

The view from my window



Neil stood half way up the rectory staircase and looked through the window at the garden chairs and table, now still just visible in the evening light. It was a Saturday evening. The atmosphere was good, and preparations for Sunday activities were all ready and in place. The evenings were now cool and dark as summer had all but gone and autumn was now well established. It had been a lovely summer, with lots of sun and many occasions when meals were taken outside in the rectory garden at that table in the garden.

Marion had already gone upstairs to get ready for sleep and Neil was getting ready for bed, having locked the doors and windows around the rectory. Neil stopped and decided to go back downstairs and look at the news on his computer, and one thing led to another, and before long, an hour had passed. It was now dark outside.

By now he knew that Marion would be asleep and so, finally switching off the landing lights, Neil climbed the stairs in the dark, trying not to make any noise. As he reached the window half way up the stairs, he looked again out at the garden table and chairs with one last lingering hope that tomorrow might just be warm enough for another al fresco meal before the onset of winter.

Finally in bed, Neil slept heavily but then awoke suddenly, needing to go to the toilet. He thought, must be that beer we drank during the evening! And off he went, trying to move silently and not wake up his sleeping wife.

The garden table was also visible from the bathroom, and Neil couldn't help but gaze again down at the scene of so much summer activity.

As he looked down, Neil was startled to see people sitting at the table.

"What a cheek..." He said out loud, then remembered that Marion was slumbering. He peered down at the garden table, trying to see if he could recognise the intruders. None of them were really visible enough in the dark to spot an individual's features, but Neil noticed something rather odd. They were dressed in rather ragged clothes, and they had on the table little lights and bottles of drink.

Neil suddenly felt angry and went into the bedroom and, without considering her needs, immediately woke Marion up and told her what was happening. Marion's response was not very active. She rubbed her eyes and said, "Where? What are you talking about?"

"In the garden. There are people sitting around the table in the garden. Shall I tell them to go away?"

"What time is it?"

"Two thirty five."

"What? You have woken me up in the middle of the night to tell me there are people in the garden?"

"But, they might be intruders. I'll go and shout at them to leave."

"Have you been in the garden? How do you know that they are in the garden?"

"I looked through the window and saw them."

"Let me have a look."

So Marion and Neil went down to the window half way up the stairs and looked out. Nobody was there. The place was completely deserted.

“You must have been dreaming. Too much alcohol, I’d guess. Can we go back to bed now, please.”

The following day, Neil was feeling chastened, but puzzled too.

“Honestly,” he said at breakfast, “it felt very real, and not at all like a dream. I wouldn’t have woken you up if I hadn’t been worried, would I?”

“Well, let’s leave it at that, shall we, and please don’t hang about downstairs after you are supposed to have come to bed at 11 o’clock, eh?”

Neil agreed and although he felt deep down that his sighting in the garden had not been a dream, he had no alternative theory as to what had happened. He thought hard about this all through the day, and the first thing he did that morning was to go and inspect the garden table and chairs for signs of occupancy. There were no such signs. Everything was just as it had been left after the last meal outdoors, some days ago now.

At the end of the day, when bedtime came, Neil was feeling twitchy, but trying not to let Marion see how he was feeling. As the evening darkened, he couldn’t help peeking out of the windows every few minutes to see if the visitors had returned.

Eventually, Marion commented, “So are your friends sitting outside again?”

“Is it that obvious?”

“Certainly is. Just forget about it. It was only a dream.”

Neil gave up on this conversation and sat down to watch the television, to take his mind off the subject. Then came the question, “Are you ready for bed now?”

“I think I am going to stay up and see what happens.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. It’s a waste of time. Go to bed and sleep. You will feel better in the morning.”

“No, I really feel spooked by what happened last night, really. You go up and I’ll follow later.”

“OK, but drinking that whisky won’t help you, you know!”

Marion disappeared upstairs and Neil sat in the study, playing around on his computer, just waiting for the time to pass. After about an hour of this, he decided to go and look through the downstairs window just to see. Nothing was moving, no signs of life, just dark, and a cool wind blowing the trees and looking a bit spooky. Neil decided to give up and started upstairs again. Half way up the stairs, he again glanced out and to his shock, he saw a figure walking into the garden from the churchyard, followed by another, and then another. They were again dressed in ragged clothes and had little lights in their hands.



Neil thought, they must be Travellers or Gypsies of some kind, but where have they parked their vehicles? Must be on the Coston Field. His impulse yesterday was to go outside and remonstrate with these visitors but today, he felt a little uneasy, perhaps even scared to do that. After all, there were three or even four of them! Well, no, it isn’t right, he thought. I will bang on the window and tell them to leave. With that he did bang on the window but without managing to attract their attention. Okay, Neil thought, I will go out. After all, this is my private garden, not a public park. And he went to the back door, noisily opening the locks and bolts, hoping that this noise would herald his arrival on the scene and swift departure of the intruders. As he walked into the garden, Neil felt a shock of fear hit him on the back of the neck and he could barely make a sound as he started to speak to the intruders ... except that the garden was, again, totally empty of people. Only the branches of the trees made a noise as the strong wind threw them from side to side.

Neil had never moved more quickly in his life as he rushed back to the house, slammed the door shut and bolted it firmly. The journey up the stairs to the bedroom was taken with a sense of panic gripping him, and he stumbled and half fell up the steps, making such a noise that Marion came out of the bedroom, anxious about the noises she could hear.

"Neil, what on earth is going on?"

Marion did not appreciate Neil's nocturnal activities and started to worry that he was having hallucinations or seeing things. She advised Neil to calm down and sleep, which he did, but only after some hours of tossing and turning before he lay still. His experience of fear had been very real, and it was still raw and troubling him as he lay in bed.

