



In The Victorian Parlour

A short story for Halloween by

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The brass firedogs stared at each other across the flagstone hearth and barked. Rather surprising since they were both cast in the form of a cat. The wolf's howl of wind that forced a plume of acrid smoke and soot down the chimney morphed into a witch's screech and the dead candle stubs on the mahogany mantelpiece guttered into flame, casting flickering shadows on the walls. Shadows that shouldn't be there in this empty room, with no figures to cast them. Shadows from the long past of malevolence that persists within, now and into the future. A room unoccupied for fourteen years, windows boarded over, left with a double locked door preventing entry ever since the last of

too many fatal occurrences, executed behind closed curtains. But tonight all those untimely banished souls have returned in sombre collaboration. A Halloween gathering like no other before. The perpetrator of all their departures has suffered his own painful demise and summoned a reunion. A reunion with a purpose.

This story begins at the end. All the characters are dead. Then so am I or how else would I have met them. All suffered at the hands of one man. A quiet soul who went about his business during the day without drawing undue attention to himself. The kind you see walking easily down a high street glancing in shop windows, stopping briefly at some, buying his morning paper off the news vendor at the corner, with a breezy comment on the day, and entering a tall office building five minutes before he is due to start work. He holds the praise of his boss and the respect of his colleagues, but rarely fraternises with them, choosing to go quietly home to his family. Only he has no family.

But enough of him for the moment you need to meet this gregarious little group, that are assembling in the parlour, as it was once termed, of a late Victorian detached house with five bedrooms and three receptions that once overlooked the green pastures of English parkland but is now fenced off discreetly away from row upon row of modern matchbox dwellings, most sporting drives full of multi-coloured motors and occupied by money-strapped families each trying to keep up with the latest fashion and gadget trends - and out do their neighbours in the process - on maxed out multiple credit cards. Our ghostly friends were never like that. Their characters were more solid. Before their demise. Individuals with various traits that attracted a special friendship, which in the end, a grisly end, proved most unwelcome.

The first to materialise out of the shadows is Sebastian (Super Seb) Shaw, a pale image of his former self, of course, but displaying the muscular strength of a former weightlifter. He was

short and broad and excelled in both competition disciplines. His secret, he boasted, was that he did not have to raise the barbell as high as his taller contestants. Even joked of getting his legs shortened even more to prove it. Something that never came to pass. It was just his life that was shortened, hence his current presence in the room.

From a different corner appeared Jocelyn Horton, whose effeminate features and light voice confused me at first. A man of the theatre, his mother (naturally deceased) had been French, which confirmed his gender if not his orientation. The latter was confirmed when he positively ogled the third of our ghostly guests, rushing to take her hand and place a light kiss on it. She looked a little confused, too, at such instant adoration, even though as the well know influencer, Barbie Bateswell, she usually craved attention. More heavily moulded than any of the Barbie toys, by far, she still took her fashion cues from them.

The fourth to appear, hesitantly evolving his once material form, was Trevor Saddleworth, the “Trev” in Trev’s Sporting Services. A downtown betting shop. He wasn’t the first, nor the last victim. He just disappeared. With the cash takings. On Grand National day. After a while, nobody bet on him coming back.

The shy Miss Overton hardly appeared at all, merely a presence that was felt more than seen at first, despite the important role she played in bringing about the string of events leading to the present assembly.

Finally, Maisie Brownlowe shimmered slowly into the room. She was older than the rest. She was the matriarch. The perpetrator’s mother.

And then, of course, there’s me. I live here. My body might be somewhere unknown, but unlike the others my spirit chose to stay. Not solid flesh and blood, but a bit like a sophisticated hologram, I appear at will after years of practice and perfection.

Trouble is, there's usually no one here to see me. One couple did turn up to look around the place a few months back, so I opened the front door to let them in. (There's still the spare key that was left behind, hanging on a hook in the cupboard under the stairs.) They assumed I was the agent, so I proceeded to show them all the rooms, leaving the parlour until last. I explained the history of the place, the unfortunate deaths, one by one, and that they would have a sitting tenant living alongside them. I've no intention of leaving. For some reason, they seemed to quickly lose interest and hurried back outside, to meet the real estate agent striding purposefully up the drive shouting out profuse apologies for being late. There was short but animated exchange, and the flabbergasted looking agent was left standing, as the couple literally fled. He took one look back at the house, probably saw me in the upstairs front window, and did likewise.

