

He hated the word 'retirement'

by Janie Reynolds

Alone, now and always, in his third year since Mavis's death, Alfred nestled back, cross-legged, into his haggard armchair, a threadbare leg-shaped patch on the seat cushion below his lower leg, where it had stayed almost every waking moment since she had died.

Beside him stood a desk, invisible for the perilously high piles of journals, pamphlets and books, some of which had collapsed into wads that looked like archeological expedition sites.

"Fucking animal," he scorned, as a thin and mangy tortoiseshell cat banged clumsily through its flap and plodded confidently into the kitchen, each step bearing a muddy print left visible on the stone floor.

"Never done a bloody day's work in your life, you scrounging piece of contagious vermin."

The moggy crouched and sunk its spine downwards before slinking warily out of sight.

Mavis' brain tumour had left Alfred to live out his long and bleak remaining days in the bungalow they had moved to when city life had proved too dazzling and complicated for her and she had requested no more than a view over fields.

Alfred and Mavis's city apartment had once bubbled with the fresh, boiling blood of idealistic young politicians, angry trade unionists, anarchic students and far-left socialists. Once a popular Economics lecturer, Alfred's lifelong passion had been to educate students, voters, neighbours, friends and the young, about the need for a revolution by the working classes and to overthrow the calamitous trap that was Capitalism. His three celebrated works on Communism, Anarchism and Leninism were placed in prime position in the centre of his battered desk, but now, too, were concealed by browning papers and thoroughly devoured manifestos.

In a village of no particular significance, ten miles from the city, Alfred felt surrounded by apathy, selfishness and mindless commercialism. He was aghast at the apolitical ignorance of the villagers. No one stopped by to say hello or to check he was OK. No one was interested in hearing about the perforation of the Iron Curtain, nor the hacking and hammering of The Berlin Wall by gullible imbeciles, spellbound by capitalist advertising, full of nonsensical promises and vicious lies. Families born in the village rarely visited the city for some culture, let alone left the country or even county. They simply grew and shrunk, following the monotonously predictable path from birth and death.

Now that Alfred's optimism to overthrow the government had waned chronically with his years, he faced an intolerable lack of purpose and, with it, the deepening understanding that his existence was utterly futile. No longer a host for gatherings of comrades, he despaired at the recreational values of others, the absurd unproductiveness of retirement, the nauseating frivolity of weekends and the morose idleness of the villagers.

Still cross-legged in his armchair, Alfred conjured up a picture of Mavis's smiling face.

"Ah, Mavis," he muttered, as he reached over an open hardback to grasp for the whiskey bottle

"I am neither a peasant nor a fool, you know. I am just too old."