

THEY KNOW ME HERE

It was the Thursday, and I remember it was Thursday because the bins were strewn about the close willy-nilly and they do that if they're in a rush. "Not that they're never not in a rush," I told Gladstone. He looked at me as if to say *you've muddled your nots and nevers, Lilian*, and went back to licking his paws. He's sardonic for a cat, is Gladstone. "You'll end up like your predecessor," I told. "Disraeli. He tried to get sardonic with a double decker bus and now look at him. Pancaked."

Gladstone ignored my comment and jumped out the window onto the patio. The sun was up, red and angry, and the sky was a violent yellow. Outside the garden wall I could hear the screams of the damned. I thought about going round and asking them to keep it down, but I decided not. It's best to be a good neighbour, even when the people next door are yelling in eternal torment as their eyes are boiled in their sockets. Besides, it meant they couldn't complain when I got the mower out on a Sunday.

Oh, that's reminded me. Days of the week. You'll have to excuse me. I know it sounds daft but it's how I remember things, you see. Sunday, Thursday. I make connections and I remember. Some people tie a knot in their hanky, others tie everything up with the siege of Heaven at the hands of all the demons of the inferno, but I like to make little links in my head. Sunday's a day of the week, and so is Thursday, and Thursday is the day it happened.

Honestly, my brain. Walter used to say I was pots for rags and he was only half joking. Of course, he's long gone, Walter, gone to sit at the right hand of the Presence, leaving me here all alone in the bungalow with Gladstone. Not that Gladstone isn't company, he is, especially after Disraeli, who was more absent than present, chasing after buses all day long. And when's all said and done, he's only a cat, isn't he? And a cat will sit in your lap and let you stroke it and maybe it'll purr for you, but it's not much for conversation. At least Wally would look up from his Daily Mirror from time to time and say something, even if it was only "Christ! Ken Barlow's still in Coronation Street!" His language left something to be desired at times, but these days I'd put up with a constant stream of eff-bombs just to hear another human voice.

I've gone off again, haven't I? And still I haven't approached the topic of Thursday. I've not even neared it. I'm terrible.

Right, Lilian. Focus. Concentrate. Draw the curtains of your mind against the outside world. Filter out the screams of the damned.

Here we go.

It was a Thursday and the bins were all over the street like dominoes. I wouldn't have minded – well, I would but you know what I mean – but it wasn't even bin day. Bins everywhere, higgledy-piggledy, and not a dustbin lorry in sight. I was about to tell Walter to shift himself and get ours back when I remembered Walter wasn't here: he'd gone to Homebase to return a set of faulty spanners. "Looks like a job for Muggins," I told the cat – this was Wellington, who was the cat before Disraeli so that dates it - and I put on my other shoes and went outside.

If I had expected to initiate a call to arms, then I was sorely disappointed. Not a single person came out of their houses to help me. "I'm not putting everyone's bins back!" I shouted at nobody in particular, but answer came there none. In fact, the entire cul-de-sac was silent. Normally there'd be a dog going off at something, or a car alarm, but today there was nothing, not even a pigeon cooing down a chimney. It was so quiet I could hear Wellington mewling in the front room, and he was never a loud cat.

Wait. It wasn't Wellington. It wasn't even Spencer Perceval, who was the cat before Wellington. It was Pitt the Younger. I've got my cats mixed up.

Whichever cat it was, I must admit all that quiet shook me. There's always some form of commotion in the close but this afternoon there was what I can only describe as a breathless hush. Not so much as a twitch of curtain, not even from nosy parker at number eleven, and she's clutched her nets so often they look like string bags.

On a whim – or maybe I just wanted company – I walked over to number forty-five and rang the doorbell. I could hear it trilling inside but nobody came to the door. I tried a few more times in case she was on the po, but with the same result. Then I went next door and did the same thing – reluctantly, because they've a doorbell that plays the music from Mission Impossible – but once more no response. Not even from their budgerigar, who normally goes off like a Gatling gun when someone rings the bell.

It was the same with all the houses in the close. Nobody was answering their doors. And this was a street where many were retired, some even housebound, so there was no chance of everyone being out, unless a charabanc had come in the early hours and transported the lot of them. A worrying thought came into my head: what if a charabanc *had* come in the early hours and taken everyone else away? Now I came to think of it, I'd seen no-one since last night, not even looking out of their windows. At the time I'd put it down to there being a particularly gripping episode of Home And Away being on the television, but now I wasn't so sure.

