

A HOUSE

“Yes?”

Carolyn answered the door. A man was on the doorstep. He was wearing a green puffer jacket and blue jeans. For some reason Carolyn thought the combination of green and blue was wrong, but she couldn't say why. The man had thinning hair that was suspiciously black and a face that verged on the expressionless. She wondered if he might be a Jehovah's Witness: he seemed a bit low energy to be evangelical, though.

“I'm sorry to bother you,” said the man, although he didn't sound bothered, or anything, really, “But I used to live here.”

“Oh,” Carolyn said. “Oh, right.”

She waited for the man to say more. Then, when she realised he was waiting for her to say something, and what he was waiting for her to say, she said, “I'd be happy for you to look around - ”

“Thanks,” said the man, and took a step forward.

“ - but it's just me here at the moment,” Carolyn continued. “You understand.”

The man was quiet for a moment. He looked, Carolyn thought, as if he was trying to connect two wildly different concepts: the idea that he wanted to come in, and the fact that Carolyn was on her own in the house. After a while, the penny must have dropped, because he said:

“Of course. I'm so sorry.”

“That's all right,” Carolyn said, and she was just closing the door when the man went on:

“Could I come back later when someone else is with you in the house?”

Carolyn was irritated now, but she could hardly fault the man's logic.

“This evening,” she said, “between five and six. No later, because we'll be eating.”

And she closed the door.

“There’s a man on the doorstep,” Bill said when he came in that evening.

“Has he been there long?” asked Carolyn.

“I don’t know,” Bill replied. “But he was there when I parked in the drive. What’s he doing?”

Carolyn looked out the hall window. It was the same man from earlier and he was standing in the same place. She wondered if he’d moved at all: it was possible. Carolyn had been working in her small office in the spare room all afternoon and hadn’t even been downstairs, let alone outside.

“He was here earlier,” Carolyn told her husband. “He wanted to see inside the house.”

“Why?”

“Because he used to live here.”

Bill looked out the window at the man. He was remarkably immobile.

“I sort of implied he could come in when you were here,” said Carolyn.

“All right,” Bill said. “Get it over with.”

Carolyn opened the front door.

“You can come in,” she said, and the man came in.

Bill had to stand back a bit to let him in, because the hall was cramped with three of them in it. It was a small house.

“My name’s John,” the man said. “Thank you for letting me come in.”

“Would you like the tour?” Bill said. He was half-joking: it was a flippant remark, but at the same time he didn’t want a complete stranger roaming free around their home.

“I know my way around,” said John and, before they could say anything, went up the stairs.

Bill ran after him, with Carolyn close behind.

The landing was quite wide for a small house, with four doors leading off to different rooms. John stood outside the first door.

“May I look inside?” he asked.

Carolyn looked uncertain, but Bill said, “Sure.”

John opened the door and went in.

The room contained a large double bed and a dressing table. There was a picture on the wall, a painting of a castle.

“This used to be my mum and dad’s room,” John said. “The carpet was blue and the bed was over by the window.”

He left the room and walked down the landing to the end, and opened a door into a smaller room with a shower and a wash basin in it.

“That’s the shower room,” said Bill unnecessarily.

John nodded, and closed the door. He walked further along the landing.

“Not that one,” said Carolyn quickly. “That’s our daughter’s bedroom. She doesn’t like people going in her room.”

“Of course,” said John. “I was the same when I was a teenager.”

He walked towards the only other door on the landing.

“May I look in here?” he asked.

Carolyn and Bill looked at each other.

“Well,” said Bill.

“That’s James’ room,” Carolyn said. “I mean - ”

“He probably won’t mind - ” said Bill.

“Thanks,” said John, and he opened the door and went in.

James’ room was full of frogs. There were posters of frogs and drawings of frogs. There was a shelf full of toy frogs and model frogs. The bed had a duvet covered in pictures of cartoon frogs, and there was a rug on the floor with the same design.

“James loves frogs,” said Carolyn. She couldn’t think of anything else to say.

“The bed was over here,” John replied. “And there was a little desk.”

He walked over to the window and pulled back the net curtain.

“That wasn’t there before,” said John.

Bill went over to where John was pointing.

“The school?” he asked. “That’s the main reason we moved here.”

John was trembling slightly now.

“It was a field,” he said. He sounded distressed.

“All fields round here in the old days,” Bill said, in a sort of yokel accent.

Carolyn put a hand on his arm.

“He’s upset,” she told him. “John, why don’t you come downstairs? I’ll make you - ”

She stopped. She had been about to say, “a cup of tea.”

