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The Landlady

by Chris Baker

It's odd isn't it – well, I think it is: how memory can be triggered. I have just had such an experience here, on holiday.

The heat of early afternoon had gone. For the last half hour or so, I had been weeding the gravel path that wandered among the olives and pines up to a cooling fountain at the far end of the garden. The scents of pine, eucalyptus and wild thyme were so mingled in the warmth of the late afternoon sun, the cicadas were playing *vibrato*: it was seductive. I wasn't thinking of anything, certainly nothing that was a match for what many consider to be a formidable intellect – other than the absorbing removal of a particularly stubborn weed, when I had a sense of being watched. It could not have been anyone else; everyone was swimming far below in the blue bay and I would have heard the deep dry gravel crunch beneath approaching feet.

Slowly raising my head but otherwise remaining perfectly still, I let my eyes wander. Roaming, there it was. The wrinkled eyelid closed deliberately over the bulging yellow lens. After a long pause, it fell again; precisely, almost like a tiny Aldis lamp. The chameleon was impassive. Occasionally, its' lipless jaws parted: its tongue casting the air for a passing insect. I backed away slowly.

It was the impassivity of the protuberant eyeball, that and the grey wrinkled skin that brought her - my landlady, back so vividly.

I'd been recommended the Fort View guest house in Bembridge IoW. It was a large double fronted Victorian house, a little outside the town, hidden up a winding drive, its large gardens attractive gardens overlooked the eastern Solent. Mrs Dunbar only took paying guests or PGs as she referred to us, we were certainly not lodgers. Mrs Dunbar was in her early sixties, well corseted – a walking advertisement for Rigby and Peller, her grey hair was arranged in a tight bun on the top of her head, and secured there with several long steel pins. Mrs Dunbar, I could never say she, was quite short so the extra inches conferred by the bun were an important feature of her presence. Whatever the weather, she was invariably housed in a well-cut suit of lavender tweed which was worn over a collarless cream silk blouse, secured at the neck by a large cameo.

Mrs Dunbar always wore the same black lace ups with cotton reel heels. Whether Mrs Dunbar wore tights or stockings I did not wish to venture but whatever hosiery she selected, she moved in a cloud of 4711. This striking get up was set off by a protuberant yellow eye - a long (and frequent) acquaintance with High and Dry and a skin long leathered in tropical sun, like a cross between W.H. Auden and Keith Richards.

Mrs Dunbar's unblinking gaze was perhaps cultivated by her incessant scanning of the foreshore and when the tide was in, the Solent, with a large pair of binoculars mounted on a pedestal in her sun room. Quite what daily caught her interest, she never explained. The binoculars must have been 18 inches long, the casing housing the prisms were stamped with a swastika borne on stylised eagles wings. They were a war trophy. Who had done battle with Mrs Dunbar? With them one could see clearly all the way to Southsea.

Mrs Dunbar professed to take an interest in her PG's comings and goings. I cannot think why, we seemed a rather pedestrian bunch. When I replied to her questions, which always seemed rather intrusive and I noticed that of those she asked of others, the interrogated was fixed with the same chameleon like stare. When speaking her lipless mouth barely opened, her voice came from the back of her throat in an expressionless grind. Verbal intercourse involved quite the most unappealing sound – especially at breakfast. I backed away always slowly but I hope politely.