a sad echo of what I was, it is as if the Barrington's taunt me. Today I am filled with their new life, filled with their friends, and see none of my old regular visitors.

Old habits die hard though. Maybe I have relaxed, my door, stiff for the first guests, has now eased. My floor, at first reluctant to accept their feet, and my walls deadening the noise, have given in. Now I pick up the chatter and music and, through old habit, I pass the echoes back with my own bright octave shift. It is a duty thing, that is all it is.

Yet, despite these sounds of happiness, there is another part of me where there seems to be no party. In one room two people are not relaxed. I turn my back on the singing in the living room, the jokes being told in the kitchen and the people crowding nearly every corner of me. I turn my focus, with just a little pleasure, to the upstairs front bedroom, the nice one that looks over the park.

“Michael’s mistress? I didn’t say any such thing, I said she’s a seamstress. Really, Mother, are you sure you don’t need a hearing aid?” It is Estelle who is talking. Estelle and I are similar, neither of us forget the past easily. I watch. Jenny sighs, she saw her verbal sally fly over her daughter’s head, leaving nothing more than a small white mark of consternation. She tries, does Jenny, but I rarely see her succeed, not with Estelle.

Mother and Daughter look at each other. Estelle standing, Jenny sitting on the edge of her bed. There is something in this tableau which speaks to me of roles reversed. I guess that should be no surprise. Estelle has never showed much respect for my age and history either.

Downstairs I can feel my floorboards vibrate; I am being brought alive with it. In every subtle shake of my doors and slight rattle of my windows memories return. But they are a phantom, a onetime charade, a small mirage of all that is gone. I am not distracted by them. So, I watch what happens in this little room. In truth I draw a strange bitter comfort from it. This is important, what is happening in this little part of me, it maybe heralds change, and all I can do is hope that change will be for the good, that is, for my good.

Estelle pulls her mother up by the hand, magnanimously moving the conversation on.

“Now. Let’s have a look at you. Don’t you look lovely? And that dress, I’m so glad it fits you; I knew you’d love it.” Jenny stands and they both study the mirrored door of the fitted wardrobe.

Jenny straightens for a moment, considering her reflection. I see it, for just a moment, that strength in her which withers under Estelle’s attention. Her hair is wavy, grey and shoulder length, Golden Girls groomed. It is in as good a condition as my new slate roof. Her face is brightened with light blusher, offset by slightly deeper lipstick. If you ask me, I’d say her face is looking a little thin, and her blue eyes don’t sparkle like they used to when she came into me as a shop. Still, she’s hardly lined, doesn’t look bad for seventy, which, given that she must be close to eighty, is good going.

A further tiny sigh escapes her as she studies The Dress. Of course, Estelle doesn’t notice. To be honest I wouldn’t have given that dress house room. It’s a Dorothy Perkins high-necked, short-sleeved, below the knee, cliché. The pattern, a mottling of various shades of blue flowers, reminds me of my wallpaper in the 1950’s. It mutters ‘age appropriate’ in quiet, slightly apologetic, tones. I search for a word that I think fits Jenny’s feelings. ‘Resigned’ comes to mind in the small smile, slight nod and the way her fingers brush an imagined crease.

I know her immediate worry, I see what Estelle fails to see. I felt small furry feet running down my stairs twenty minutes ago. Jenny wants to go find the owner of those feet, before Estelle does.

They descend the stairs; Jenny’s hand grips my stair-rail taking support I am bound to give. Her tread is strong but not quite direct, I suspect, her mind is elsewhere. Perhaps she is wondering whether to pick up the hearing aid comment. Ok, a party is a tense time, but even I’ve seen that Estelle usually

greet tension with a glass of red wine and a dismissive hand wave. There, see? That tiny shake of Jenny's head, she's decided to ignore what Estelle said, how can she do that? It's going to end badly. Do I hope so? Not really, not absolutely, but maybe a little.

They step out into the ground floor. For a moment Jenny hesitates by this new door, light and flimsy, like all the new internal doors Estelle had put in. Jenny is just staring at the noise and bustle, confused? No, I can see, she's still trying to track down a certain furry dark cloud. Good luck with that Jenny-dodderer. She selects number two vacant nod and walks out into the party, quickly putting distance between herself and her daughter.

I can see the safe harbour she is sailing for, safe if not very calm. Michael and Bryan, Estelle's sons, and Jenny's grandchildren. I almost like the boys, children were always my favourite people, I understand why Jenny weaves her way across to them, they are the perfect Estelle antidote. I'm wonder though if she sees Estelle following her track, sees her daughter's own slight head shake.

"Hello Grandma." Bryan greets her first, Michael catching him up a few seconds later. Their almost thirteen-year-old faces are two twin peas in a pod. Brown hair and large dark eyes, freckles across small noses above generous mouths, always smiling. They don't quite reach Jenny's five feet three but will soon. Nature isn't their only sculptor though. Michael, I know by the sports boots and equipment he leaves around me, is a football team captain and rugby player. He's already growing broader than Bryan, who is more long-distance runner slender.

Right now, they have that look, the one that says they are about to paddle their feet in the warm sea of puns in which all, or at least most, of the Barringtons have evolved. Sure enough, I knew it, they jump in, feigning nonchalance, a word, I suspect, they would have trouble spelling and have even less success counterfeiting.

"Granny, what exactly is a Duffle and why does it need its own bag?"

Jenny smiles, a true smile, her face brightens in the way I remember from many years ago. She glances upward, head to one side. Maybe she thinks this is the attitude of someone thinking. To be frank, she appears to be hovering between concentration and incontinence, but maybe that's deliberate.

"Oh, I'm not sure boys, but I do know that if you catch and shear one you can make a coat of it." If I had a head to nod, I would use it. There is though something...admirable in Jenny, the way she connects with her inner child in a moment.

The boys look at each other and groan. They are going to have to get up a little earlier where Granny is concerned. Jenny gives them a cheery wave and glances down, continuing her path into the crowd, peering at the legs of various partygoers.

The boys nod, they get it. Jenny is Snoozette-hunting. That, of course, isn't their concern. In my day kids would have been quicker to help. However, in the almost telepathic way they have, the twins

move off towards my kitchen. I know that look, teenagers on the search for coke and snacks. As they go, they talk, it never seems to matter who says what, they think alike. They are complaining. It is no surprise to me that Estelle is at the heart of this little dark cloud too.

“No way we can get out of it, you know Mum.”

“But you know what it will be like...”

“The yellow coats.”

“The bags.”

“And they’ll be there, they said.”

“I know.”

‘I know.’ Words which at nearly thirteen mean, “we’re stuffed”. As the mother sows, so shall the boys reap. This dark cloud will break on the boys tomorrow, and I am looking forward to watching it happen. Into every life a little pain must come, and it’s time it came somewhere other than me.