“ – a glass of water,” she finished.

“No thank you,” said John. “I’m going now.”

But he kept his gaze on the school.

“Thank you for letting me look around,” John said.

He was standing on the doorstep.

“Not at all,” said Bill. “Drop by - ”

“It was nice to meet you,” Carolyn interrupted.

She closed the door and they watched John through the window as he walked down the drive.

“Well, that was weird,” said Bill.

“I saw him again today,” Carolyn told Bill. “I think,” she added.

They were doing the dishes because the dishwasher had packed up again.

“Who?” Bill dried a plate and put it in a cupboard.

“John. The man who used to live here. That plate’s not dry.”

Bill looked at the plate. Drops of water were falling from it. He wiped the plate again.

“Who’s John?” he asked.

“The man who used to live here,” Carolyn said.

“Said he used to live here,” Bill told her. “For all we know he goes from house to house, telling people ‘oh this was my childhood home’, snooping around and sniffing their pillows.”

“He didn’t sniff our pillows,” Carolyn said. She handed him the last of the glasses.

“He might have done when we weren’t looking. Very fast, these pillow sniffers.”

Bill stopped, remembering what Carolyn had just said.

“Where did you see him?”

“I’m not sure,” Carolyn replied.

“That narrows it down,” said Bill, putting the glass away.

“It was out of the corner of my eye, or something,” she said. “Outside the shops, or in the park.”

She took the glass out of the cupboard.

“It’s dry,” said Bill.

“On the outside, maybe. I wonder if he lives near here.”

“I wouldn’t worry about it.”

Weeks pass, then months. Anna, Bill and Carolyn’s daughter, got a job in Scotland. Their son James went to secondary school. Carolyn was glad James was still living at home: there were problems at Bill’s work, and he had gone from expecting a promotion to not being sure if he’d even have a job at the end of the year.

Then one day there was a knock on the door. It was John.

"I understand you have a room to rent," he said.

"It's you," said Carolyn, remembering. "Sorry, what did you say?"

"A room," John said. "Your daughter moved out, isn't that right? I apologise if I got the wrong end of the stick."

How did you know that? Carolyn wanted to ask him. Instead she said:

"Yes, she's got a job now. But the room's not for - "

"She's not using it, then."

Carolyn found herself sounding irritated.

"No," she said, "she's not using it. But it's her room and we want to keep it that way until - "

John looked at her with a steady gaze. His eyes, Carolyn noticed, were a very pale blue. They hardly stood out at all against the white surrounding them. It was like being stared at by milk.

"I can give you two hundred pounds a week," John said.

"Pardon?" said Carolyn.

"Two hundred pounds," John repeated. "And when she comes to stay, I can go to a b and b for a while."

"We don't need the money," Carolyn said.

"It's always nice to have the extra, though," said John. "In these uncertain times."

Carolyn thought of Bill, worried about his job. The savings account they'd opened for Anna and James, never topped up.

"I'll have to speak to my husband," she told John, who smiled.

“Master of the house, is he? That’s refreshingly traditional.”

Carolyn wanted to shut the door in his face. Instead, she felt the blood rush to her cheeks.

“I’ll want the deposit in cash, please.”

John grinned and patted his jacket.

“I’ve got it right here,” he told her.

“You did what?” Bill asked.

“We could do with the money,” Carolyn said.

Bill looked huffy.

“I’ve still got a job,” he said.

“‘Still’ being the operative word,” Carolyn pointed out. “You don’t even know if there’s going to be a plant this time next week.”

“It’s not that bad,” said Bill, but he didn’t press the point. “What about Anna?”

“He says he’ll get a hotel when she comes down.”

“He can afford hotels then?”

“Or a b and b. Anyway , you were saying we should do something with Anna’s room now she’s left.”

Bill shook his head.

“I meant make it into an office for me. Or a craft room for you,” he added hastily.

He sighed.

“Welcome to modern Britain,” he said. “Taking in lodgers to make ends meet. Hardly the sunlit uplands is it?”

“Ooh,” said Carolyn. “Satire.”

Bill laughed. “Go on then,” he said. “Let him in.”

“Let him in?”

Bill spread his arms. “Let the prodigal son return. Prepare the fatted calf.”

“Or,” said Carolyn, “You could make your lasagne.”

“This is amazing,” John said. “It’s really very kind of you to feed me.”

“Normally,” Carolyn said, “you’ll get your own food. But we’ve cleared a shelf in the cupboard for your - ”

“Cornflakes and so on,” Bill finished.

