

I know why I took the room. The rent was only £35 a week. Not bad, eh, considering what I got for it. A large bedsit, kitchen and bathroom all on the second floor of a two bedroom terrace. The old man who owned it lived downstairs “bought this house for twenty grand, I did,” he would say as he sat in his fading armchair. I can understand how I got it too.

For a start off I think I was the only one to have spoken to him on the phone. After moving in I consequently found out he was completely deaf in one ear. Just so happened to be the one that is nearest to the phone when he was sitting in his armchair, which happened to be ninety-nine per cent of the time. I must have called at the exact time he was walking into his bedroom which was the down stairs front room. How I managed to arrange to see the house I’ll never know.

That was the next test you had to pass if you were to live here. The back door was the front door because of his bedroom being the living room. This meant a walk around the back to the back door leading straight into the kitchen and the falling wall plaster. Once passed that I could barely make out, due to the low lighting level, a small, frail, spindly man sitting at his cardigan and armchair. “Come in, come in,” he beckoned. I did just that and somehow wondered if I’d be leaving alive.

The first thing I notice apart from him was the far wall totally lined with black plastic bags. The thought did cross my mind that these could be the previous tenants but had to ignore that fact, as I needed somewhere to live and fast. The old man seemed sane enough as he said to “go on up and have a look around.” He also said he would wait downstairs as he had “trouble with them now”. So after managing to negotiate a route safe enough past his armchair I climbed the dark stairway.

At the top was a sliding door. Good, I thought a bit of privacy and as it turned out that’s exactly what I got. To the left was the main room. A reasonable size and the floor was slightly sloping towards the outside wall. Fair enough. There was a double bed, a wardrobe and a table. Not exactly high design style but all very functional. To the right was the second bedroom but was now a loose fitting kitchen and further down was the bathroom complete with bath and a wall shower. Not bad, I thought, I’d take it.

I moved in on a Friday. Strange day to move in but for some reason I’d already taken the day off work and it turned out whatever I was going to do fell through. I didn’t have much stuff really, just odd bits and pieces I had managed to pack before the wife, sorry, before the *ex*-wife either smashed or stuffed in the garden shed. Not to worry, I thought, I’ll pick the rest up when she wasn’t about. It therefore didn’t take long to unpack and arrange things how I wanted.

The last tenant had left a few things – a calendar, 101 Quick Recipe Cookbook, her rubbish in her bin and a rather nice William Morris diary. There was nothing written in it though. Funny how even though she, I could tell it was a girl by the hair clips and empty lipsticks in the bin, had left a couple of weeks ago, I had the strong sense she was still with me. Of course it helped that half of her possessions, not to mention her long blonde hair strewn across the carpet, lived with me for the first day but I could actually sense her as a person, as a being with energy all around the top floor. Could that really happen? Could someone’s energy remain in a building? What about after death? Could it happen then? I generally thought that once you went that was it, gone, dead, the end. But now this had happened I wasn’t so sure anymore. Maybe there are several endings to one event, object, situation, person?

I stayed in that Friday night as I was knackered and couldn’t face a lads night out. Call me Larry if you like, that’s Larry Lightweight, I can tell you hadn’t heard

that one before, but once I'd sat down that was it. I'd crashed on the bed watching *Blade Runner – the Director's Cut* on video. I woke up just as the android let the dove go at the end, the philosophical bit. Not to worry, I'd seen it loads of times before. Once in bed I had time to reflect on what had happened to me over the last couple of months.

As I said before, my ex-wife and myself decided to finish the relationship. Luckily we had no kids so the split was pretty clear cut. She had built up so much anger towards me that in the end we were bound to hate each other or I should say she hated me, I just had had enough. But I would say that, wouldn't I? There are always two sides to any story. I was tired of it all, of all the rowing over silly things, all the stalemates, the bad words spoken. In the end I had to face up to the cold facts, it was over. We loved each other once, a long time ago. Where did that love go? Did it just disappear, did it just freeze in the frosty atmosphere or was it stolen in the night? I couldn't tell, gave up after nights, months, years of trying to "work things out" but we never did. Nope, I guess you could call it a clash of personalities.

