

Cuckoo in the nests

She always took more than the recommended dose of estazolam sleeping pills, enough to knock out a horse, or at least a pony, but she had never suffered side-effects and had taken two pills every night for the past two years since her doctor had recommended them for her, failing to mention their slightly addictive quality, which she denied, telling herself she wanted to take them, and could stop anytime she liked.

When she downed them with a cup of horlicks, out she would go, sometimes literally before her head would hit the pillow, her sleep being so deep fireworks could explode outside her house and she would barely twitch an eyelash.

She swallowed her pills and drank the water and felt drowsy as she switched off the lamp and lay on the bed.

As the grip of sleep circled her consciousness and took her to the land of dreams, outside her bedroom, above the top of the stairs, the loft entrance moved slightly, and then moved altogether. A rope descended, followed by feet, and gradually a man climbed down into her house.

He had done it many times before, because in the loft, was where he lived.

Barbara Mullens who was in the room, currently dreaming about blue frogs, was the only occupant of the large house, a house which was in the middle of three terraced housing on the outskirts of a town, within walking distance of a supermarket, but far enough away to have one toe in the countryside.

He stretched and made his way across to her bedroom, opening the door and standing before her sleeping form, just watching her. He knew she wouldn't wake.

She had never seen him. Never known about him. Yet he had been doing this several times a week for three years. There was a street lamp further along the road, and the fringes of its light seeped into the room, and once his eyes had adjusted she was not in total darkness.

His name was Dale Chandler, 59 years old, only wore a bathrobe and slippers, and he lived in the three lofts, because in the walls separating them, holes had been made in the brickwork, so when he knew the occupants were out, he would come down and help himself to food and television.

The house to the left of Barbara's held a youngish couple, possibly in their thirties, and to the right a man in his sixties who was hardly ever there because he spent most of his time down the local pubs.

When he first came to the houses he had been searching for a place to stay, and had found one empty. He had stayed in the house as a squatter, but when estate agents started coming around, he retreated into the loft, and created the holes between the houses, one covered by a large sheet of plywood, the other by a decrepid chest of drawers. To this day he never knew how they had got up there as the loft entrance looked too small.

Sometimes he would lie next to Barbara in her double-bed, getting under the sheets and stroking her hair, her shoulder, enjoying the feeling of what it would be like to be a married man.

For now though, he sat at the end of the bed and just stared at her.

After a few minutes he got up and left, and went downstairs into the kitchen, made himself a one-sugared tea and watched some satellite television, sitting on the sofa, feet up on a coffee-table.

After a couple of hours, he tidied up as best he could, covering his tracks and climbing up the rope, back to his own abode, replacing the loft entrance.

When he had decided to call this place home, and after he had knocked through into the other lofts, he had carefully pierced a small hole in the bedroom ceilings as close to the light-bulb as possible so he could watch them sleep, or anything else that went on in bedrooms.

Barbara seemed like the type of woman who was a permanent spinster. Men did not feature much in her life, and when they did it was on normal, friendly terms,

none ever crossing the threshold of her house, nevermind the bedroom. Also, Barbara to him, wasn't the highest on his list of most attractive. She reminded him of a kindly grandmother, and her clothing cupboard was never more than practical. No daring lingerie, as he'd discovered when rummaging through her clothing. She always wore passion-killer underwear, but it didn't matter. Sometimes he would take an item of her clothing up to his bed in the loft. Half of it consisted of her things. A towel, a bra, a jumper, a cushion.

He also liked to have a little fun to amuse himself when he was in the house. Basically he enjoyed moving things around, and tonight he put the television remote-control on the bottom of the stairs.

He lived mostly in the dark, as he had quite adapted to it, and also because if he put any form of light on it may be seen coming through the small hole in the ceiling.

None of the occupants ever seemed to venture here. Only once had the occupants at number 40 came up while he was in the next loft, but it wasn't for long, and it was only to store something. Even though for one hour he had hidden in the corner of the loft of number 38. In this house there were sparse furnishings and even less in the loft. A few old suitcases with some knitting patterns, plenty of asbestos insulation and some yellowing photographs of people who probably lived in this house possibly three or four occupants ago. They will have no relation to Mr Rutherford who lay asleep in his clothes without a sheet covering him, as he did most nights after the pubs had kicked him out.

He would be zonked out until morning. Dale moved across to the loft entrance, and was soon putting down the rope he had by all the entrances. These lofts were quite high up and he guessed he would hurt himself if he dropped, so the rope was the best he could do.

Mr Rutherford's kitchen was sparse and he didn't have much in the way of food, but he made himself a cheese sandwich and sat down to watch television until dawn broke.

