

Number 13 Addlestone Grove

There wasn't much to be said for Number 13 Addlestone Grove. It was an unloved building, with streaks of sleet-coloured ash carved into the burnt orange stonework. The inside corridor was damp, it had been for quite a while, with unsightly collections of ever-growing mould solidifying in each corner. A single door stood downstairs, the once delicately forged brass handle now hanging awkwardly to one side; nobody had cared enough to replace the missing screw that fell out in 1957.

The upper floor remained untouched, though only until recently. Now the chipped, formerly-green window panes fluttered with handstitched cotton curtains, elegantly attached to single-glazed glass. The faded mustard wallpaper had been stripped from the living room, and replaced with effervescent alternating stripes of olive and cream; contemporary living at its finest. One thing, however, that remained true to the once unloved rooms of Addlestone Grove, was the satinwood clock that sat proudly upon the mantelpiece. Nobody knew who it belonged to, so nobody dared touch it. It just waited, watching the lives of each unsuspecting tenant.

I.

Eric Price didn't own a car. One day he planned to buy one of those new steel blue Chevrolet Corvettes that he'd heard about on the wireless, but that dream was as diminutive as his job prospects, at least according to his wife.

'A car isn't a necessity right now, 'Ric.' She'd say.

As a new wife, Robin was taking married life in her stride. She aimed to avoid the routine-living of her mother and older friends, who would never once speak out of turn with their husbands for fear of another night with an ice-rag soothing a blackened eye.

'My mother called the station.'

Eric folded yesterday's *News of The World* and slotted it between the sofa cushions.

'Again?'

'I didn't respond to her letter, apparently.'

Robin scuttled around the cramped kitchen. It was overflowing with her grandmother's ancient crockery that she hadn't dared throw out, combined with inoperative cutlery draws and uneven rigid floorboards. Eric rolled his eyes and pulled out the wooden coffee table from the window to the centre of the room.

'It only arrived on Tuesday,' he exclaimed.

Sighing, Robin walked into the living- room. She carried a tray of tea accompanied by a selection of stale biscuits.

‘You know what mother’s like...’ she replied, setting down saucers and arranging cheap ginger-snaps on a delicately patterned plate. ‘She’ll never let me go.’

‘But you can’t be expected to drop everything you’re doing at her beck and call? She’s got to learn that you’re not a child anymore.’

Robin dropped onto the settee beside her husband, laying her head on his shoulder.

‘But Wimbledon is so far away...’

‘It’s 15 miles, Rob! All she’s got to do is get off that arse of hers and find the District line...’

‘Eric, that’s my mother!’

‘Darling, she’s paranoid!’

‘Wouldn’t you be?’

An uneasy silence hung in the air as Robin recoiled from Eric’s embrace and slouched against the fringed cushions.

Eric nodded, cleared his throat and turned back to his wife.

‘Darling, whatever happened to Eleanor...’

Robin hushed him.

‘I don’t want to talk about her.’

Eleanor Swift had lived at 13a Addlestone Grove, and owned *Swift’s Haberdashery* between the years 1948 to 1961. It was a cosy shop with brim-full drawers of silk thread and miscellaneous material. Everything she made, she made with deliberation and affection. It was only when the Prices moved into 13b did Robin recognise her love for needlework; the

art of embroidery had been a foreign language before the summer of '61. Widowed and childless at 49, Ms Swift was a lonely soul, and she found Robin's companionship a comfort in her old age. There was no real explanation for Eleanor's disappearance; she simply vanished one day, though it is of common regard that the streets of East London are paved with foul intentions. At each corner lurks a hidden silhouette, masked by darkness under every shattered street lamp.

A clandestine figure, motionless in movement and word, watches from the pavement. No-one need notice him, they won't in fact, for he doesn't act when there is an audience. Only in the lost hours of dawn will he ever take shape and carry-out his abhorrent intentions. A lonely soul needn't be alone any longer.

The chill of that forgotten November in 1961 was enough to ward away any premeditated demons. Eric had run to the police station, and Robin had walked through every street of Tower Hamlets in search of their missing neighbour, though by that time Eleanor Swift's body was gently washing ashore the banks of Vauxhall, half the Thames churning inside her stomach.

After the tragedy, Marianne, Robin's mother, demanded her daughter 'come home at once'. It had taken Eric several phone calls and a strongly worded letter to calm her, although of course, deep down, he understood. Moving from the suburban experience, away from the leafy borough of Merton and into the desolate Docks of Poplar was like sending a child into Strangeways with only a pat-on-the-back and a long length rope. It was the instinctual maternal nature that gripped at Marianne's chest and swelled her primal need to protect.