In the morning, Marion was all common sense and full of advice.

"It's all in your imagination, Neil. Do you want to go and talk to the GP about this?" she asked.

Neil looked away. Marion sounded sensible, but she had not understood the quality of his night-time sightings. Neil was now almost certain that he had not just imagined it. People had been in the garden, but he couldn't say so with total assurance because he had only ever seen them from his position inside the house, never when in the garden.

The real possibility of doubt remained there, stubbornly in place.

"Shall we just leave this subject for a few days, eh?"

"Fine" said Marion, "but please don't scare me in the middle of the night again, will you?"

Neil thought, scared? She doesn't know the meaning of the world! He remembered that he had felt very scared as he walked into the garden, on the previous evening, only to find nobody there. The experience of fear had been devastating and he did not want to repeat that experience, but he knew that he must once more attempt to meet these intruders and ascertain for sure if they were real or from his imagination.

After dinner, he said to Marion, "I think I might sit in the garden this evening and see if I can exorcise my ghosts by being there and proving whether or not they are real."

"What a silly idea, Neil."

"But I still feel wound up about it..."

"OK, but please don't expect me to sit out there in my winter woollies and spend the night with you, will you? You will catch your death of cold if you're not careful"

After Marion went upstairs, Neil put on his coat and a warm hat and opening the back door, went and sat on one of the chairs, taking with him a cup of coffee for company. He felt the pull of sleep, but he was determined to test his theory and face his fear. He put his feet up on one of the other chairs, and eventually, fell asleep.

Suddenly, Neil felt a hand touching his and he woke up, feeling very startled, and suddenly full of fear. He moved his body to gain an upright position, then felt a cold liquid fall on his legs. He stood up and found Marion, speaking to him, "Neil, come to bed now. It is 2am. You've knocked your coffee cup all down your trousers. What are you doing out here at this time. Come back in the house, there is nothing out here apart from cold wind."

Feeling rather foolish, Neil went back into the house and went to bed, trying to warm his cold feet on Marion's legs, which she did her best to avoid.

The next morning, Marion was sounding a little put out, to say the least.

"Neil, you must stop this strange obsession with night-time visitors. They are in your mind, so please try and forget them. Let's go away for a few days and have a change of scenery? Eh? What do you think?"

"You know I hate going away, Marion, and I must get to the bottom of this garden thing." Marion sighed, and went about her daily tasks as did Neil, although both of them were thinking of the visitors, from rather different angles.

When night came again, Neil was feeling very excited, but trying to hide it.

"I know" said Marion, "Let's go to the Legion for a drink?"

"OK" said Neil and the next two hours were spent with friends drinking in the Club just opposite the rectory entrance on Oldfield Lane South. During the conversation with Malcolm Ede, Nigel and Lorna Churn and Cyril Brown, Neil kept totally quiet about the issue which was engaging most of his waking hours. At 11pm, Neil and Marion decided that they had had enough and returned to the rectory to get ready for bed, leaving the others to continue imbibing.

"You're not staying up again, Neil!"
"I agree. I am very tired. Let's sleep."

But the inevitable happened and Neil woke up, noting that the bedside table said 1.45am and went to the loo. And yes, he did look out of the window. The usual group of visitors were gathered around the garden table and suddenly, one of them turned towards the house and looked directly at Neil. His gaze was magnetic, and Neil was unable to look away. Neil made an automatic gesture of greeting with his hand and the figure in the garden made a gesture of beckoning, inviting Neil to join them in the garden.

Suddenly, the fear he had felt disappeared and he found himself unlocking the door and going out into the garden, in bare feet, wearing only his dressing gown. He now felt invited, and welcomed, a guest of these strange visitors, and as he walked into the garden, he felt a sense of pleasure at such a welcome. But again, when he got there, nothing could be seen different to normal. Not a soul, not a sign, only the trees blowing in the wind.

Going back into the house, Neil decided to keep this latest twist in the story a secret from Marion. In the morning, she was surprised to see Neil behaving normally, not talking about the visitors and getting on with things as usual. She was pleased and thought that this must be the end of a rather strange episode.

However, in Neil's head, the matter was far from over and he was planning a way to intercept his nocturnal visitors that very evening.



When night arrived, Neil went to bed early, and pretended to be asleep. As soon as he knew Marion was asleep, he managed to creep out of the bedroom and go downstairs unheard. He had hatched a plan in his mind to sit in the greenhouse, sheltered from the cold wind, and wait for his visitors in earnest. This time, he was determined not to fall asleep. His patience was to be rewarded. Around 2am, he saw lights arriving in the garden and the group of people sat around the table. Neil stood up and started to approach them, but as soon as they knew of his presence, the group quickly retreated into the churchyard again. However, the figure who had looked at Neil on the previous night, again turned, looked directly at him and motioned him to follow. Entranced by the occasion and

the invitation, he followed, out of the rectory garden and into the churchyard and....

The next morning, Marion was woken up by an urgent ringing on the rectory doorbell at 6.30am. She noticed Neil was not in bed, and thought, he must have gone over to the church, and so, putting on her dressing gown, she went downstairs to answer to door.

It was Lorna Churn. She looked very distressed.

"Marion, I have some bad news for you. Come and see."

Marion followed Lorna into the churchyard and there, lying on the ground was the body of Neil, apparently dead for some hours as his limbs were stiff and very cold.

However, on his body, it later transpired, no sign of injury was visible. His death was declared "accidental" by the Coroner and would remain a mystery for ever.

Neil Richardson