Rutherford, back in his heyday, was an infantry corporal, and when that petered out he took to earning money as a taxi-driver. Fifteen years he was fine, nary a point on his licence until he started to enjoy a slight tippie below what was legally required to drive. However the limit got closer and closer, and he would basically drink and drive, getting away with it, because in his mind he thought he would be fine, until one day it caught up with him, ploughing his taxi into a street-lamp. The two passengers in the back had skin lacerations from flying glass. Rutherford lost his licence, his job, had to pay damages and a large fine. Not only that but he was ostrisced by those in his locality, people who knew him, people who he crossed paths with. Only his true friends stuck with him, and that only amounted to about 2 or 3. However, the alcohol also stuck with him, becoming his most loyal friend. He managed to keep the house, but not much else. His dignity, his honour, any sense of respect he once held, all poured away down the drain. A man without any interests besides sport and politics.

Dale's moving of things around didn't really work too much, because Rutherford hardly noticed, believing he had put them there, maybe in a drunken haze, he would just assume it was him, but Dale did it anyway.

As he watched him sleep, Mr Rutherford kind of reminded him of himself, having nobody to really rely on, no-one who cares.

Down in London four years ago, having been long-term unemployed, Dale had been sent by the job-centre on work experience in a supermarket. Trouble was Dale was not used to being told what to do, let alone being talked down to. His manager was a rigid, straight-laced perfectionist. A place for everything, and everything in it's place. So when he told Dale to go and brush up the car-park, he told it in a patronizing way as though chastising a child.

'Now you, go and brush up the car-park'.

'You what?' said Dale, 'Who d'you think you're talking to? Don't you speak to me like that'.

'I will speak to you however I like. You'll do as I ask or I'll tell the job-centre to get

your money stopped. Don't think I want to employ alcoholic drug-addicted reprobates like you...'

'What! you cheeky...!' and Dale saw red, and punched the manager in the face, then proceeded kick and beat him, grabbing a nearby wine bottle and striking him with it. It didn't break, but had it done so, Dale would probably have used the jagged weapon. Other workers soon came to the manager's rescue, but the damage had literally been done.

Three months in prison and one-hundred-and eighty-hours community service.

It was during the fourth hour of the service that he and a few other workers had been tasked with removing graffiti from a railway bridge, that he saw a window of opportunity to escape. The supervisor was at the van. The others were on a break, and Dale found himself out of the eyeline of all of them, and ran, realizing after about two miles that he was still wearing a yellow high visibility jacket which he discarded.

He soon found the house for sale, broke in, and it wasn't long before he was calling the lofts his home.

He believed the police would be hunting him down. Little realizing, that although they would be looking for him, he wasn't high on the list of priorities. He was hardly fugitive number one, but he had visions of armed police patrolling the streets, possibly even a reward, as even the public may give him up. So in the loft he stayed, as the house gained a new occupant.

He made his way back up there, closing the hatch behind him, not that Rutherford would notice he guessed, but he still did it anyway, and made his way back to the middle loft of Barbara's house where he had his bed. He looked through the hole in the ceiling and saw she was still in dreamland.

He wondered if he should venture into the third house, as it was more dangerous in there, the chance of being caught being much higher.

He had assumed it was a married couple, but it seemed more like a marriage of

convenience, perhaps business was their pleasure. Occasionally he would see what he hoped to see through the hole in their bedroom ceiling. Good old-fashioned love-making, but mostly only one of them slept in the bed, the other downstairs in a makeshift sofa-bed. He believed it was because one worked irregular hours, as sometimes one would be up through the night.

He knew they were trying to go into business together, and guessed it must be something to do with computers because there was an office desk in the lounge with an expensive looking PC and sheets of paper scattered around.

When he knew they were out, or when he guessed they would be away for a while, then he would have the run of the house, and with it being quite messy anyway, his presence was not obvious. They had a lazy house cat who would stare at him when he entered. Then it would lose interest and go back to lounging on the sofa.

As one of his jokes, Dale would put food from the fridge in the cat bowl. Slices of bacon. Salted peanuts, carrots, and he would put his ear to the spyhole and hear them arguing over it: 'Well it wasn't me', 'and it wasn't me!'.

Tonight though, he could see Chantelle in her bed, reading, Philip downstairs.

He couldn't work out their routine, but still, he got some good things out of it. They had a penchant for organic food. One of them must have been a vegetarian and he would help himself sometimes to them as despite not being vegetarian, he quite liked the food. The bathrobe he always wore had belonged to Phil.

He wondered when he was going to go back down there, but there was no rush, and went back to his makeshift bed.

After another week, business was as it was, careful not to step loudly up there, but in Rutherford's case it didn't matter too much because he probably wouldn't have been too aware anyway, but as it was he was out as usual in whatever pub took his money, and Dale was lounging on his sofa channel surfing.

Suddenly he heard the gate outside open and footsteps. Dale panicked, but when

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