“Thank you,” said John. “Well,” he went on, getting up. “I’m going up to my room.”

“It’s early,” Carolyn said: then, to be sociable:

“Are you sure you won’t have dessert?”

“No thank you,” said John, “I’m a lodger, after all. Good night, everyone.”

That night, Carolyn lay in bed looking at the ceiling.

Bill jerked in his sleep and woke up.

“Sorry,” he said, “I was having that dream again. Why aren’t you asleep? You’re normally dead to the world.”

“I can hear his television,” said Carolyn.

“Has he got a TV in there?” asked Bill.

“Laptop, whatever.”

“Ask him to get headphones then,” said Bill. He rolled over and went back to sleep.

From the next room Carolyn could hear the faint melody of the Grange Hill theme as she drifted off.

“What do you mean, you’ve let out my room?”

Anna’s voice was distorted by the computer’s cheap speakers.

“It’s only while you’re away. You can still sleep in it when you’re here - ”

“But it’s my room, Mum.”

Bill leaned into shot.

“Technically,” he said, “it’s our room. We pay the mortgage.”

“Not helping, Dad,” said Anna.

“What?” asked Carolyn. Anna’s mouth was moving but there was no sound.

“ – James think of it?”

“He’s fine,” said Carolyn. “John’s hardly here, and when he is, James is in bed.”

“It’s a bit Box and Cox,” Bill added.

Anna and Carolyn said nothing.

“Except they don’t share the - ”

Bill's voice trailed off.

"Anyway," he said, trying to regain lost ground, "Are you seeing anyone?"

Anna's face froze on the screen like the portrait of an annoyed young woman.

"I was thinking of decorating for you," said John one morning. "As a thank you."

"There's no need," Carolyn said. "Bill's doing it. At least, he's about to do it. At least - "

"I am actually a painter and decorator," said John.

He gave her a card:

<p style="text-align: center;">"JOHN"</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Painter and Decorator</p> <p style="text-align: center;">johnpainteranddecorator@johnpainteranddecorator.co.uk</p>
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"I don't do the actual painting and decorating so much myself these days," he went on. "I work more in an advisory capacity. But you never lose the skills."

"I don't quite get what you mean by decorating," said Carolyn.

"If you provide the materials, which I can get at trade discount," John explained, "I can do the work."

"I'm not sure what Bill would say," Carolyn replied, although she had an idea.

"You'd choose the colours of the paint and the designs of the wallpaper," John said. "It wouldn't take long. Tell you what," he added, "We could just do upstairs. As a trial run."

"Just upstairs?" said Carolyn.

“It does look better,” Carolyn said to Bill. “Even you have to admit that.”

“The landing smells of paint,” Bill replied. “But yes, it does look better.”

He walked down the landing, plastic crackling under his feet, and opened their bedroom door.

“He’s fast,” he said, looking at the new wallpaper and the freshly-painted skirting-boards.

Bill turned to Carolyn.

“What about John’s room?”

“John’s fine. He said he’d grown out of frogs, anyway.”

“And Anna’s?”

Carolyn said nothing. Then:

“I don’t know,” said Carolyn. “He asked me to let him have a free hand.”

“What does that mean?” Bill said. He sounded angry. “I don’t like the idea of a stranger having a ‘free hand’ in my daughter’s bedroom.”

“He’s not a stranger,” Carolyn said. “He’s been here for a year.”

The meaning of the words made her silent.

“Is it really a year?” asked Bill.

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Carolyn knocked on John’s door.

“John,” she said, “I’m Hoovering.”

The door wasn't entirely closed so she knocked again and, getting no answer, pushed it open.

"I was just doing the landing so –"

She stopped and let go the Hoover. It fell backwards like a surprised drunk.

Anna's room was completely different. The walls had been painted a dull white, the carpet, which had been a deep, if faded, blue, was now red, with a geometric floral pattern and the curtains were brown like oxtail soup. The bed was smaller (Carolyn wondered if there was actually room for John in it) and it had a covering with – what was it called, she thought, then had it: *candlewick*. There was also a small desk with a wooden chair, and above the desk was a shelf full of plastic soldiers.

Carolyn took a step back, and nearly walked into John.

"Do you like it?" he asked.

"You've done a lot," said Carolyn. "It's very" – she searched for the right word, couldn't find it and said " - nice" instead. "Where's Anna's things?" she asked.

"It took me a while to get it right," John said, ignoring her question. "But it's exactly as I remembered it now."

He opened a drawer in the desk and took out a small pile of comics.

