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Mrs Tavistock

by Victoria Watson

Mrs Tavistock lived at no. 22 Gundreda Road. She had always lived there, at least nobody could remember anyone else living at no. 22. There had been more of them. Satchels had been swung up the front path, the door slammed and a football kicked against the back wall. Whistling had been heard in the tool shed as apples lay fermenting under a harvest moon. But that was years ago now, and Mrs Tavistock lived quite alone. Now the house looked out expectantly to the street, just like its occupant whose white knuckles could be seen holding back the chintz curtains.

I had been chosen to take the tortoise across to her on the morning of our annual holiday. The tortoise was packaged up in a cardboard box along with a couple of lettuces and some dandelion leaves; and all day I would put off the job, until I was almost close to missing my tea. Nobody wanted to visit Mrs Tavistock. The job of taking the tortoise across to her had been delegated to me only because I was the youngest of my three brothers and the least likely to argue.

Her front door opened before I had latched the gate and she waited in the hallway. I had tried once before to handover the tortoise on the threshold but Mrs Tavistock had smiled sweetly and I knew resistance was futile.

Her house was exactly the same as ours, same wooden floorboards, same clothes hook on the wall; except where hers had a coat, a bag and an umbrella, you could not easily pass ours, and when you picked up your coat, someone else's was always hung below it. Our hallway was full of cooking smells or furniture wax so different to the cool hush of Mrs Tavistock's, where the front room clock could be heard ticking in every room. The slow and steady heartbeat, resonated throughout, like it was waiting for something or someone to return.

“Thank you so much for looking after him, Mrs Tavistock” I would say. We never asked anyone else to look after our tortoise, since Mrs Birkbeck left her two young sons in charge and the hutch door had been left open during a thunderstorm. Peanuts, the tortoise had been missing for a whole year after that mishap.

“Oh, he’s no bother dear, such a lovely chap,” Mrs Tavistock would say and then show me the lettuces and old carrot tops she had saved up for his stay with her.

I would keep looking at the front door, wishing for a knock to give me the distraction or reprieve that could allow my escape. But nobody knocked on No. 22, unless you counted the gas man or the Avon lady twice a year.

“Now tell me all your plans,” Mrs Tavistock would say, while ushering me into the front room. She would pull up a chair and study my face so she would not miss a word.

“I only have five minutes,” I heard myself say. “I have to help Mother with the babies.” Mrs Tavistock knew this to be untrue, she knew my mother’s dedication to order and place, just by the line of sheets flapping in the autumn winds. She smiled and looked at all our postcards on the mantelpiece that we sent every year. We dreaded writing them, searching for any piece of bad news like a delayed train journey or a rainy afternoon; anything to not make Mrs Tavistock feel envious of our annual holiday away, anything to not remind her of happy family times.

Nobody thought Mrs Tavistock had ever left the street, let alone the town, so nobody wanted to remind her of melting ice creams, decorated sandcastles or donkey rides as she sat listening to the clock. We never realised her disappointment to hear of our squally days or minor inconveniences. She so desperately wanted to hear about our sun-filled afternoons that she hoovered up every fact from those postcards and lived each moment with us, from behind the sash windows.

I saw the eagerness in her eyes as she studied my face. So described how father had put away all the garden furniture the night before, how my brothers had helped mother lock the windows, pack the picnic for the journey and how little Jeremy was sulking. He was sat on the bottom step, troubling over untied shoelaces, holding a kite under one arm, while his older siblings stepped over him, passing luggage over his bowed head. I filled out each fact and each story for Mrs Tavistock and I watched her drink up every one of them reliving each moment.

“I must be going, I would hate for them to go without me,” I joked and she stood up too and wished me well.

I knew as I turned to cross the road, she was watching me. I waved to her later as we left to walk to the train station, but she did not wave back, so sure was she to be unobserved, she must have assumed I was waving to someone else.