The weeks rolled by without anything unusual happening. I came to realise that the old man in the armchair actually lived in it! Every time I went in or out there he was, normally with a pan of soup sitting in his armchair. "Do you like soup?" he would say. "Yes," I would say and then he would repeat the question, "do you like soup?" Not only that each and every time I returned to the house he would ask, "do you like soup?" in a voice that sounded a cross between Frank Butcher and Davros. Also, he would ask whether I liked tomato soup in particular. I said I did although I can't stand tomato soup. I just said it to make him feel good. "Nice bit of tomato soup, you can't beat a nice bit of tomato soup," he would say ladling some out of a cooking pan.

I don't blame him really. He said he had a daughter and there was a picture of her on the wall. She was in her thirties and he said she visited from time to time. But all the time I was there I never saw her. Maybe I was out. He also said he used to have a dog. "Lucky her name was," he would say, "she was run over by a bus when she was six." Some luck I said, he said "she was 'cos she had cancer." I guess it's how you look at things really. He always seemed cheerful but for what reason? He had no visitors apart from the local grocery man who delivered his food, he couldn't walk far, his dog was dead and all he ate was soup. Yet there he was grinning away at the bottom of the stairs sitting in his armchair like some little elf or gnome on a toadstool without a care in the world. Maybe that's why he *was* so happy. He didn't have any stress in his life, nothing to worry about. As for myself, well I had stress coming out of my ears.

The ex was getting shirty because I still hadn't moved my stuff from the garden shed and I had just been promoted at work. Very nice you may think but with promotion always comes hassle. More responsibility, more problem solving and therefore longer hours. I guess I like it really. You see that's what I'm good at – solving problems. Well to be more precise solving people problems, well to be even more precise solving other people's problems. You see I'm a marriage guidance councillor. Not very glamorous but interesting and the good thing now is I've become the classic cliché. Now I'm the marriage guidance councillor who advises on other people's marriages whilst his goes up the swanny. It gets better than that as well. I got involved with one of my clients.

The landlord kept hinting that he wanted me to cut the grass. I've seen the garden, no thanks. Apart from the line of black bags resting against his living room wall the garden was covered with them. Not just on the surface but underneath,

interwoven where the grass has swallowed parts of the bags. I know this because eventually I agreed to tidy it up and cut it. He offered to let me off one week's rent. Not a bad deal especially as I had a friend who was keen on me at the time and would do it for half the money.

If ever there was a house and garden that was primed for dead bodies hiding in it this was the one. The bags in the back garden had begun to rot. Fortunately no bodies were in them just rubbish but from the stench they might as well have been. Shelly, the friend who was helping out, had found a bag full of old coins. Nothing special just pennies and halfpennies. She said she would clean them up and use them "Money's money," she said. True, I pondered. It took all of a Saturday to finish tidying and cutting the grass in the back garden.

The landlord said that the front needed doing as well. We were going to do it if we got time as part of the deal. He trumped up another week's rent money for me to do it. I said that would be fine and Shelly helped out again. She was a little disappointed because my new girlfriend, the client, had stayed over and was leaving as Shell came around. I hadn't told Shell of Fiona yet and I guess now that my marriage was over... Anyway she hid her feelings fairly well and funnily enough it wasn't until years later that we talked about it. Strange that, what is said and what is unsaid. Even between friends some things have a boundary and only time can clear it out of the way. Same with lovers but the time period is much longer, sometimes never at all.

Fiona and I's relationship was strong at that point. We were heavily in love and talk of the 'serious' relationship was aired. I told her I loved her and wanted to marry her. She said exactly the same. I could tell she was telling the truth because I could see her soul in her eyes. The problem was of her husband and my job. I bet it's not the first time a marriage guidance councillor has had an affair with a client. Bet it happens all the time. Pretty girl feeling vulnerable who confides in a man who listens and understands. The difference here is I generally do understand. That's part of me, part of who I am. I'm kind and caring and all that. You see my mum brought me up and of course I'm used to communicating with girls. I treat them as people, as I would like to be treated. So many men don't but then again I'm not perfect, I've made plenty mistakes in my time. Well there's my marriage for a start.

The District Nurse had been to see the old man. I don't know why she decided to visit but she did. Maybe it was a routine visit or maybe it was because his G. P. had said something. I overheard the old man telling the nurse how he had a skin complaint on his hands and how he didn't know how or why he was getting it. The G. P. had given him something for it he said. This I guess confirmed that no one had visited him before, well no one whilst I was in anyway. Sad but true. The nurse talked about his health, the black bags along the wall and a commode.