John turned to look at Carolyn.

"I did ask you not come into my room," he said.

"I'm sorry," Carolyn replied. "I was Hoovering and I thought -"

"It's OK," John said. "On this occasion. But please remember that although I'm only a lodger, I do have rights."

"Sorry," said Carolyn.

"Look," John said. He held up one of the comics, which had a colourful drawing of a cheerful boy and a snake. There was something plastic taped to it.

“This one’s still got the free gift on the front,” said John.

Bill met John coming down the stairs and stood aside to let him pass. John didn’t thank him, but said:

“You’re lucky you’re at work all day. The noise from that school at break time is deafening.”

“I thought you were at work all day,” said Bill.

“I told you,” John replied. “In an advisory capacity.”

He opened the front door and glared at the building across the road.

“I’ll be glad when it’s the summer holidays and I can get some peace,” he said.

“Which reminds me,” Bill said. “What are your plans for the summer? Will you still be here? Only we’re going to visit Anna in Scotland for a few days and - ”

“It’s OK,” said John, “I’ve got my own key.”

“What’s that?”

Carolyn was looking at a painting on the wall. It had suddenly appeared on the landing.

“I found it in the market,” John said. “Don’t you like it?”

“It’s nice,” she admitted. “But you should have told us first.”

“I can take it down. It’s just I thought I’d buy you a thank you present. For being so kind and welcoming.”

Carolyn hesitated. It was a good painting, after all.

“All right,” she said. “But please ask next time.”

“I will,” said John.

“Where’s the television?” Bill asked.

John looked sheepish.

“I’m afraid the dog knocked it over.”

“We haven’t got a dog.”

“Sorry,” John said, and he slapped his own forehead. “I said that wrong. I meant cat.”

“We haven’t got a cat either,” said Bill.

“A cat got in,” John explained. “And it knocked the telly over.”

“But - ”

“It’s OK. My fault. I’ve ordered a replacement on Amazon. In the meantime I found this.”

Bill looked at where John was pointing. There was a large cardboard box.

“What is it?” he asked.

“Give me a hand.”

Together they lifted a large object from the box.

“Good God,” said Bill, “I haven’t seen one of these since my nan died.”

“It’s a proper telly,” said John. “None of your streaming flatscreen rubbish. Real old school.”

He got down and plugged the set into the wall.

“Does it work?” Bill asked. “I thought analogue didn’t work anymore.”

In answer, John turned a knob with a clunk. A dot appeared, then a picture.

“Bloody hell,” said Bill as the Grange Hill theme played.

“No, we are still coming up,” said Carolyn loudly. The internet wasn’t great in the café but it had completely packed up at home so she was zooming Anna from a Costa.

“OK, great, only I haven’t heard from you.”

“Bill’s not been great,” Carolyn said, leaning into the laptop.

“Mum, you don’t have to whisper, it’s a Costa. Nobody’s listening.”

“He thinks he might lose his job.”

“That’s not good. Mum, you should have told me this before. How about I come down to you?”

“No, don’t,” Carolyn said, almost too quickly, “It’s not an ideal time.”

“Have you still got that creepy lodger?”

“He’s not creepy, he bought us a new TV. Well, it’s not here yet but the internet’s down so -”

“Sure. How’s James? Still sullen?”

Carolyn looked round then leaned right into the laptop screen.

“I’ve got to go, there’s a man hovering with a latte.”

She closed the screen on her daughter.

“The thing is,” said Bill, “the whole management structure’s messed up. Sorry, let me know if I’m boring you.”

John, whose expression had not changed during the entirety of Bill’s speech, shook his head.

“It’s interesting to hear about other people’s work,” he said.

Bill nodded as if satisfied. He poured himself another whisky.

“One for you?” he asked, but John shook his head.

“Thing is, I don’t want Carolyn to know I’ve - ”

He waved an unsteady hand at the window.

“Lost your job?” asked John.

“Exactly,” Bill said. “Which is why - man to man – not asking your advice, but - ”

“You should go and see this man,” said John. “The one you told me about, who might have something for you.”

“Yes. But the thing is, Bristol. Long way.” Bill’s eyes closed briefly.

“Go now, then.”

“No, I didn’t mean – I thought tomorrow.”

“If you go tomorrow, the work may be gone.”

Bill thought.

“I’ve had a couple of drinks.”

John shook his head.

“You seem fine to me.”

“Really?”

John nodded.

“And if you’re not, you’ll sober up on the way. Here,” he said, taking a flask from the kitchen counter, “Take my coffee. It’s black and strong.”