“Ah, it’s my favorite ...” The voice of ‘Uncle Charlie’, who isn’t an uncle, but some very good and slightly vague friend of their Father’s, greets them as they reach the new kitchen. The bright white cabinets, long strip lights and island where normally there would be chairs, is a hard bright uncomfortable heart at my centre.

Charlie Melon is one of those ambiguous adults who I and, perhaps the twins don’t quite understand. He is about the same age as the boy’s father, something they see as ‘really old – at least forty’. He is short, thin, wears jeans, trainers, and a T-Shirt with Motörhead on it. His hair is long, untidy, and has threads of grey in the black. He presently has a sparse beard, which will vanish when he next remembers to shave.

Charlie sways back and forth. His eyes are just a little more staring than they should be, he’s having a bit of trouble getting focus after a good deal of time at the make-shift cocktail bar at my sink.

I saw them, the boys, they’ve been watching him. Michael raises his eyebrows, Bryan nods, and drifts to one side, up to something, yes, boys will be boys.

“Oh Hello, Mr...Charlie.” Michael takes the lead and Charlie’s attention snaps to him.

He stares at Michael, slowly closes one eye and tilts his head to the left. As he does, things seem to come into focus, confirming or perhaps denying something. He sighs, then jerks slightly backward as his view is blocked by a new person.

This person is short and broad. She has dark hair, wears a big smile and a black dress, which covers, yet doesn’t entirely camouflage, an extraordinary amount of bosom. I can always tell where she is in the house, sure, she has a weighty presence, but it is the way people gravitate towards her, if you get my drift, that tracks her.

“Ah Rev, Vicar ...” Charlie smiles at this distraction, then shakes his head. Whatever he’s trying to get to roll into place doesn’t seem to drop into the slot though.

“Celia,” She corrects him. “Charlie, I’m off duty now. How’s Charlie?”

VICAR close to VICE in the dictionary – joke to write

Behind her, in Charlie's eye-line, a boy sinks slowly downward over Celia's left shoulder, then instantly reappears over her right. Charlie's eyes widen and he shakes his head again, turning his focus on her, he replies.

"Vicar, to be honest, I'm having to rethink my future, adjust my short-term goals, reassess my strategy going forward wise." He speaks slowly, keeping one eye over Celia's shoulder. Maybe he's hoping the boy will settle down into some definite position, or number.

"Oh, why's that?" For a second I see Celia's mouth tense, yes, she knows this is a risky follow-up question. As a vicar she shouldn't be gambling on gambits, I'll never get why she does that.

"It's 'Give me a break', I've got to shut it down," Charlie says and I can hear the genuine disappointment in his voice.

"Give me a break". I know about this. Charlie and David Barrington have bored the paint of the walls of his office talking about it. It is a business Charlie started, selling fake zip-on plaster casts. They have been popular with workers seeking time off, travellers wanting first place in airline check-in queues, and music fans looking to, in the words of Charlie's advertisements, 'blag' preferential places in concerts.

"Oh, what happened?" See? That's Celia, always genuinely interested, would have made a great shop-keeper.

Charlie shakes his head.

"An entire stag party from Melton Mowbray turned up at Gatwick's EasyJet check-in to Prague with broken arms. That was aside from the groom, who had chosen my deluxe special offer, a broken ankle cast, two crutches and an eye patch."

He trails off, then continues slowly.

"The check-in people got suspicious, words were said, a cast was unzipped and an off-duty policeman from Croydon very nearly got plastered. Sunk the whole thing." He shakes his head, and Celia nods in sympathy.

Then Charlie gives a high-pitched yelp of fear, as Celia dropped from his line of sight and, yes behind her, are two boys. His colour recovers when Celia reappears, having been reaching down, then come up, in a rugby scrum move of considerable dexterity.

"Snoozette! no you don't." As Celia stands up the paws I have been tracking around the house suddenly vanish. I watch as the dog in her arms squirms, gives a short, annoyed bark, then settles. As she does, Jenny appears, looking a little like a rabbit caught in the headlights. She throws a glance over her shoulder, then smiles at Celia.

“Ah, there you are! Thank you, Celia.” Jenny, flushed and slightly panting, reaches for the dog.
“Naughty girl, what am I going to do with you?”

Snoozette is small, sandy brown, and hairy, very hairy, which given the amount of it that she has left around me, always surprises. For a second it isn't entirely clear which end is which. Then one end wags a bush-like tail and the other reveals dark eyes, black nose and a pink tongue. These are all the classic traits of a Pekinese. Snoozette is now caught in Jenny's grip, small legs scampering dark marks onto the mottled blue primness of her dress. Celia frowns at the marks. Jenny appears not to notice.

Across the room, with cocktail party syndrome inevitability, Estelle, is watching the little scene unfold. For a second I can see in Jenny's eyes that she is experiencing one of those tracking shot moments made famous by Hitchcock, camera zooming in and moving back at the same time. I try to rustle up a billowing of curtains, but double glazing is not to going to give way that easily.

It would be unfair to say that Estelle's expression is unclear. It is, but only in the way that eight-year-old Michael's thick crayon scrawl on the wall was unreadable. It doesn't take too much effort to work out the general idea. In his case the start of a war battle, in Estelle's, well, not significantly different. Jenny nods thanks again to Celia, her smile falters for a second and she makes her way back through the house.

Celia turns to David, Estelle's husband, whose light step I had felt turn heavy as Snoozette made her dash for the kitchen.

David, I know, is handsome. I've had the shadows of enough matinee idols flickering across my walls to know what handsome is, but he doesn't act as though he knows it. He has dark hair and eyebrows, strong dark eyes, and a jaw line you could cut a piece of pie with, my thoughts, I find, are still with Celia. His smile is white and his stubble just thick enough to be used to strike a match, meaning he probably shaved two hours ago. He's wearing a plain white shirt open at the collar, and blue jeans.

“You know,” Celia says, turning to David. “The first time I met Charlie, he told me he was an inventor, but I guessed he was just making it up”.

David responds with the laugh she had expected. Celia resorts to her traditional deflection, perhaps one day people will ask her first how she is, but it will not be this day.

“How's David? Things still good at the agency?”

“Oh, you know, still trying to keep the children in line.” He isn't a teacher, he works in some design agency in Cambridge, he seems always to describe his colleagues as ‘the children’ though.

“I'm sure you're a very good teacher, and I bet you enjoy it.” Celia always looking on the bright side.

“Oh, I do, most of the time. And even when things aren't right, they have their moments.”

He grins, raises his eyebrows and for a second it is like I am selling sweets and swapping gossip again, he is shifting into story-telling mode, and I can't help but listen.

“...For example. We're doing this series of ads for Spectacles, the glasses company. We came up with the tag line. ‘You should have donned Spectacles’. Good idea, even if I say it myself.” Yes, he would say that.

“So, we show lots of examples of things that go wrong if you can't see properly. School crossing-man holding a lamp stand rather than the crossing sign, that sort of thing”

Celia nods, "Me, marrying the best man and bridesmaid by mistake."