She said it would be better than having to climb the stairs. She asked if anyone could empty it for him. Here we go, I thought. "What about your lodger, he'll empty it won't he?" she said. No I bloody won't, I thought, I'm not flushing out smelly crap. Much to my delight the old man strongly protested this saying, "no, no I couldn't get him to empty it, it's not fair". Good on you, I thought but the bossy old cow kept on insisting. The old man stood his ground and that was that. I don't know what conclusion was reached or what was decided, if anything about the black bags and his health in general. Despite her damn right cheekiness I was glad the nurse had swung by. Meant he wasn't going to rot in his chair with soup dribbling down his chin.

The telephone was a slight issue. Because he was deaf he couldn't hear the phone and to make matters worse the telephone ring was actually quieter than usual. This meant that I therefore couldn't hear it either. I think it was broken but I didn't want to broach the subject because trying to say more than five words (usually 'yes I do like soup') was completely wasted. So trying to hold an intricate conversation about the phone being too quiet would surly drive me insane. No, I just had to rely on the fact that if he or I heard it then we heard it, if not then not.

One time I did manage to hear the phone ring it was my brother. We were chatting away when I noticed the old man standing by his bedroom door. The phone was positioned just outside his room so I could see him clearly through the two glass panels. I wondered what he was doing as he was bending his neck looking downwards as he stood profile on. After a few seconds worth of conversation, the old man came out of his bedroom carrying a milk bottle full of yellow coloured liquid. It could have been cider but I wasn't taking any chances. I swiftly got out of his way as he made his journey to the kitchen.

It all made sense now why I felt like I had so much privacy because he never used the bathroom upstairs and why he always ate soup. What he did for a shower barely dares thinking about and that would also explain the skin complaint on his hands. It turned out that because he used a milk bottle for his convenience he would pour it down the sink. Nothing wrong in that you may wonder but he would then use bleach to wash the sink afterwards without using any gloves. How the problem was eventually solved was let's say, unconventional to say the least.

I did go back and collect the rest of my belongings from the ex's shed. Not a good move at all. She was in hysterics about things that had happened ages ago. I guess it takes people longer to overcome problems than others. I hear this sort of stuff at work all the time. Maybe I've become desensitised to it in my private life. I just switched off really. I started doing that after a year or so and that just made matters worse. But by then I didn't care I suppose. I just drifted along in the relationship until something changed the status quo. It took a good few years for that to happen and by then even if I hadn't of met Fiona we still would have split up. There is only so much voluntary suffering humans can go through.

I had mistimed my visit or rather she had cancelled an appointment so we ended up arguing. I guess it confirmed to both of us that even after some months apart we had made the correct decision. She asked me if I had met anyone new and I told her I had been seeing someone for a couple of weeks, nothing serious of course. I don't think she believed me, as she tended not to now a days about anything. All those years of mistrust which; I might hasten to add were totally unfounded. I asked her the same question out of politeness but she said that she hadn't and "didn't want to anyway," so I left it at that. Strange to think that that would be the last time I saw her. I had heard she was seeing a guy who she worked with, a teacher and that she was happy. At least some stories are happy.

I emptied my stuff fairly quickly and took it back to my palace. The old man was out or in his bedroom lying down and I quickly made my way up the stairs as not to catch too much of the rotting smell in my nostrils. I decided to unpack my belongings straight away as I like to be fairly tidy and besides Fiona was coming over later on that night.

I unpacked several uninteresting objects and found homes for them. Then I began to unpack a few books I had. As I lifted Nancy Friday's *My Secret Garden* out of the cardboard box, a piece of folded paper fell to the floor. I instantly recognised it as the first love letter Fiona had written to me. An intense and overwhelming wave of

passion and love ran through my body as I picked it up unfolded it and began to read it. Three years on I still have the same intense and overwhelming feeling every time I read that letter. It still is as fresh as the crisp April's day I first read her beautiful words.