Bill stood up.

“Good man,” he said. He took the flask and went to get his coat.

“The policeman said he was over the limit,” Carolyn said. She took John’s handkerchief.

“At least he didn’t die,” said John. “Sorry, that came out a bit harsh.”

“It’s fine,” said Carolyn. “And yes, he’s alive, and that’s the main thing.”

She looked at the front door.

“I suppose we’ll have to get a ramp,” she said.

John shook his head.

“I’m sure it won’t come to that,” he said.

“No, I meant for the - ”

“I’ll carry him in and out,” said John.

He smiled at her.

“A lovely house like this,” he said, “We don’t want to change it.”

“When’s he moving out?” Bill asked. He manoeuvred himself in front of the telly, which was now showing something with puppets.

“Soon,” Carolyn answered.

“How do you feel about that?”

“How do you think I feel?” Carolyn said, hotly. “First Anna and now James. I know he’s sixteen, but I did hope he’d be here for a couple more years.”

“I know,” said Bill. “He’ll visit.”

He smiled tightly.

“After all,” he said, “he’s still got a room here.”

“I made it myself,” John said. “It’s a bit odd, making your own birthday cake, I know, but I wanted to say thank you.”

He cut two slices from the cake and put them in front of Carolyn and Bill.

“Thank you,” said Carolyn.

John put the knife down.

“I have some news,” he said. “Exciting news.”

Bill looked up.

“Moving on?” he asked.

“Bill,” said Carolyn.

“It was just a joke. Besides, everyone moves on. Don’t they?”

John smiled.

“They do. Which is my news.”

He smiled at them.

“I’ve seen how you’ve had financial issues, Bill and Carolyn. What with Bill losing his job and Carolyn a carer now.”

“I’m not - ” Carolyn began.

“And I’ve had an idea,” said John. “Instead of me living with you, why don’t you live with me?”

There was silence.

“What?” said Bill.

“I’ve worked it all out. I buy the house off you – at a fair price – and you live here as my lodgers.”

“This is – no,” Carolyn said.

“You pay me a peppercorn rent – I love that word – and life goes on like it did.”

“I don’t see how this is good for us,” Bill said.

“Bill,” John replied. “Remember, Carolyn doesn’t know about your debts. Or the fact that you didn’t qualify for redundancy. And now you can’t work, well - ”

He looked at them both.

“This cake is amazing,” he said.

The doorbell rang.

“I’ll get it,” said John.

He opened the door and there was Anna on the step.

“You must be Anna,” he said.

“You must be John,” she replied. “Are my mum and dad in?”

Before he could reply, she walked straight past him through the hall.

“Oh no,” she said.

The interior of the hall was completely different. In place of the plain cream walls, there was now a layer of wallpaper with floral patterns printed on it. The walls had been bare, but now there were pictures, all of them old-fashioned: there was a scene of men drinking in a tavern, a landscape of boats in an estuary, and a still life of flowers in a jug. The carpet was thick, and there was a telephone seat, complete with telephone and phone book.

The door to the front room was open. John stood in front of it.

“Come back later,” he said, “When we’re expecting you.”

Anna pushed past him into the room.

Bill was there, watching television. He didn’t look up. There was a tray on his lap, and a blanket over his legs.

“Dad?” said Anna.

Carolyn came in. She was wearing a print dress and had on oven gloves.

“You must be John’s friend,” she said to Anna. “Sit down, I’ll get you a jam sandwich.”

“Sit down,” Bill said. “There’s plenty of room on the settee. After all - ” he laughed, indicating his chair, “I’m not using it.”

On the telly screen, a cartoon fork speared a cartoon sausage.

Anna ran out of the room and up the stairs.

The door to her bedroom was open.

She went in. And she fell.

She was on a platform. There were statues on the platform with her, garishly painted. Anna couldn't move. She stood beside a car. It was a clumsy car.

A hand loomed out of the sun towards her and raised her up. Now she could see that the platform was a shelf and the statues were toy soldiers.

"You shouldn't be here," a huge voice said. The hand dropped her. She screamed.

Anna was in the kitchen. It was dark and evening.

"Mum?" she said. "Dad?"

She walked around, but the house was empty.

Months passed, then years. Anna stayed up in Scotland. After a discussion with James, they put the house on the market. It was, after all, all they had.

"I'll get it," said Craig.

He went to the door and opened it. Outside there was a man in a green puffa jacket. The man was looking across the road, towards the school.

"Yes?" Craig said.

"My name's John," said the man. "I used to live here."

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