"Yes, got it. So, I send the bright young things out to the conference room to come up with a few ideas. And soon, back they bustle." He gives a headshake now.

"And some of the ideas are good, tree surgeon cutting down the branch he was sitting on, that was ok. But they saved the best for last. And they'd actually done a storyboard for it. You know, pictures of various scenes."

She nods again, even I'm picturing it all. He pauses for a moment, breathes in, starts to act out the scene, holding up an imaginary board.

"First board: a sign with 'Gents' toilets' and a man squinting and looking a little uncomfortable. I couldn't see where this was going to go, but it didn't seem promising. Second board: a picture of one of those air blade hand dryers, with the caption 'Camera pans from drier to urinal'."

He pauses again. "You remember, right, when the country faced a seemingly deadly plague, the most we could show was an iceberg? So..."

"Third board: face of a man, still squinting at the wall, caption 'unzipping noise.'"

"Noooo." Celia is ahead of him, the no is drawn out between two posts, one labelled incredulity the other disbelief.

"Yes. I'm afraid so. Last board, pictures of the man first with a relaxed face, then a look of horror. Caption: 'roaring noise of hand dryer.' "

They both burst out laughing, childish really, but laughter is laughter and I've heard much worse.

"And, no, they weren't taking the piss either!" David caps off the story with his own, obviously oft repeated, ending. As he does, Celia is called by a parishioner in the crowd, touches David's arm, and walks away.

David turns, glancing around. I can see the warmth of several whiskies adding to the general glow of contentment he feels at that moment. His eyes scan the scene, looking through the open double doors showing both the kitchen and main living room full of people. Yes, It is nice to feel so full. Once a year is nothing though, I used to be like this every day.

David is searching now, and finds, let me see, ah, Jenny, I feel him stiffen even through the carpet. She's carrying Snoozette towards the door that leads upstairs, Estelle is by the door, opens it with a swift jerk and I feel the strain on the hinges. Jenny's feet begin to climb the stairs, one hand on my rail again, her grip is firm though, her climb steady.

Estelle turns back to her sister, Eileen. David's blurred shadow on my wall stiffens, then relaxes a tiny bit. Of all of the Barringtons, I dislike Eileen the least, perhaps because she doesn't live here. If they all didn't live here I might like them all a bit more. Eileen, David once said, "is an 'oil on troubled waters' pourer, if ever there was one, she," he had continued, "always tries to cross in advance the bridges other people would burn."

Eileen and Estelle have been deep in conversation, heads close together, perhaps because of the party noise, perhaps not. They form a small tense island of stillness, their focus out of balance with the ambiance. You know that saying? "If walls have ears?" I do.

Of course, David walks over, he knows he has a habit of wandering into blind alleys without proper protection but does it anyway. It's fun to watch.

Eileen is five years older than Estelle, taller, slightly larger but all in proportion. She is wearing a cocktail dress, a little black number, which, in a subdued way, outshines her sister's clothes. Her blonde hair is long, her eyes blue and her smile extravagant. I always wonder why Eileen isn't married. Estelle says Eileen's job has never given her the chance to meet the right person, 'hardly in any one country for more than a few days.' Her tone though doesn't convince me, it seems aimed at the job, not the marriage state.

Eileen is like one of the shy pretty girls who used to come in to me a gaggle of others. When standing she will be slightly off to one side; if laughing, her volume will be a little lower than everyone else; if talking, she is always guiding, rather than leading. It's like she's trying not to shine. Possibly she does that naturally, but maybe just for Estelle, who seems even more cactus and thistle needles when Eileen is around.

David gets closer, head tilted towards Estelle who's she's using her 'I'm just saying, that's all' voice.

"Mum doesn't seem entirely under control." David puts his arm round Estelle, and she greets him with a slight kiss. Eileen is inclining her head to show she heard, but I'm not seeing any agreement in the way she's standing.

"Oh?" Eileen says in a voice which if it were a paint, would have been pale magnolia for all the commitment it's suggesting.

"Just little things. You can't be with her 24/7 like I am. She lost her keys last week, and Snoozette's a handful, and I just worry for her." Estelle, is melting under the heat of Eileen's rationality, failing to find quite the examples she wanted. Eileen nods, I reckon as though Estelle's failure confirms her thoughts, but then she comes on with the oil.

"I know you worry Es, but I'm here as well... well, as often as I can be, and we shouldn't let small things get the better of us, should we?"

"No, and even the big things don't stand too much of a chance if Estelle sets against them." David joins the conversation with all the subtlety of the Iceberg joining the Titanic.

My door beside them opens, Jenny steps out from the stairs into the living room. As she does a long low howling, of Baskerville hound shaming characteristics, follows her. Jenny immediately turns to go back upstairs. My door bumps, suddenly just a little more loose on its hinges than it normally is. I tap Eileen on the shoulder, her glass of red wine slops, and, with an inevitability that proves we are all at the mercy of physics, flows in Estelle's general direction. Mischievous, Moi?

Jenny is already making her way up the stairs before the tiny tsunami reaches its shore. Sighing, and smiling a smile for which the word wan had undoubtedly been invented, Estelle turned to follow her mother her turn to find a new top.

Chapter 1 - January 1st 9.00 am

Littered with mistakes.

“But, Mum, I still don’t get it...why are we doing the council’s job?” Michael is making a third attempt to wriggle his way out of a position which I can see is already held in the headlock of Estelle’s ‘Because I’m your Mum and I say so’.

“You know that’s not the point, Michael. We all enjoy The Park, and this is our way of showing we care, and are grateful. I’ve seen you there often enough with your gang...”

“They’re not a gang...” Michael and Bryan in unison, very fast and with that rising pitch which only those whose voices are about to break can reach. This little back and forth has been waxing and waning for the last hour or so, it was fun to begin with, but has now reached broken record levels of repetition.

“Well, that’s beside the point.” She pauses and attempts a detour that I can see is really a change of subject. “Maybe some of them will join us? I have extra bibs if needed”. I watch as the boys both try silence as a detailed and heartfelt explanation as to why this is not likely.

I do love this sort of morning, next, I know what is going to happen, I feel her feet on the stairs, yes, here she is. Jenny, walking in, picks up the tail of the conversation and proceeds to shake it about. She thinks she is being helpful.

“Oh, will some of your friends be joining us to help, dears?”

“No. Well, yes, but I don’t think they’ll be there to help”. Bryan replies whilst Michael attempts staring out of the window as a response.

“That’s a shame, you know how important this is to your mother”.

“It’s not for me, Mother. It’s for The Park, it’s such a special place. Something I thought you would agree with.” One of Jenny’s tiny sighs escapes her, even when she tries to say the right thing...

Mother and Daughter are both silent for a moment. There is perhaps a significance in that silence, but if so, it sails above the heads of the boys. In the quiet I feel scratching at an upstairs door, my paint, what little there is left there, being scraped away. The Barrington’s turn only at the low whimper of a dog.

