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The Crescent

A block of flats called The Crescent stood on the lip of a small, round city. It was long, low, and orange. It occupied a triangular island formed by three roads. Older locals remembered The Crescent being built, about twenty years ago, on an abandoned orchard. Some recalled a horse or donkey, tethered to fencing, others the over-ripe apples rotting in the long grass. Despite the constant traffic thrum, most residents – especially those on the fourth and fifth floors – found The Crescent a restful place to live. This was partly because a green space of fields and tall, old trees lay between The Crescent and the city centre. A windy dog-walker's paradise, in parts marked up for games, in others left to the wild weeds, it wound through parkland to the old city wall and the castle moat. On winter nights, parts of the city twinkled through the branches – office block lights, a corner of the sports stadium, the silver dome of the college observatory. In summer, these sights were obscured by an efflorescence of oak and elm, ash, beech and larch. An almost rural calm sometimes descended on The Crescent's balconies.

Two types of people lived in The Crescent, the quite old and the quite young. Many of the flats contained retired widows, whose television sets could be heard so clearly by their neighbours that it was possible to predict which programmes, out of an evening's schedule, the aged ladies would choose to watch. Other flats were occupied by young professionals, singly and in couples. Their older neighbours would tell visiting sons and daughters that you didn't hear a peep from next door all week, but occasionally on a Saturday there would be some thumping

music quite late into the night, but it wasn't very obtrusive really – and it was Saturday night after all.

On the fourth floor, in flat thirty two, lived Martin Gardener. Until recently, Martin had been involved in marketing and promoting his city as part of the regional tourist board. A graduate in tourism studies, Martin had worked hard to place himself in what he defined as a 'real' job, one that wasn't just a lot of paper-shuffling. In his current position, Martin came up with ideas, argued for them, and oversaw their implementation. An international food fair at the convention centre and a week-long pan-European arts festival were Martin's proudest professional achievements to date. He had more ideas in mind, but he hadn't been in work for the last eight months, because he was ill.

One morning early in May the year before last, Martin smiled in an exhausted way as he fumbled for the keys to his flat, looking at the brass numbers on his front door which reminded him, unnecessarily, of his age. He sniffed as he fitted key to lock. Someone was having a fried breakfast. Martin's stomach made a strange, high-pitched noise. He caught a peripheral glimpse of the lady from the flat next door emerge on to the shady landing.

The corridor here became especially wide, like a passing point in a country lane. A trail of plants in patterned pots began outside number 31. Geranium, cranesbill and cyclamen, African violet, Cape primrose and Jerusalem cherry fought for space, their leaves touching, their colours mixing. The smaller pots balanced on window sills and ledges, and some hung from the blue tubular window frames. At the landing's widest point, the homecomer's pacing feet passed three large floor-standing pots, orange, green, and blue, containing christmas cactus, yucca, and swiss

cheese plant. They drank afternoon light from the floor-length windows. The residents' car park peeped up through the petals and the stems. The trail continued past Martin's flat, began to thin as the corridor narrowed, and ended at the north stairwell, a final snowbell drooping next to the fire extinguisher. The space, the view, and the plants made Martin's mind speak words like 'terrace', 'botanical garden', 'green house', and 'arboretum' to itself, to the rhythm of the few final footfalls before the door; and once – when tottering home tipsily after a longer lunch than expected – 'sky garden'.

He couldn't remember his neighbour's name, but felt it might be something like Grace or Rose. A blink of floral print and the impression of a small blue watering can were all he saw before shutting the door.

Martin watched the cat approach him along the narrow hall. She had been listening to the radio in the kitchen while he was at the shop. Peering into that room, Martin saw that she had taken advantage of his brief absence to do her business, tidily, in the litter tray. This was the usual habit of Martin's elderly though discreet cat. She followed him into the living room.

The flats in The Crescent faced east, but they weren't very light. Each had, appended to the living room, a small, brick balcony topped with brown, bolted steel, which did an excellent job at trapping the sunlight.

A few rays would struggle into the rooms, but leave the far walls sunk in orange gloom. By noon, the sun would have passed overhead, to spend the rest of its day sinking down the blind side, pouring into the corridor and on the closed doors.

But there was an intense hour shortly after dawn when that same light could actually hurt the eyes. It was an odd kind of light, as Martin acknowledged now, standing near his reclining armchair, blinking and

transferring his plastic shopping bag from one hand to another. Rather than bathe the flat in a warm wash of radiance, it seemed sprayed in at high pressure. Martin was reminded of the way a mild gush of water will become a fierce jet if forced through a narrow aperture.

Martin was getting used to looking into the light, to sighting along its rectangular beams, through the curtain of blue-grey smoke, out through the sliding glass door, out of the box balcony, over the cars waiting at the lights on the arterial road beyond The Crescent's wooden fence, into the trees, through the trees, above the trees, to the city's taller buildings, the spears of the stadium glinting painfully, and directly above, reaching down to touch them with wavering fingers, the sun.