‘If I don’t reply to her, she thinks I’m dead, Eric. It’s as simple as that.’

‘She’s a right fuss-pot is your mother.’ He laughed, brushing the hair out of her eyes. ‘Listen, if it makes you feel better, I’ll pop down the station in the morning. I’ll give her a call and explain that you haven’t had time to send your letter off, or maybe it’s just got muddled in the post. Either way, I’ll sort it, darling. Okay?’

He smiled at her before reaching out to find his paper again. Feeling for it under the cushion, he shuffled out the pages and leant back in his seat to start on the evenings obituaries. Robin began to hum under her breath and looking out of the window, she watched the browning trees in the park opposite dancing in a sudden gale.

II.

Robin awoke to the sound of innocuous birdsong floating through the open window. She could have sworn it had been locked the night before; Eric had developed a new routine of safe-guarding since moving to Poplar, simply for precaution’s sake.

She wiped the sleep from her eyes and stretched out on the empty pillows, thinking it unusual for Eric to be gone so early in the morning. On the average Thursday, she would get up, get dressed, boil the water, sweep the floor, fry the eggs and throw the bins out, all before her husband had even opened his eyes. Quite recently, however, Eric Price had become a hard-worker, looking to achieve ‘bigger and better things’ than his family of Dockers.

‘One day Rob,’ he’d say, grinning as if they’d won big at the races, ‘I’ll own half the city.’

For now, she was quite content with her husband’s nine-to-five as a bank clerk, and although they didn’t own half of London just yet, it was a start.

Rolling out of the sheets, Robin slid into her pale-pink slippers and padded through to the kitchen. The room was neat; a few unwashed dishes in the sink but nothing too demanding. She rolled her eyes, spotting the black bin bag waiting by the coffee table. She'd purposely put it in the middle of the room the night before, in the hope that her once useless husband might manage to take it out with him the following morning.

'No such luck,' she muttered, grabbing it by the twisted handle and opening the front door.

The corridor was damp in the weak November sun. Bubbling paper protruded from the pale-green walls and the steps of the old oak staircase creaked under-foot. Robin shivered in her thin nightdress as the wind from the downstairs hallway swept through her.

She deposited the bag onto the road, leaving it to be collected by the young boys in their orange jackets. As she headed inside again, an unforgiving moan snatched her attention.

The door to 13a was open.

Robin flinched as she watched it bang against the back-wall, hinges creaking with each slight movement.

The light rasps of her breath were caught in a sudden draught which brought her skin out in goose-bumps. She took a step toward the door, taking a grip of the handle and silencing the groans.

'Hello?' She called out.

The eerie silence was punctured by the click of Blakey's Segs on tiled floor.

'Good morning. Miss Barker, I presume?'

The voice came from the cast shadow behind the door.

'It's Mrs Price now, actually.'

'I do apologise. It seems the council's tenant directory has yet to be updated.'

Robin wavered on a laugh as the figure stepped into the light of the corridor.

The man in front of her was standing at an average height, sporting a coal-coloured suit jacket and matching trousers. His brown hair was brushed neatly to the left side of his elongated forehead and his black spectacles sat perfectly upon his slim pointed nose.

'I do hope I didn't disturb you, Mrs Price.' The man said, smiling a thin grin.

'No, no...'

Robin shifted her gaze back to the hall of 13a, the black-netting draped walls replacing Eleanor's delicately painted pictures. The lights were dim, as if still functioning on the same burnt-out bulbs, and a pungent scent of mould was hanging in the air.

'Have you bought the place?' Robin asked.

The man's eyes narrowed and the smile broadened.

'Yes, we have. My business partner and I have acquired the shop and will soon be transforming it into a furnishings store.'

She nodded.

'And your name?'

‘Do excuse me Mrs Price, I didn’t mean to be so rude. My name is Straker. Of *Barlow and Straker Furnishings*, although I highly doubt you’ll have the pleasure of meeting my partner. I’m afraid he’s away on business.’

Before Robin could ask anything further, Straker continued.

‘I do believe that the flat has been unoccupied for some time now?’ He queried, looking over his frames.

‘Oh. Yes. It must have been, well, a year at least?’

‘A year exactly.’ Straker took a step forward, his breath visible in the cold air. ‘Yes. That’s what the letting agent said. Coincidence is a fine thing.’

Robin watched as the man wiped the condensation from his glasses, she noticed how he hadn’t blinked once during their conversation.

‘I must be getting on.’

‘Oh, yes of course.’