“Snooze! – What are you doing? You bad girl.” Jenny hurries to her feet in a way that belies her years. “I’ll go get her; she can join us in The Park; I’ll be five minutes.”

“Mum...” But Jenny is gone. Estelle sighs, starts to call upstairs, to be interrupted by Bryan.

“Is Nans alright, Mum? She seems, I don’t know ... different.”

“Oh, I think she’s just a bit pre-occupied at the moment, you know at her age, old memories come back, and what needs to get done right now can get forgotten.” Estelle’s voice drifting off as, I suspect, the phrase ‘out of the mouths of babes’ comes to mind.

I watch Jenny on the way upstairs, her face is flushed almost enough to warm my walls. Yes, The Park does have memories, I hold some of those memories too. They are in my roof tiles, stacked in the cellar, perhaps I should revisit them.

Jenny opens her bedroom door carefully, for a moment I’m tempted to see if I can swing it wide, but no, that’s not the sort of house I am.. usually. She bends down to catch Snoozette who makes a wriggling attempt to escape.

“Come on, Snooze, time for a little walk, to The Park... You can make yourself useful. Keep the squirrels off!”

Snoozette hears little, and from everything I’ve seen, understands less. “Park” and “Squirrels” though, they seem to get through, and her legs begin a Pavlovian scamper.

Ten minutes later Jenny is back downstairs.

Ten minutes later? Surely it doesn’t take that long to pick up a willing dog and walk down a few stairs. No, of course not. It is, however, the length of time required by Jenny to solve the mitten mystery.

With the world as it is, it should be no surprise that a left mitten can become stuck inside a right one, such that a person, especially Jenny, can be absolutely sure that the left mitten is lost. There was a surprising amount of what I see the TV screens are now warning is ‘mild profanity’ when she discovered the truth.

Downstairs was more fun though. First, I had Estelle’s voice first echoing up my stairwell, then, when that produced no reaction, there was a good deal of plate-putting away clattering and window blind-rolling in a way that would have made Freud scribble furiously in his notebook. I could almost see her suppressed annoyance ripple up along the stair carpet, reach Jenny, and work its way through the dog lead to Snoozette, pretty good going for one petty frustration. I almost felt sorry for them, but I never asked them to come here, did I?

At last, they were all gathered and ready. Estelle gave my downstairs door a final slam and rattle, thoughts, I’m sure ,of padlocks to be fitted. Then they were off. Not even a good-bye to me.

“Ok. Right, let’s go. They’ll all be waiting. Michael! Mother’s here – we can go now, everyone will be there, and I’m supposed to be leading”. Her tone and bustle bring the image to mind of cat herders and infant schoolchild wranglers, only less organised.

I can’t help it, I’ve watched too many animal documentaries, I find myself commentating the next section in the dulcet tones of the blessed Saint, David Attenborough.

“On this special first day of the year, [pause-heavy breath], we watch as the Family Barrington arise from the cocoon of their home. They are driven by the mysterious force known as Estelle Barrington and make the perilous journey across the road to, [pause]The Park.”

And they do. Estelle, it seems, has gathered together friends and family, neighbours and future enemies, for a special task. I’ve been watching her. By cajoling and persuasion, leaflets and street chats, and by a dozen diverse processes, she has gathered a swarm of followers to descend on the park. I know some of those in her crowd. I remember them from when they came daily, or more often, to visit me. I wonder, if they remember me, as I was.

It does make a sight. I gaze from my best point of view, Jenny’s room. There they are, below me, bedecked in bright yellow high visibility jackets, many wear mittens or protective gloves. Some are armed with metal litter pickers, these wave back and forth, ant-leg, or antenna-like, depending on their o’clock position. From above, as they wend their way to the park, they resemble nothing less than a fluorescent yellow, multi-segmented caterpillar. All on the way to The Park.

The Park is a special place. I and the Park, we grew up together. My corner stone was laid the year the Park was donated to the people of the area. It was a gift from Princess Alexandra of Denmark, at the high watermark of her time as wife to King Edward VI. That was when my foundations were still wet, and my first window sash cords were bright and oiled. Happy days.

I can see it, most of it, laid out below me. It is an iceberg-shaped wedge of green, lying in a sea of small roads, lined with terraced yellow brick houses. From a straight line of private gardens at the southern border, it extends little more than 150 metres to a point at the northern tip. An undulating path traces the edges along a hint of altitude change, courtesy of two small hills, a precious rarity in Fenland Cambridge.

The lower half of the park is set to grass, and a small playground, including an igloo-shaped climbing frame. The top half of the park provides a billiard table lawn for a bowls club, and an ornate bowling club pavilion. This area is separated from the common masses by a Great Wall of China-style privet hedge on three sides, and an ornate metal fence on the fourth. Around the edges of the entire park a thin line of plane trees has been allowed to grow over the last one hundred years. Their canopies provide homes for birds, their trunks toilet posts for dogs, and the branches breeding grounds for grey squirrels. It is on this piece of post Victoriana nostalgia that the Barringtons and their eclectic crew descend. This is the second time they have done this, but I know Estelle is trying to make this gathering a New Year’s custom.

There is indeed a large crowd awaiting her. For a second I allow myself a small shift, my roof rafters relax with a gentle crackling. I watch as best I can, though from here not everything is clear. There does seem to be a surprising number of helpers shaking their heads and waving apparent forearm fractures, but there are still enough healthy volunteers. I see Charlie Mellon, catching sight of Bryan and Michael together. He momentarily goes a little pale, then looks as though a weight has been lifted from his shoulders.

David is watching as Estelle gathers her small army. Each pair approach her, she nods, checks a clipboard, points, and away they march. It is impressive.

David approaches, for a horrible moment I think he is going to salute, again my rafters crackle, but he merely stands there. Estelle glances at her clipboard. For a second it seems like she doesn't recognise him, I can't hear, but I can imagine it though.

"Ah...David," then, as she remembers who he is, "Darling." Small, slightly forced smile; when Estelle is focussed she makes a laser beam look like fuzzy felt.

She glances around, calls out to Eileen, and I catch her voice, that rising tone which usually summons the boys to school.

"Eileen, have you seen Mother? Is she lost again? Goodness, we've only gone 100 yards, it can't be that difficult to ..."

Eileen is staring at her, meaningfully, but the meaning escapes her. Jenny is standing just behind Estelle, waving a half raised hand and no doubt saying something. I'll bet she's got that little smile on her face, the one that makes her look younger. Estelle jerks, spins, and somehow makes everyone know that is Jenny's fault for being exactly where she was told to be.

More arm waving, nodding, pointing. Estelle has paired David and her mother, good plan. Estelle commands, waving in an imprecise way at a corner of the privet hedge surrounding the bowling green.

"Right ho! – Come on Jenny," David talking loudly and taking on the Eileen role of soothing oil spreading.