Leaning on the armchair, Martin realised he was in the same spot as he had been when he watched his father and brother toasting baby Jack in whiskey. This was last Tuesday, at around this time of the morning. A visit from either was rare, from both together unprecedented. Martin's father and his brother Andy had been quarrelling for a couple of years, and had only just started speaking to each other after an icy eight months. The argument had initially sprung up around a second-hand motor-home that Dad had lent Andy the money to buy, but which Andy had spent on home improvements – specifically, redeeming with cane furniture and soft rugs the fiasco of the conservatory, at his wife's insistence, according to Dad. He had always admired the adventurous spirit in his younger son, and didn't want to see it extinguished, even if he was a family man now. The dynamic had proceeded predictably from there, for Dad, Andy, and Andy's wife were all hot-headed.

Andy had brought Jack along, on their way to the crèche. His wife, Brenda, was on a coach trip to a designer factory outlet sixty miles west

along the motorway. Dad had come by on his way to work, to give Martin a sheaf of forms about claiming sickness and disability benefits. This was Dad's second visit since Martin's diagnosis, and Andy and Jack's first. It was, Martin realised, his illness that had made this meeting between Dad and Andy happen.

After an uncomfortable twenty minutes' discussion of the local traffic conditions, Dad looked at Andy silently for a few seconds, then produced from a side pocket of his green coat a half bottle of Bell's Whiskey and proposed that all three drink a toast to Jack. Andy and Dad exchanged glances, furtive at first, through the passive medium of gurgling Jack, and finally meeting each other's eyes.

Martin reminded them that his illness prevented him from drinking alcohol, then went to the kitchen, the cat cutting across his path, to fetch three tumblers and a carton of apple juice. He also brought in his own unopened bottle of ten year old single malt.

"Ah, the good stuff," Dad said.

Dad poured the whiskey, and he and Andy exchanged a few appreciative murmurs on the colour and volume of the liquid. Dad made the toast, wishing Jack a life of happiness and good health. All three raised their glasses. Swallowing his apple juice, Martin watched his father and brother enjoy the whiskey's after-glow. The pair looked to the ceiling for a silent second, lips slightly pursed. Over their shoulders, Martin noticed vegetation creeping around the whitewashed wall that separated his balcony from that of Grace, or Rose. Slim green curls of grape ivy reached over to touch the handlebars of his rusting bicycle.

Dad and Andy looked down from the ceiling and at each other.

"That's a good drop," said Andy, sighing.

“That’s true, that’s true,” Dad said, nodding.

Martin stood where he had stood at the time, nodding and sighing, acting out the memory. His neighbour’s television could be heard quite clearly through the wall. She seemed to be watching a documentary about alpine goats. She was keen on wildlife programmes, Martin had come to understand.

He opened the sliding glass door to let some morning air and rush hour noise into the flat.

The Crescent was stepped, each balcony jutting out a little further than the one above, like a ziggurat. Several times in the past, usually late at night, with friends round, Martin had watched a fumbled cigarette end fall from his fingers and land on the bolted border of the balcony below. His unknown neighbour dealt with Martin’s cigarette and its ash scatterings silently, invisibly. Neither had ever knowingly seen the other, despite the slender seven-brick gap between their balconies’ northern and southernmost points. Martin had only to lean an elbow on his own balcony to see directly into his neighbour’s. He had often noted the onion bulbs growing in a pair of ragged, soil-filled shoes on the ledge.

Martin had thought of letting a note flutter down, apologising to his neighbour for the cigarette accidents, and for a vomiting incident last Christmas when he had been too late with the bowl for a merry friend; but he knew he wouldn’t. Both men imagined a bigger man as his neighbour.

Somewhere a car with a faulty exhaust over-accelerated. By the time the grating noise arrived in Martin’s flat, softened by its journey across the park, it had become a whimsical raspberry.

On the landing Camellia Jane-Beatty turned from her flowers. Her front door had a knocker, unlike Martin’s. A brass horse’s head, in profile,

peered through a horseshoe. The knocker banged when the door closed, but Camellia never heard it. She took the watering can through the hall to the kitchen, her carpet slippers shuffling and paddling slowly. Camellia's body, in profile, was beginning to resemble a question mark. An unruly white fuzz was the only visible reminder of the blonde curls that Camellia's Edward John never could stop touching, when they were just children. On the rare occasions she left The Crescent now, her destination inevitably smelt of disinfectant.

The door was wide open and Camellia stood looking at the bower she had made of her balcony. She remembered the day a neighbour of hers, a handsome boy, had locked himself out and asked Camellia if he could climb out on her balcony and down into his. It was dangerous, of course, and the residents' association wouldn't have approved, but he was an athletic boy with a big toothy smile and Camellia had got caught up in the adventure. All went well, and he had come back for a glass of wine.

