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## Too Much Change

by Sue Hitchcock

Overnight our neighbours began to look at us differently. We had never been sociable. I'm not sure if we ever had a doorbell that rang, even when we were first married. At our first flat we certainly didn't. My father-in-law made a star-shaped crack in the kitchen window, when he was driven to throwing stones to get our attention on the first floor. Maybe the kids were making a racket.

When we moved into our first house, we were more accessible, living room at the front, but I can remember feeling violated when an elderly neighbour, Mrs Bacchus, knocked, and when I answered, raced in, through to the back garden, saying that Mrs Brown, who had lived there once, had always let her pick a lot of mint to make mint sauce.

Mrs Brown had died after a fire in her downstairs part of the house, then owned by a grasping, ruthless woman, from whom we had bought it. When we found a beautiful mirror in the loft, we always thought Mrs Brown was looking at us through it, glad that the house was busy with children and indulgent parents.

We had young neighbours some with children, but we didn't do dinner parties and seldom even birthday parties for the kids. Were we too strapped for cash or too busy at work?

Our oldest was at university, keen on rowing when the largest intrusion on our privacy occurred. We now lived in a bungalow and a men's rowing eight appeared, presumably at her invitation, needing to sleep on our floor before the "Head of the river" race on the Thames the following day.

We have become more and more reclusive as our friends and older relatives died, and younger relatives were busy with their own lives. Covid was the last straw.

Alone in the house, my husband would insist on our keeping our distance from everyone. He even frowned on my talking briefly with familiar folk.

Then came the day of his stroke. Everything changed, but for the worse. It was three weeks before anyone spoke to me. Were they afraid they might find me bereaved? I didn't much care. There was too much talking at the hospital and besides, I needed to make space for a disabled husband, should he ever come home.

In the first weeks I veered between terror at the doctor's repeated, "sorry" and joy at my husband's apparent sudden, but short-lived improvements. Adrenalin drove me to move furniture, discard hoarded bits and bobs, which might come in handy one day and dismantle rickety constructions accommodating yet more books. I even enjoyed the freedom, to act without his restraint.

Now reality is beginning to dawn. In the unlikely event of his coming home, there is no way of making this house suitable and it would seem even walking would be difficult. If he could remember anything, it might be bearable, but he can hardly swallow, let alone speak. Today he has another hospital-acquired infection, and I wonder if I shall feel free or just lonely.