It all really started when the last owner, Mr Brownlowe, moved in here with his mother, many, many years ago. She was a widow who had been living with her only son in the poorest end of town, virtually estranged from her parents after marrying an unemployed, heavy smoking Scotsman, a wee bit too fond of the hard stuff, who slipped peacefully away in a drunken stupor on their third wedding anniversary, leaving her with no money and six months pregnant. Nevertheless, having reverted to her maiden name, in shame, she had inherited the family pile from her widowed, retired bank manager father. And a pile of money, too. Thanks to his prudent investments, she didn't have to work provided she wasn't extravagant. But she was. So, by the time her son, Sidney, became old enough to legally work she found him a job with an accountancy firm. Solid and safe bookkeeping. No college or university for Sidney; she had the upkeep of the house to think of; and the upkeep of her expensive fashions and lifestyle. Her dinner parties were famed, Sidney looked quietly

away in a simply furnished attic room until they were over. Even when he was the main provider.

There were strict daily rules for Sydney to follow. Breakfast chores, work, a simple dinner for him to cook, household chores and bed. He managed to read a little and watch the TV news - captions only, no sound to disturb Maisie or her guests, or even suggest he existed should she be entertaining a man friend. Hence his reluctance to mix socially with his office colleagues. What did he have to add to their conversations? What if they asked about his homelife? Or worse, tried to visit. He was stymied on all fronts. And that led to resentment. A wish to become an individual.

He was surprised how easy his wish came true. It was his mother's birthday. She wasn't having a party because someone might ask her age. Something she kept to herself. Her real age, certainly. The two of them would have a special meal beyond Sydney's culinary capabilities, delivered by a caterer, with waitress service included. One for which he would pay. This time willingly.

Once the waitress had cleared up and left, he told his mother he had bought her a bottle of her favourite brandy and suggested that they retire to the parlour for a glass or two. She readily agreed. She was already heady on a full bodied red and a sweet dessert wine, so she did not notice any additional flavour notes in the brandy. Sidney had done his homework well during an illicit visit to the library, a strictly banned institution. Agatha Christie would have been proud of him. Maisie slumped on the sofa, feeling unwell, and shortly became unconscious. She was still there in the morning, icy cold to the touch, her spirit departed, no doubt hovering in horror at what her beloved son had done.

Over the previous months Sydney had a range of mail order gardening implements and materials delivered as part of his duty

to maintain a “pretty garden”, which his mother insisted was essential. To impress her friends, of course. However, not all the new items he stored in the large potting shed were destined for the generous acreage surrounding the house. As long as kept close to the north side of the garden, by the tall conifer hedge, he was completely shielded from prying eyes, so he fetched the larger of his two wheelbarrows, loaded Maisie into it, not without a struggle, and sauntered down to the shed, not too fast as this would make the wheel squeak, and deposited her on a low pile of sacking topped with a waterproof sheet. She looked comfortably at rest. He pulled the sheet up at the sides and covered her over.

It was autumn, a good time for heavy pruning, no birds nesting, and the conifer hedge was far too tall. Despite the recent benefit of its height, he got out his tall step ladder and a large, professional Stihl hedge trimmer and lopped the top off the whole length. One of his purchases had been a stainless steel smokeless incinerator, capable of handling heat up to nearly 900° C. Enough to consume human tissue and break down bone. But it wouldn't take a whole body. So, it was time for some butchery. Trial and error butchery. But with the assortment of heavy and sharp implements he had acquired over time he was able to feed wood and corpse bit by bit into his fiery furnace. It was done over three nights so as not to annoy the neighbours (or alert them), though the old house was well separated from the nearest ones. He had to fell one of his apple trees to get sufficient material, but it burned fiercely and reduced the burden of having a whole body to cart away in one load. He discreetly disposed of parcels of remains over the next three weeks, most dumped in the deep locks of two nearby canals, some just in the household waste, which would be further incinerated, and the final scrapings flushed down one of the office toilets.

As for those who asked about his mother's whereabouts, he explained that she had been taken on a surprise global cruise by her latest beau and wasn't expected back for several months. He regaled them with tales of her distant travels, saying she phoned him nearly every week (this being before the days of social media) and eventually told them she was looking to settle down in an East Asian religious community after which he had sadly lost touch.