She was no longer sure who her neighbour was. Lots of young men had come and gone. Camellia got them confused, but they were all very nice. Very quiet too, she thought, dazzled for a second by the sunlight glinting on the ornamental horse brasses that dotted the rear wall of her flat. She would think next door was empty at the moment, if it weren't for the odd cooking smell. He was obviously keen on garlic. On the landing, leaning away from her blooms, Camellia had also smelt rosemary and basil, and the odd waft of cardamom and cumin. It was funny to think of a young man interested in cooking. Camellia's husband, Edward John, hated the kitchen.

Camellia realised she hadn't smelt any of these for a good while now. She remembered what she thought must be cinnamon and cloves last winter,

and she thought perhaps he was making *gluwein*. Perhaps he had moved out.

That night, Camellia fell asleep in her armchair in front of the television. A tall variegated schefflera with ribbed trunk and bold palmate leaves showing some signs of mineral chlorosis stood behind her, touching her chair, and the illusory flames of the log effect fire drew lazy orange ovals on the walls. On the television, an antiques programme ended and live coverage of an athletics tournament began. Camellia's flat was full of ornaments, mainly made of brass, copper, and nickel - plates and platters decorated with finely wrought galleons amid intricate waves, equine ephemera, shields and tabards and pewter steins. Among these, and glossy green leaves, Camellia snored and the television blared.

Camellia began to dream. The couple upstairs were having a vicious row, even louder than the real row they'd had some months ago that made Camellia wonder if she should call the police. Annoyed at first, Camellia now became worried for the woman, whose cries had gone from angry to pained. She hurried into the corridor, smiling at the handsome boy who stood sniffing the petals of her sunroses, and he raised his wine glass at Camellia. White, yellow, and red reflections stretched out on the window panes behind him.

The door to flat 41 was open and Camellia looked in. The row had stopped the second she set foot on the fifth floor corridor. Now she heard men's voices talking calmly. Standing in the hall, Camellia could see into the living room. Her husband, Edward John, was sitting in an armchair. Her brother Dominic stood near the window. Silently, Camellia listened to them.

"It's because of what happened when you died," Dominic told Edward

John. “The house was too big and gloomy for her. She found it difficult to get on with things.”

Edward John nodded in an intensely familiar way, slowly, eyes down, a particular furrow appearing. Camellia blinked. She associated the gesture with compassion, occasions in the past when Edward John had heard a sad story of someone’s life, and looked down, nodding, before offering some practical help, often financial.

“When I married Hilary, I asked Camellia to come and live nearby, so she sold the house and we found a nice flat,” Dominic said.

“But why Wales?” Edward John asked, frowning. “We don’t know anyone in Wales.”

Camellia smiled at his forthright manner.

“Hilary is Welsh, and she wanted to stay close to her mother and father, who are getting old,” Dominic said. “We went to see Camellia every day, either Hilary or myself. She was happy. She seemed to have taken on your old interest in horticulture – pots and trays, of course, rather than gardens and greenhouses.”

Camellia thought of the wide garden at the back of the old house, of bringing rubber-gloved Edward tea and buns, wasps buzzing around his strimmer. Her brother, Dominic, had died of a heart attack eighteen months after Camellia moved into The Crescent. Hilary visited less and less often, busy nursing her parents, who finally died, and then Hilary moved to England with her job. Camellia didn’t think Dominic had any need to apologise to Edward John for anything, and thought she would walk into the living room and have a word with the both of them. She found herself watching a man in yellow shorts throwing the javelin, a crick in her neck, the antiques programme finished.

In the flat next door, Martin listened to the row progressing upstairs, and decided it hadn't the staying power to last much longer. The bass voice had gone from strident to ragged, and was subsiding into broken grunts. The soprano had clearly locked herself in a different part of the flat, and her diminuendo was further muffled. Now the sound of the television next door – some kind of sports commentary – dominated again. It was a minor skirmish compared to the row he'd heard a few months ago, which made Martin wonder if he should call the police, or at least one of the men from the residents' association. It went on for nearly two hours. At a late stage in the row, the woman's voice had fallen silent, while the man's had dropped into a mournful rumble, punctuated by sobs, and Martin thought he might have murdered her. But the idea was too much like a comedy sketch to take seriously, and he tried to go back to sleep. He did the same now, listening to Camellia's television, individual words forming now and again from the slosh of vowel sounds, increasingly absurd and inappropriate to any kind of sports commentary. In the kitchen, the cat poked her head through the curtains and looked down at the spotlit garden below, with its twin oak trees and two wooden benches. The cat saw a movement down there and crouched to stare. Emerging from the bushes behind the fence was a long, sleek fox. The cat's whiskers twitched. She watched the fox step into the light, look left and right, and step back into the darkness, sniffing the air.