Robin stepped aside as Straker walked back into Mrs Swift’s old flat, although he turned around and flashed a final smile before she took to the stairs again.

‘Charming to meet you, Mrs Price. Mind how you go on those old steps. Don’t want us damaging the little one, do we?’

III.

‘He knew about the baby, Eric!’

‘Darling, it’s obvious when a woman is pregnant, he must have simply guessed!’

‘I’m not showing yet ‘Ric! How did he know?’

Robin had run-through the conversation in her head at least fifty times before telling Eric about the new neighbours; something in Straker’s smile had left her uneasy.

‘Please Rob, calm down...’

She’d tried to convince herself it was just a lucky fluke, but an ominous darkness had cast over her subconscious and spread through her mind, shadowing her moral judgement.

It worried Robin that Eric didn’t seem bothered about the new tenants downstairs, considering all he knew of them was what she had told him. That night, Straker haunted her thoughts; the image of him, in his dark suit, silent but smiling, waking Robin up in a sweat, an empty scream scratching at her throat.

Eric was still sound asleep, his chest moving up and down in time with his short breaths. She could have watched him for hours, if she hadn’t been elsewhere distracted. The walls of number 13 were very thin, with no insulation to keep out heat or sound; inconvenient in the winter, but helpful when one is doing a spot of eaves-dropping.

Robin could hear voices in the flat below, she recognised Straker immediately, his monotone inflections and foreign accent radiating through the floorboards, but he wasn’t alone. Another man was there, she could tell from the deep tone, but his responses were limited and

repetitive. She listened for as long as she could before the mumblings ceased entirely, though only managed to make out a snippet of the conversation:

‘Yes, it’s all sorted. The boat will bring them over sometime next week...’

‘And the shop?’

‘Payment made and contract signed, we can be open for business whenever we like.’

‘Very good. You’ve done well, Mr Straker, congratulations. Much smoother than Hamburg.’

‘Thank you Mr Barlow.’

Robin’s heart-rate doubled; the midnight whispers creating unsavoury thoughts in her mind. Barlow was the name of Straker’s travelling business partner.

IV.

‘I won’t hear any more of this, Rob!’

Eric snatched up his jacket and headed toward the front door.

‘No ‘Ric, listen to me, please! He scares me. I heard them, last night, I heard what they were saying and...’

‘You can’t just listen to other people’s conversations, they’re our new neighbours and on day one you’ve spied on them?’

‘It wasn’t like that. He’s lying to us, Eric. He told me that Barlow was out of town, but he’s not! Last night, he was downstairs with Straker, I heard...’

‘Stop! I think you need to get out more. Being inside the flat all day obviously isn’t good for you. You’re hearing things, and seeing red when there’s nothing there. This ‘Mr Straker’ seems perfectly fine and you’re making him out to be... well, I don’t know...’

Robin bit her tongue.

‘Listen, I’m late for work...’ Eric muttered. ‘We’ll talk later, but I’m going to call for a doctor, just to check up on you. I don’t want anything happening to you or the baby.’

Straker’s lasting comment replayed over in her head, silencing her into submission.

*

The rain was coming down hard and heavy as Robin finally found Eleanor’s old spare key in a bed of dead magnolias. For hours, she had been perfectly poised in the window-seat of the living room until finally she saw Mr Straker walk down the road, carrying a thick leather briefcase, an indication that he’d be away for some time.

Robin ran back inside the building, dripping water over the threshold, and although initially stiff, the key finally cracked in the lock and unbolted the door to 13a. The harsh stench of disinfectant hit as she crept inside. There was no furniture, no décor, no sign of life at all; the place would have looked almost unlivable if it wasn’t for the chalk sign on the old shop door.

‘Barlow.’ She read, keeping her voice at a harsh whisper.

There was no handle, so Robin pressed her body-weight against the wooden frame until the hinges gave out, and sweating slightly, she wiped her brow before walking through the doorway. In the middle of the room was a box, it was about seven-feet long, four-feet wide, and didn't serve any obvious purpose. Robin dropped to her knees and began to prise off the lid, hoping to discover the indecipherable secret she knew her neighbours were hiding. With a colossal thud, the wooden top came away from its structure, enshrouded in a cloud of dust.

The box was empty.

Catching her breath, Robin couldn't help but feel disappointed. Maybe Eric was right, maybe the cabin-fever was getting to her, perhaps she *was* seeing things, hearing things that weren't in fact there. With the self-doubt clogging her mind, Robin didn't hear the footsteps on the floorboards behind her.

'Ah, Mrs Price; how good of you to visit. My name is Mr Barlow.'