By the time anyone thought anything remotely amiss, all evidence had been destroyed, including disposal of the incinerator and tools he used on e-Bay after, burning the other materials, disposing of the ash one night in a near neighbour's dustbin waiting by the pavement for collection the following day. Even the stump of the apple tree had been dug out and burnt.

Sidney had amazed himself at the ingenuity of which he was capable, glad it was all over and ready for a new life. Not one thought of another atrocity ever being committed in his parlour. But one was. More than one.

Having now gained his freedom, Sidney had been so busy thinking how to cover his tracks that he didn't know what to do with it. He had no friends to invite him to parties, he couldn't suddenly change character with his colleagues at work, that would be too suspicious, and he had no attachment to any person, sports or social club, nor was he even a churchgoer. After a few days of cooking just for himself after work and watching endless TV soaps and documentaries, he felt lonely. Time for another visit to the library.

The library assistant, Miss Overton, guided Sidney around the bookshelves helping him to choose titles that might interest him; some fiction, some on practical ways to add interest in his life. He felt too old to take up any physical sport; one visit to a Bridge club bored him to death (well almost); a solo visit to a

Shakespeare play left him feeling even more lonely. He needed company.

As it happened Miss Overton was also lonely. Shy from a very sheltered, strictly religious upbringing, she was wary of men and not attracted to women. Similar to Sidney, she had little experience of the wider world, except through her work and the countless fictional romances she took home from the library shelves for escapism rather than literary merit. She did, however, welcome the visits from her Mr Brownlowe, as her senior teased her, and felt a warmth towards him she had never experienced before. She noted the books he seemed to like and read them herself, hoping one day she could discuss some of them with him. Her first chance came when the library held a “meet the author” event and she asked him if he was going to come along. Not a personal invitation (she was asking everyone) but an opening that he took that way. He thought the author’s books rubbish, and said so, but told her he would come.

He decided to brave the moment and asked the author, on the day, where did she get her ideas for her rather trite fiction. Had she ever committed a murder to see what it is really like? And got the suitably trite reply that it was all fiction, my man, just what my readers love to read. Miss Overton, who had sidled close to where he was sitting, giggled. She didn’t know quite why, but Sidney turned round and stage whispered, ‘Bet she has. Bored them to death, no doubt’.

Feeling emboldened, at the end of the session, Sidney asked Miss Overton if she would like to tell him what she thought of the author’s works. ‘Not in here,’ she replied. ‘She might overhear and she wouldn’t be pleased if she knew what I thought.’ There was a rather bohemian style café in the same building and much to his own surprise he invited her to join him to pull apart a book or two. And much to her own surprise she said yes. And over

coffee she revealed her first name, Piety, which she hated especially as inwardly she was not at all pious.

So started a short liaison entirely devoted to cultural activity. Not that either of them intended it to be short. They enjoyed country walks, the theatre, and dining out. They enjoyed staying in for meals and watching dramas on television, but never the soaps or reality shows. He learnt all about her family, the religious order roots of her father, the strictness of her mother, which he felt they shared in common, and the high academic achievement expected of her but never achieved. At least as a library assistant she had a respectable job in her father's eyes, but her mother constantly warned her about books she shouldn't take off the shelves for herself. Which only piqued her interest, of course. What she knew in theory she encouraged Sidney to learn in practice. Amorous nights followed.

One night, after a little too much wine and watching a rather raunchy drama, Piety encouraged Sidney to explore her on the parlour floor, leading to an intimacy and some sexual gymnastics she had learnt from one of the forbidden library books. Reluctant at first, he relished the opportunity to prove he was no longer the introverted man she had first known and followed her instructions with gusto. Unfortunately, he did not realise his own strength nor quite how far he should go and ended up with a limp, strangled woman beneath him, totally devoid of life. And no longer an incinerator to dispose of her. He did, however, have a number of very sharp saws, a heavy axe, and a large glass fishtank in his shed, plus a quantity of muriatic acid which he had bought as a masonry cleaner for sprucing up his house. Would it be enough? Would it be strong enough? Only one way to find out. And he could always buy more from a different supplier.

I'll let you imagine the rest. A little trial and error, again, and the resulting sludge was well diluted and fed into the sewer. Piety

had never told her parents about Sidney. They would have deemed her liaison unholy. Nor had she told anyone at the library, for fear of ridicule after their one time teasing of her. Nor anyone else for that matter. And Sidney was very concerned and sympathetic when her former senior colleague informed him that Miss Overton had gone missing.