We had trouble with some boys one night. West Street is notoriously quiet with its main function being to join the dual carriageway with an estate. It was a long and winding road with a wood at the estate end. I had heard all sorts of rumours about the woods as a small child like an ex-headmaster went mad and hid in the woods waiting for children to grab and kill. Also about the headless woman who was a local farmer's wife. The story goes that one night the farmer was driven insane by his wife constant talking that he cut her head clean off with a sickle and buried it in the woods somewhere. The woman is said to still walk the woods searching for her missing head. Stories like those were layered all over the area and no doubt all over the country. Whether any truth was behind them was anyone's guess. I just know that the boys from the estate used to play in those woods and sometimes, only sometimes they would stray further.

This was one of those times. The first I knew of it was when I could hear loud voices in the street. They lingered for quite a time. I looked out of my window and could see four or five lanky youths loitering on the pavement and spilling over into the road. Every time a car passed, which wasn't really that often, it had to slow down and wait for them to clear. A couple of times the drivers beeped their horns or rolled down their windows to shout abuse at them. They just jeered back without a care in the world.

The trouble came when my landlord decided to tell them to go away because "some of us are trying to sleep". I thought this a stupid if not brave move on his behalf. They of course took no notice and one even took to throwing a few small stones at his window. I don't think he wanted to cause any damage just barrack the old man. Half an hour passed of little incident. The boys were still hanging around and getting in the way of the cars. I, by this time, had gone back to reading *Pillars of the Earth* when all the commotion kicked off.

The old man had lifted his sash window and was at full pelt with moaning. The lads surprisingly enough just listened not really retaliating. It wasn't until a man in his fifties came bombing out of his front door waving a walking stick claiming he would "phone the police if you lot don't move off". The lads sort of took the threat seriously enough and reluctantly moved away leaving the man in the street waving his stick and my landlord shouting through his bedroom window. And they call this a quiet street!

Fiona had decided that in order to leave her husband she needed to earn decent wage to live on. That in turn meant her obtaining a degree. She thought it best to divorce him and move into a smallish flat and embark on a Psychology course. Break ups are never easy but her husband was of a particular breed that just wouldn't let go. He had been claustrophobic when they were together and even worst now they were apart. He kept phoning her up, even calling round to see if another man was there. Pathetic really but such is the power of love. Or rather such is the supposed power of love. Some people use love as a shield for other feelings. Control was his real problem but that doesn't sound as noble as love. 'I want to control you' is always dangerous but put it under the banner of love and it seems noble, 'I can't let you go because I love you.'

Fiona moved the same day as my mum's birthday. I was, and still am, always fascinated by those sorts of coincidences. I say coincidences but are they really? Is it

just fluke that two significant events in a person's life happen at the same time or is there a greater force controlling even the most smallest of occurrences compared to the larger issues of the universe? Anyway both events went smoothly. I gave my mum six Kandinsky posters and matching gallery book and spent the evening with Fiona.

When I arrived at her flat I was greeted by her stunning new look. She had symbolically cut her hair short and removed the nose ring. I knew at once that I wanted to spend eternity embroiled with her spirit. She had cooked a tasty curry and we whiled away time enjoying Chicken Korma, fine wine and divine moments. I had never experienced a relationship like this. It was as though we had met in a previous life. Corny I know but that was exactly the feeling. She said she felt that as well. The end of the evening was spent in the perfect way. She had put an oldish sofa the last owner had left, into the garden. We had grabbed the champagne, watched the evening sunset and the morning sunrise, talking of marriage and an ideal world. I drove back in the afternoon. My mind misty with love I was not ready for what awaited me back at the house. I sensed something was wrong as I turned into West Street. A traffic jam five cars long met me and I groaned. After a few moments I could hear wailing sirens in the distance. The loud vehicle soon past me. I swore repeatedly as I climbed out of my car and ran down the street.

Several fire engines were sprawled across the road with their hoses sprayed in all directions like Medusa's head. The crackling flames roared their intentions as they licked back against the fire fighter's snake heads. I heard the old man coughing as he was safely escorted across his front garden with a blanket hugging his frail body. Thank God I whispered. He was waving his fist violently shouting "bloody kids" over and over. I smiled; you tell them. Maybe the kids had done him a favour for at least he won't be living in squalor and pouring urine down any more sinks. I suddenly thought I'm not the tenant of West Street any more. I reached for my mobile phone.

"Fiona, I'll meet you on the sofa," I said, "with the champagne."