This is where it gets even more fun. Jenny clearly knows when the going is worth getting, and starts moving off.

"Come on, Snooze." A tug on the lead and Snoozette reluctantly turned from what was clearly a very promising scent, and walked on, pulling the lead at ninety degrees to Jenny's right.

That shouldn't be a problem. It wouldn't have been, had David not stopped to glance back at Estelle, whilst Jenny, ever anxious to please, marched forward.

"Ow, what?" Classic exclamations of surprise from David, as the dog lead, then the dog, wrap around his legs. He twists as the confusion of six legs, four of which are definitely not his own, vie for attention.

With practice born of not quite a lifetime of walking, he manages a dance-step-leap-twist reminiscent of a man with bees in his underpants, or something equally unlikely. The final leap-twist takes him almost over Snoozette, almost, by one tenth of a heel, which clips her on the back. The resulting yelp sounds like the opening blast of a bugler waking up an army camp.

Jenny spins around, and watches as David starts to topple backward. She reaches to stop him falling. It is a move that belies her age in a positive way and her common sense in the other. The attempt at a catch was never going to work, and they slow-motion tumble to the ground.

For a moment, a tiny moment, I worry for Jenny. However, nothing seems broken, and pride only barely damaged. David and Jenny are, in fact, on the verge of laughing, when three other things happen.

Firstly, Estelle regains her voice at the sight of her heavy husband crashing cannonball-like into her frail mother, and rushes forward, I swear I can see a flash of panic. Second, a very close second, Snoozette fleeing the avalanche of bodies, and momentarily no longer held by a lead, dashes towards the trees. Thirdly, on the climbing -frame, this year's crop of youthful "Haven't they got anything better to do's?" burst into laughter. I hear their cackles only a second after they begin extravagant capering and mock falling off the frame.

Michael and Bryan stand still, very still, then glance at each other. I get it, until now, until the laughter, they could seriously pretend not to have noticed six near-teens watching The Great Clean Up.

The laughter is led by Stephen Binge. Binge is one I don't regret that he doesn't visit me anymore. I always made sure my door stuck when he came, so the bell rang extra loud. I remember when he was described as having, a 'heart of gold, really'. When I was closed down, he'd reached, 'bit of a rough diamond'. I've seen him saunter past with his friends, he has a good chance of reaching '6 months for drunk and disorderly' in a few years' time.

Estelle going to untangle her husband from her mother, shouts.

"Michael, Bryan... Get Snoozette." Actually, good in a crisis is Estelle. And, yes, the boys have been well trained, their conditioned legs start moving before their brains have fully engaged.

As they break into their run the laughter from the climbing frame gets stronger, more focussed. Then it turns to helpful calls of encouragement.

"Michael, Bryan, go catch the dish mop."

"Michael, Bryan, get those legs moving."

Snoozette, in the way of small dogs, suddenly decides that running is too much for her and stops. This is a good thing, soon the ignominy of the chase will be over. No, it is not a good thing, now she squats.

The twins grimace. Even this, though...even this, can be made worse by one thing. Just one thing. Surely, surely Estelle understands the unwritten rule, remembers her childhood. I remember her's well enough.

The mob on the climbing frame are calling out and pointing to the large 'no fouling' sign. Steve Binge is urging Michael and Bryan to pick up, 'the business', as Jenny calls it, but Binge is not troubled by gentle euphemisms.

Jenny, righted and on her way to do just that, ignores them. David, also now up, brushes himself down.

Estelle, Estelle is released again. Released to do the one thing that will make matters worse. I feel my doors stiffen, and if someone looked up at me now they would see a slight darkening of my top windows, as though I have closed my eyes.

There she goes. She's marching across to Steve Binge and the others. Righteous indignation in mind, mother protecting her children-energised, and intent on throwing a big can of verbal gasoline on a smouldering bonfire. And she doesn't even know. It won't burst into flames now, but it will, at school.

Trust me, I'm a sweet shop, I know what kids are like.

Chapter 2 – Fifteen minutes in January.

Jan 5th 10.50am

Sometimes it seems to me I'm looking in one of those kaleidoscope things which Mr Matthews used to sell. I have a vague idea how they work, click, a scene comes to life, twist click, another one. Today I am moving between two scenes, very different, but both very interesting, full, I suspect, of potential. Things have been quiet since the park clean up, but, not for long. So, click...

Michael and Brian

"Training is all we need." Michael doesn't have the lyrical ability of the Beatles, but he does have passion born of ignorance, and what can be stronger than that?

The boys stand in jogging bottoms and are bare chested. Michael has two mismatched socks tied around his head. With return to school day lurking in the wings like a 1930s horror movie Dracula, Michael has decided that they must prepare themselves for the retribution that Steve Binge is surely planning. He has insisted they ready themselves by training, just as he would do for the rugby, football, hockey and cricket teams he plays for.

Bryan doesn't look convinced. I think that, like me, he considers the attire and the intent equally mismatched, that the whole idea is strange. Quite apart from that, what they are training for is also not entirely clear. That's Michael for you, always in a desperate hurry to find out where he's in a desperate hurry to get.

Charlie Mellon is in the mix as well. Charlie does understand kids, he saw the stand-off at the park, and he knows. Three days ago, he came ringing my doorbell and delivered a book, dedicated, it seems, to "turning your enemy's strength against himself." Charlie had also offered a number of zip-on self-protection personal armour items, but Estelle vetoed them.

To my fairly ignorant eye, it seems that the focus of the training keeps shifting too. As they practise, the twins fall into Worldwide Wrestling Federation land, another of Michael's favourite places. They wrestle to carefully worked out unwritten rules, which they both understand perfectly. It seems it is

agreed that played out moves can only be those which are theoretically possible, yet it is of no import that they can't actually do them. If I had a head to shake, I would shake it.

So, as I click the Kaleidoscope, Michael is leaning against a bookcase, as though it is the ropes of a ring. Bryan is standing on the bed. Technically this is outside the ring, but his commentary reflects that he is about to re-enter the fray:

"John Cena recovers from being thrown from the ring, and climbs on the ropes, ready to carry out his world-famous Fly Dive..." Bryan's voice reaches a sudden peak in pitch which rather ruins the effect. Michael tenses and presses back against the bookcase ropes of the ring. He is lost in a world of imagination. Steve Binge, it is clear, is long forgotten, Michael leans hard against the ropes, which are not ropes. The bookcase wobbles.

Bryan sees the swaying, suddenly he breaks the fourth wall - "Michael I, I think it's going to..."

A few family heirloom encyclopaedias and dislocated travel books slide from the top shelf. Storing them on the bottom would have done so much more to establish the bona fides of the bookcase as a wrestling ring. On this occasion David has failed his children; he has not considered that important design element.

Bryan watches the books cascade to the floor. "Cascading, even I know, is not something books should do, but Bryan too is caught up in the moment: the fight must go on.