And then I saw it.

The claw in the sky.

I screamed and tried to run. But I couldn't. I wasn't a speedy person at the best of times but now I couldn't move a muscle.

The claw didn't do anything at first. It just was there, in the sky. It had a slight look of a chicken's foot to it, except on a much bigger scale, obviously. Judging by the size of the claw, you wouldn't be short of eggs with a chicken that size, although the eggs would be too large to be of any practical use. You could boil one if you had access to a swimming pool full of boiling water or one of those geysers like they have in Iceland, I suppose, but then how would you eat it?

I'm doing it again, aren't I? Rabbiting.

The claw, yes. It didn't move for a long time, and then slowly, ever so slowly, it flexed until the whatever they're called, the fingery bits, the digits, touched. And when they did, it was like the sky cracked. What am I saying? It wasn't *like* the sky cracked: the sky did crack. And in the crack, something was trying to get through. It was something you couldn't describe, even if you had all the words in the world, because it wasn't from this world. I don't think it was from any world. It had – no, I can't even make a stab at describing it. Never mind no words for it, there aren't any words for the words for it. I'll say this, though. It was awful. It was horrid. Just looking at it made you want to be sick. Just remembering that you'd looked at it was bad, like you'd just brought to mind a terrible tragedy.

I couldn't stop looking at it, though, and the way it was oozing through the crack in the sky. It was slow but it was coming. I couldn't tell you if it was like lava, or water, or anything (although for some reason I kept thinking of semolina), but it was definitely coming through.

I suppose it was about then that I ran. There was nowhere to run, unless I was thinking of vaulting a fence and taking a chance in someone's back garden, but I was in a panic and I wasn't thinking.

It was the cat that saved me. Pitt the Elder or the Younger or whatever his tomfool name was. I heard a horrid scraping noise and I turned to see the cat had clambered up onto the settee and was scratching his claws on the glass of the lounge window. Normally he's not allowed on the furniture but on this occasion I was glad he'd taken matters into his own hands, because the sound shook me out of my panic and cleared my head. I turned and walked back into the house, closing the back door behind me.

Not a moment too soon, either. The semolina stuff suddenly burst through the crack and oozed into the close. It covered everything in its path – bins, cars, a child’s tricycle left on the pavement – and then it sucked it all back into the crack. It was like watching on rewind: the whole thing just whooshed backwards up into the sky, semolina, bins and all. The claws clacked once more, the crack in the sky sealed up, and that was it. Silence again.

It’s been that way ever since. The street as quiet as you like, no birds in the trees, no cars or children playing, just the yellow sky and the red sun in it, and the screams of the damned. And me, stuck here, for ever. I’ve thought about it, and I’ve looked in Walter’s encyclopaedias, and I’ve come to the conclusion that this place, if it is a place, must be limbo. What they used to call purgatory. The in-between place, neither one thing nor the other.

So here’s me in purgatory. It could be a lot worse, I suppose, I could be in with the damned, screaming. I’m not in heaven, that’s for sure, and I know why. There was a fella, wasn’t there? Me and a fella. Walter knew, but he never said. He was a good man, you see. And that’s why he’s there, and I’m here.

I can’t say as how I’m delighted. I’ve only Gladstone for company, and he’s getting on: I fully expect to wake up one morning and there’ll be a kitten in the basket in the kitchen, name of Lloyd George. But I’m not roiling in the flames of eternal torment, so that’s something. I doubt I could leave if I wanted to, anyway. And there’s another thing. It’s me, this place. It’s my house and my things and what I used to call my life.

I had a friend once, back in the other place, Gloria Peabody. Once a month we’d meet for a coffee in town, and we always met in the same place, The Brown Bean. It was what they call a coffee shop, and it wasn’t up to much. In fact, not to put too fine a point on it, it was a dump. It was dirty and the coffee tasted like dishwater and the cakes were nothing to write home about. I remember saying to Gloria, no offence, Gloria, but this place, it’s awful. She said, yes, I know, and I said, so why do you keep coming then? And she said, because they know me here.

And that’s how I feel about this place. It may be red sun and yellow skies and the damned screaming all night and day, but they know me here.

They really do.

David Quantick