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Your Secret, My Problem

by Stuart Carruthers

Melrose Terrace was the street everyone wanted to live on. On either side of the road mature Beech trees stood guard in front of the well-maintained four-storey Victorian houses. It was a quite residence. Despite the ridiculous prices on offer in the current market, the residents in this sleepy part of town were never tempted to cash in.

Robert Jar retired in 1997 aged Forty-Eight. A self-made man, he never married but had a very active social life. Approachable and always well-mannered he was chairman of the residents' committee. His true love was his sky-blue Sunbeam Alpine Series convertible, that would emerge from the garage only on days when the sun was guaranteed to shine.

His parents had originally lived in No 23 and after his sister moved away, he returned from Canada to look after elderly parents. No one ever knew why his youngest sister had left and when the question was discreetly asked, Robert would politely and in a few well chosen words reply before changing the conversation.

As you turn into the Terrace, it's impossible not to notice No 21. Of all the houses its desperation for some much-needed maintenance is clearly evident. On every floor there is a handmade detailed bay window. Its lead flashing left blowing in the wind. Its owner, one Jeremy Francis Pottery revelled in the annoyance of his neighbours. Despite repeated requests and generous offers of help, he refused on the grounds that this was how he liked it. He had the money to undertake the repairs but chose not to.

Before Robert took over the chair of the committee, Mr Potts as the neighbours called him, had held the position for ten years. He had originally come up with the idea in response to a series of break-ins.

The residents meetings were always held in the kitchen of Mrs Agnes Cumberhold's house. She baked the best cakes and at the end of the evening as everyone drifted away, they collected a small tinfoil package of leftovers.

As the long hot summer rolled on Robert emerged from his house. Walking to the top of the road he placed a note in his neighbours' homes for the upcoming meeting. He never knocked on their doors. Carefully opening the various types of letterboxes, he slipped the single piece of paper into their hallways and moved on. As the sun emerged from behind the Beech tree outside No 21, he was suddenly blinded by its strength. Before his eyes had a chance to adjust to the sunlight, Mr Potts was towering over him. A giant of a man, his frame blocked out the sun's glare. Jabbing his finger into Mr Jar's crisp white shirt, Robert couldn't understand a word Mr Potts was saying. Angry words landed with spit on his face.

After what appeared like an age, Mr Potts suddenly stopped ranting, took a step back and returned to his house. Robert didn't move. "What the hell was that about?" he said to himself. Removing a grey handkerchief from his pocket he wiped his face and went about his business.

Meanwhile inside No 21 Mr Potts was furious. His office was a car crash of paperwork. Fumbling in the black box under his large oak desk, he emerged after five minutes with a padded envelope. Its seal untouched. Her name handwritten on the front in black ink. Slumping into his office chair he slammed the envelope down on top of yesterday's daily news. In the background the afternoon radio play entertained itself. Jeremy leaned forward, took the envelope in his right hand and prised it open with the letter knife that his father had given to him. As his hand removed the contents he whispered that revenge would be a dish served well. Her handwriting was erratic as he scribbled down her intentions. It took several attempts to read her notes and correct the wrongs inflicted on him. This would wipe the smile of Mr Jar's face.

On the other side of the world a young lady stepped off the morning bus into Liberation Square. Standing momentarily in the morning sun she allowed herself to smile. As her mind took her to a place far away, her phone interrupted her moment of silence. Carefully removing her phone from her shoulder bag, her heart stopped when she saw his name on the screen.