I hear the bed springs creak as Bryan prepares to jump, Michael moves to step over the books, slips and falls. Bryan is airborne, but not for very long.

Jenny and some very senior moments

Meanwhile, in another bedroom Jenny's work on today's crossword has been interrupted. You would think watching a crossword be completed would be like watching paint dry. Well, firstly you must appreciate that I like watching paint dry, it is very exciting to see my walls change colour. Secondly, Jenny has a rather unique approach to crossword filling. Hold on, did I just add a modifier to an absolute? My rafters ease as I recognise that I, like Jenny, am getting old.

So, to rephrase, Jenny has a unique approach to crossword puzzle completion which I find, if not quite endearing, at least, intriguing. It displays perfectly her idiosyncratic approach to problem solving.

Her approach typically alternates between finding words that are fit, that is to say are correct, and words that simply fit in. She appears to rationalise this on the basis that when trying to find an 8 letter word that satisfies the constraints of G _ _ _ _ _ S, whether you put 'gentries' or 'generals' should be a personal preference, the official clue being by way of an optional consideration.

I know Jenny, I've heard her talk quietly to Snoozette, there is a bit more going on than is obvious. The Park, and the party before, are playing on her mind. I can see now that little quizzical look as she realises that she has just spelt 'guesses' with an extra s for convenience. Yes, she knows, that's not quite within even her fairly flexible interpretation of crossword etiquette.

"Oh, Snooze... sometimes I feel she'll just say, 'that's it, David. It's The Home for her'. And, you know, she might be right."

Snoozette looks up, brown eyes, small eyebrow ridges and a face that would make Solomon look like a court jester. She whines slightly in encouragement, and her pink tongue flicks across her lips. Jenny smiles, scratches the dog's head.

"But where is it, Snooze? I had it a few minutes ago." Bingo, that's the other thing on her mind, Park, Party, Estelle's finger pointing out the door, and ... passbook.

Years ago, when I was a sweet shop, my golden years, there used to be a magician on TV, Paul Daniels with a delightful and diminutive assistant. When he wasn't sawing her in half, he made things vanish, and the audience would applaud. After a while I realised, it wasn't the vanishing, but the reappearance that they applauded. The audience all knew they were equally capable of making things vanish. Reappearing them was the trick.

A week ago, Jenny had vanished the house keys, to reappear them behind the TV. Then the mitten, a good trick that, one hidden inside the other. Today though, it is her building society passbook. She has paused for a moment in the search, hoping, I suspect, that it will wobble back into sight on its own accord. Now, the pen goes down, the crossword is set aside and she is emulating Poirot, only without the little slug on her lip or the annoying faux foreign accent.

"So, I last had it ... hmm - in my right hand... that's not much help."

Chatting to herself, or to Snoozette, who can tell the difference? Certainly not Estelle, who I see is poised outside the door.

"I went to ..." she turns to the little office bureau in her room and looks in a flower-patterned cardboard box.

"It was under those papers, my National Insurance card, vaccination and birth certificates and, oh, that lovely picture of Bryan and I in Cromer..."

All things link, for a moment her mind joins dots which only she can see, and she smiles quietly. It's strange, again I see how that smile can make her suddenly look so young. My rafters creak slightly.

Snoozette looks up, whines, at me or Jenny, I'm not sure.

"It's nothing, Snooze. At least I have plenty of money. But the book..." still thinking, "There had been a knock and...yes, Estelle came in."

Estelle had brought a morning tray of tea when Jenny was looking at the book. She's right, I remember the room ringing to the quiet chattering of the crockery. That was not an unusual chorus on mornings when Estelle was home. The clinking of China, the sounds of quiet solicitation and care. For a short moment that real act of kindness seemed to sweep away the cobwebs of Jenny's imagined fears. She had cleared room for the tray. Then Estelle had gone, leaving her to her crossword, and her doubts.

At this particular moment, which is about the same time Bryan has launched himself into the air, Jenny is beginning to lose her composure.

"Oh, this is so annoying!" She searches again around the box and bureau.

Snoozette whines again.

“I really must stop doing stupid things like this, Snooze... It is just so frustrating, everyday...”

Jenny has eighty years of living behind her. In her life she survived a world war, choking smog, the winter of discontent and Punk rock. She successfully raised three children from birth, and 6 champion Pekinese dogs from puppies. I even remember her telling a laughing Celia that she was for a brief time the mistress of a Major in the RMC, before enjoying fifty years of marriage. Her life, overall, has been a success.

But age brings change, don't I know. In the last six months I've watched her small fears tumble snowball-like down the mountain slope of her rationality and build as they go. Surely, she is unique in this respect; do other people would judge themselves so harshly?

“Oh, for goodness sake – where is that blasted book!?”

If this were one of the Disney films I used to enjoy, Snoozette would leap up, shuffle her dark nose through the newspapers, bark a small bark, and the passbook would be revealed. Yes, I saw it go. It is hidden in the hill of magazines moved when making space for the tea tray. But this isn't Disney and Snoozette doesn't move. I like to think I'd tell her if I could, probably. Not if Estelle were in the same position, but maybe for Jenny.

Suddenly Jenny loses it. This, she realises, isn't dementia, it is far worse. Life has just got it in for her.

“Estelle came in – tea tray – reading papers ...” words in staccato, turning and play-acting each description.

Snoozette watches, we knows this voice Jenny is using now. It is the one when Snoozette has to make herself very small and quiet, the Pekinese pushes her chin between her paws and into the carpet.

Jenny reaches the denouement moment in her re-enactment.

“The papers!” She grabs for them, grabs in a way designed to stop the passbook scuttling off somewhere else. Grabs the tray.

As she does there is a crash from above her head, my floorboards shake, one window rattles, and there is a not-too-distant scream of pain and fright.

Jenny jerks upright at the sound, still gripping the tray. Everything on the tray flies into the air. Everything includes the milk and sugar, half eaten toast, cup, teapot, milk, and sugar, saucer, teapot lid, and milk and sugar (there is always far more milk and sugar than is rationally possible).

Bryan and Michael

Click, I'm back up in the attic, Bryan has gazelle-leapt through the air; aiming to land next to Michael then slow motion commentate the fateful body slam. He touches down, but his right foot lands on a Himalayan Travelogue masterpiece, and he slip-skids several more feet across the carpet; he sees Michael trying to dodge but knows he can't.

Twisting is no use. Gravity and Momentum aren't just cute names Einstein gave his cats. Obeying their dictate, Bryan, all arms and legs, comes down on Michael's knee. There is a dull crack and a high-pitched scream. Neither, as I suspected, are good things.

Jenny

In her bedroom Jenny watches the crockery reach its zenith. I watch to, as, for a brief ridiculous moment, she considers trying to catch the items on the tray as they fall. No. This leaves the tray at a forty-five-degree angle to the force of gravity and provides a perfect springboard from which to distribute the items around the room.

After facilitating that spectacular ricochet, Jenny swings the tray downward, creating a swirling gale of newspapers. Confused, she swings the tray upwards for one final time, catching the last magazine, the one that hides the passbook. It really is quite spectacular.

There is only a final scene to play out. With a certainty born from the depths of life's capricious nature, the little passport-sized book is lifted into the air. It sails in a perfect parabola to land in the large puddle of milk which is pooled and soaking into the duvet. Ah, there is something more. Snoozette leaps on the bed and starts licking up the sugar and toast.

There is only so much that any one person can take. I know Jenny is a strong person. I've known her most of her life. Her strength is built on foundations of age and wide experience. But there comes a point when the wind blows and the bough breaks. For Jenny, that moment is now, and she slumps back into her armchair.

And I feel it too, her weary pain. We are both old, both facing change we don't want. I, I at least will endure. I feel inside my walls, find the warmth that I can from downstairs and bring it to Jenny. My windows are good here, yet I try to close them tighter.

Jenny sniffs again, reaches for a tissue on the bedside table. She shakes her head at Snoozette, and stands. Her strength returns, there are things tidy up.

CHAPTER 3 Squirrel - Toast

6th January

If Jenny is a type, it is the sort of person who has a surfeit of duvet covers. I watched her two days ago as she had replaced the one Jackson Pollocked by her breakfast. The replacement It is a fine duvet cover, 500 threads in its count, a duvet cover not to be sneezed near, let alone at. But it is too bright, does not match my wallpaper. It makes me think vaguely of a car-crash. I suspect Jenny shares my misgivings, perhaps it is not the one that Derek and she had shared, it does not make her smile her quiet smile, it does not hold memories.

So, I was pleased to see she had washed the toast-tarnished bed covering, and this morning she ironed it. There had been something almost meditative in the process. I had relaxed, my windows let in all the sun they could, and I was feeling, warm, cosy almost. Now, I am sharing with Jenny one of life's finer moments, the spreading out by hand of the best duvet cover that John Lewis can offer.

The bedroom door moves a fraction, caught by a draft, the front door opening.

"Bye, everyone, off for school now," Bryan calling. That is fine, but, had there been four other feet crossing the doorstep at the same time?

Jenny leant forward, a final satisfying hand sweep. The cover is smooth, her hand ran across its faded but cherished patterns like a boat skimming across azure waters, the fabric softener smell rising like a gentle zephyr. I could see on her face; this pleasure is up there with a glass of cold Chardonnay whilst soaking in a warm bath.

The caress finished, she straightened slowly.

My bedroom door moved again, pushed by a tell-tale draft of cold coming up the stairs, the front door had opened, re-opened. No call from David though. Now I can feel it a scampering of slightly damp feet on my carpet. Snoozette climbing the stairs. I like the pattern her feet make; it has a playful bounce. Snoozette I think might actually like me. The bedroom door pushes open; a small brown bundle of triumph trots in, tail high.

“Oh, hello Snooze, what do have you there?”

The words freeze, and for the second time in a few days the world slows down.

Snoozette leaps, inner gazelle clearly channelled, onto the bedside chair and then onto the duvet.

There is a scream.

I have to click and rewind again. So many little lines to trace to that scream. Of course, it was Jenny, but the reason for the scream, yes, that was Snoozette. Snoozette, Innocent in my view, betrayed by the family, as one might expect. See for yourself, judge.

Snoozette had heard the boys calling, the household waking up around her. She had greeted each person with a tail-wag and a snuffle, ever the happy child-like soul. Even the pack- leader’s attention had been garnered and delivered with restrained grudging. These were the usual chorus of the day, then Snooze, we, had heard something else, something new, outside, on the road.

Not the car, that wasn’t new. It was one of the rat-run cars that took the road too fast this time of day, causing my windows to shake a little. No, there had been other sounds, a tiny dull thud, a squeal pitched perfect to a dog’s ear. Did I see those jigsaw puzzle pieces drawing a sketch in Snoozette’s head? I did not. Yes, I saw how she padded to the door and sat beneath the small metal post box through which the Postman taunted her. Maybe I saw how she drew in a nose full of investigatory air, but what’s that to me?

Of course I could tell, in the way she whined, that something had caught her attention. Was there perhaps, a faint aroma, a scent, which to Snoozette was then colouring in of detail. I watched with only mild interest as the picture blossomed in her mind, details filled, whatever doubt there had been washed away on a sea of smell.

Without real thought, without indeed volition, only the primal urge of instinct, Snoozette, rose, barked, whined, and paced. Of course, no response from any of the Barringtons, and I was not going to open the door, no.

At that moment, called by the canine gods, true anagram friend of dogs, Bryan arrived at my front door. Rucksack on his back but no brother by his side, a strange novelty. He looked a little distracted, new term and old bullies to think about, he, I think was only vaguely aware of a small whining

Snoozette. Vague awareness is not a good thing, it is a door through which disaster slips, or in this case, four extra feet crossing the threshold.

My front door opened at Bryan's hand. Did I open a little fast, a little wide? I don't think so. Bryan called out and looked up, and paused for Michael, who of course, was not coming.

Snoozette's hunting instincts took over. She was out, like a brown blur, a coffee-coloured conundrum whose answer is the source of a smell. Rationally the source should by then be as distant as the Nile's was to early explorers. But rationalising is not restricted to binge eaters, patience card cheats and mathematicians, and anyway isn't even something dogs can do.

Oh, there was something of beauty in the way she ran. Dancing to the tune of her DNA. Snoozette went rushing, charging waddling, to, miracle of miracles. A squirrel. An actual squirrel, or to be more accurate, in the purloined words of a famous sketch, an ex-squirrel.

For, not ten feet from the Barrington's front door, rested a sad and disappointing distortion of a squirrel. A flat yet still oozing Tracey Emin bed-wreck of a squirrel. It lay by the side of the road, leaking in a way which should have been unattractive, but somehow, for a dog, was enhancing.

She had snatched at the small grey motor-traffic statistic, and inwardly howled. From there it had been only a door scratch, David glance, stair scamper and bed-jump, to an ear-splitting scream.

And note the part the family Barrington played, Bryan released the hunter and David allowed her back in, but who will be blamed, who will be castigated. My little Snooze, that's who.

Chapter 4

8th January

The four horse people of the apocalypse

Estelle stands at my front door, a quick sweep of her head scanning the area around her feet, then she opens the door to check the world. For the beginning of January, the weather is bright, dry and cold. The air is clean, outside looks quietly inviting. She is poised, work beckons inside, the park outside. Behind her a radio tosses headlines randomly to the waking household. The UK government is seeking a Libya no fly zone and millions are losing out in a "tax shambles". Estelle bites her lip and hesitates; can one really go for a walk in with such news? Finally, we are told that someone called Daisy Lowe has declared herself a "mild lesbian". Estelle gives a headshake an eyebrow raise and a puff of frosted air billows in front of her.

That last seems to be enough to tip the balance. She closes my door carefully, pushes it a second time even after I gave her my loudest lock click of reassurance. She steps out, across the street and into the park.

Across the park the low sun filtered through the plane trees, a few dog walkers were spread out along the path which describes the circumference. Some of the dogs had stopped for the obligatory doggy greeting involving checking gender status. I bet Estelle was pleased this wasn't required of people, but actually, from what I've seen, it happens, just not so blatant.

Her head raises, peering out across the half-light. A single bulb shines in a window in the pavilion. That is unusual for this time of day. Three or four silhouetted heads are peering out suspiciously. Suspiciously? A strange adverb for me to be using, but I and the park, we know each other. I feel in it the slightest unease, the roots' of its trees vibrate against my foundations. Yes, I understand, there is something in the way the four are now looking from the window which is odd. Their gaze is a little too distant, they stare as though they see something other than the bowling green and quietly bucolic scene.

Estelle pauses in her stride. I don't think she has heard of Peter Parker, mild mannered student bitten by a radioactive spider (really?). I doubt she knows the "tingling Spidey Sense", which describes Peter's uncanny ability to spot trouble before it strikes. But there is something the way she too is watching those four which pleases me, just a little. For whatever reason something pulls her from her clockwise walk around the park, to walk anti-clockwise. Anti-clockwise, I can see, will bring her quickly towards the pavilion. Will bring her to cross the path of the four figures now walking up the steps towards a park exit.

Let me look closer, three men and a woman.

One, is "The Major". I know little of The Major but saw him on numerous occasions when I was a shop. He would come in, point with a small baton he had a habit of carrying, and demand a pack of cigars. I've seen him too, directing affairs on the bowling green. He always bustles with slightly more than military efficiency, tone of voice just the wrong side of jocular. I once heard two elderly bowlers reflecting that often when he walked into the pavilion, it was as if someone you liked had just left.

I think Estelle can see that too. Despite my other feelings about the family taking over the shop, I am getting to know the Barringtons. Estelle can see into the heart of people. She too has seen how his presence sends a ripple of frozen faces and stiffened postures as he bustles out of the pavilion to check on some administration detail. She has heard the club members greet him as "Major" but has never seen him actually bowl. So, seeing him here, now, that's enough to attract her attention. Yes, if she had one, her Spidey sense would have been tingling.

The other three are a mixed bunch of conspirators, again a jaundiced epithet. One is tall, tanned in a misspent time sort of way. His bleached blonde hair flops down over his eyes, and his wrist glitters with the flash of a heavy watch as he waves to make a point. What he is saying is either cut off by the distance, or he cuts it off as he sees Estelle. But whatever was being said, the real message he had for the group was "I'm The Man". Almost immediately my own Spidey sense starts tingling in a way that would have one of Michael's Comic book artists preparing a single picture, double page layout, involving many teeth and drool dripping jaws.

The third is a grey cliché. If Marvel wanted to plumb the absolute depths of despair, wanted to create a character who invoked the crippling malaise of modern living, they would turn to this figure. "Bureaucrat Man". He carries a briefcase, a sure sign that he is not in charge. He doesn't wear a bowler hat- this is 2011- but his grey head looks like he is wearing one. He does (of course) have the required thin, small glasses which he can peer both over and through at the same time. A single glance can make the recipient feel they have been doomed to enter the last 100 years of Paraguay's rainfall data into an unformatted spreadsheet, without the use of copy or paste. Though the sun shines on the group, there seems, from my angle, to be no shadow where he passes.

The final figure in the group is, the Woman. Smartly dressed, skirt the right length and line to fit any office. She too carries a briefcase, but this is smaller than that of Bureaucrat Man. It might contain a minimum of camouflage makeup, most importantly though, I'm sure it contains her Apple Ipad Tablet, smart phone and small trophy case of business cards. She is uniquely striking in a way that makes her seem to have been cast from a mould. Behind her, conjured in equal parts by imagination and the dazzle of the sun, I can see a thousand beach party and cocktail-bar selfies.

Estelle reaches them just as the path turns either out, or up behind the pavilion to continue around the park. Estelle works in a University Department. I know her, I watch her every day. She is a middle-aged woman with much on her mind. Right now, I see on her face thoughts about a mother who is struggling and a dog intent on destroying the house. Only a fraction behind those concerns is worry for her son, and she doesn't even know about David's problems.

What she is not is a detective, nor an investigative reporter. But there is something in this moment, something perhaps born of the spirit that carried her around the world, that catches her attention. So, it is no surprise to me when Estelle turns right, speeding up slightly so that she converges on the party of four.

The Major looked up, I could see him watching her closing on them, he uttered a sound, a cross somewhat between a donkey braying and the long-drawn-out flatulence of a hippopotamus. The others, who were in any event talking in lowered tones, stuttered into silence. Even Bleached Hair subsides into not quite acquiescence.

From nowhere, obviously unplanned, without thought, unbidden, words rise to Estelle's throat, I hear them across the short distance. For a moment I have to admire her intuitive determination. She has depth, Estelle.

"Major, hello. How are you this fine morning?" Even Estelle, it appears to me is surprised by the apparently relaxed candour in her voice.

"Ah, good morning, I, that is..." this is not a chess match, but the major seems to sense in the question a trap. I can see him running through his memory for younger women that he knows. I don't think it is a long list. I sense that he is trying to decide if Estelle is the wife of one of the club members.

"Ah, Mrs ..." he keeps walking.

"Barrington, we live across the road."

The look of worry changes to disdain, no doubt there is no Barrington on the members list. The others are confused, unsure if they should stay, or keep walking.

"I was wondering, Major, if it might be possible to ... join the Bowls Club. How does one become a ... Green Crown bowler?" Estelle is not entirely sure she has the term right there, but inspiration is the mother of invention.

"Crown Green Madam, Crown Green Bowls, but I'm afraid that right now we are not accepting new members, we are... full up." This response is enough to halt Estelle for a moment, during which the others continue their rapid path out of the park.

“Oh, such a shame,” still hurrying after them. It is as if she has no volition of her own. “Could I perhaps put my name down in case someone ... falls ill or dies?” Estelle too is struggling; this is one of those moments when I wish I could snigger.

“What Madam? Well, I suppose so, I’ve made a note, Barrington – I’ll put you on the list. Now I’m afraid I...”

The four of them make their way hurriedly off. Estelle reaches the gate just in time to see the handshakes as The Major and Bleached Hair climb into the Bleached Hair’s Range Rover. Bureaucrat crosses the road and starts up towards Victoria Road, heading away from the city centre. Business Selfie girl has pulls out her phone and started dialling. Twenty years ago, it would have been cigarettes as the meeting dispersed, now it is phones.

Estelle and I are left watching. Neither of us know what we are looking at, but, for once I suspect we share similar feelings. They are not good, the day seems to have clouded and I watch as Estelle turns to return home, her mood broken.