Piety's parents didn't dream of her of having a man friend and thought her evenings out were with her female work colleagues, which is what she told them, so they were of no help to the police once they had reported her missing, some three days after the tragic event. With nothing positive to go on and no leads to follow up, the case just gathered dust on some detective's desk.

Sidney was on his own again. Now with two guilty secrets to haunt his quiet nights in. He needed another distraction. He enjoyed the sport he watched on television and thought it time to go to a live event. He chose a weightlifting event which he thought would be less popular and unlikely to draw the attention of anyone from the office, his colleagues being mostly into rugby, soccer and cricket. It was something away from his norm and he'd seen a fly posted bill urging folk to support the next Olympic hopefuls at a match in a local gym. That's where he met "Super Seb" Shaw. Not that Seb had any Olympic hopes as just one of the weightlifting club's trainers, well past his best yet still fit and strong.

Sidney quickly picked up the basic rules of the game and started to appreciate the competitors' physical prowess in different age and weight category competitions taking place on three stages. Even though he felt a little out of place in his tweed jacket, flannel trousers and polished shoes, sitting amongst the mostly hoody, track bottoms and trainer clad spectators. Perhaps that's why Seb singled him out as a newcomer, gave him a hearty

handshake and welcomed him to the club. Hoped he'd enjoy the evening.

Spotting him again as he left Seb jokingly asked if Sydney was thinking of taking up the sport. He went on to say that it wasn't just the sport the club encouraged but they welcomed anyone who would like their fitness toned up a bit and didn't like the fancy prices of the big commercial gyms. He could have a free trial the following Tuesday when they would be running a fitness awareness session. A way of attracting new members to support the club even if they didn't want to progress to the heavy stuff. Why not? Sydney bought a new coloured T-shirt and shorts and went. And enjoyed the obvious camaraderie and the particular attention and easy banter of the jocular "Super Seb". Afterwards, signed up for more sessions, they had a drink at The Falcon pub to celebrate Sydney's new coming of age - not that he had had a first one. Something too frivolous for his late mother.

The short of it is, Seb had split from his wife - no kids, luckily - and was living on his own in digs. His landlady cooked meals to suit him, most of them good except for a decent steak. She never got that right. So Sidney invited him around for a meal, because he had become quite good at steaks and other meals over the years. He accepted but didn't tell his landlady where he was going that night in case it offended her. He enjoyed the best steak he'd had in years accompanied by a large quantity of alcohol over the evening.

Telling Sidney that the garden looked big enough to make a fitness trail, he was taken out for a closer look, albeit now dark outside and unfortunately he tripped over the kerb of the ornamental pond, striking his head against the fountain at its centre. Sidney thought he was dead, but Seb started spluttering incoherently and he manage to help him back into the parlour where his guest collapsed on the floor. Not sure what to do next,

he tried to pour a glass of brandy into the recumbent man's throat, which only made him writhe in agony before quite quickly going stock still and unbreathing. This was a calamity. Had he killed the man. He could find no pulse. After an hour of hoping Seb would wake up he knew he had trouble on his hands, Again.

Sidney was glad, now, that he'd built up his muscle mass. He dragged Seb into the garage and tipped him into the boot of his car. Then he drove off to one of the isolated canal locks he'd used before, made sure nobody was around and heaved the inert body in. A couple of days later an astonished boater found the bloated body half submerged as he prepared to take his narrowboat downstream.

Sidney was questioned as a member of the weightlifting club but denied having seen him on the night in question. The postmortem found a significant amount alcohol in Seb's body and the coroner deuced that he must have taken a canal walk in a drunken state and fallen in. The only mystery was how he had swallowed and choked on a small golden carp, which was not a fish normally found in the canal. More usually a garden pond fish. And Sidney knew inwardly that that last glass of brandy had only washed it further down the man's trachea.

For the next few weeks, Sidney returned to his old routine of going straight home from work and spending the evening in his own surroundings. Alone. This lasted a few years, and he bumbled along happily in his simple life. Then one weekend when doing his weekly big shop, which wasn't very big since he lived alone and grew most of his own vegetables and fruit, he decided to drive back a different route than usual, taking him a little further afield around the far side of the town. And down by the dog track. There he saw an elderly woman in a thick wool jacket and dull brown slacks leading two very svelte looking greyhounds, one tan, one black, in through a side door and wondered if they were going to

be raced. He slowed down and looked up at the big poster on the sidewall. There was indeed a race meeting that night. Then he saw a small van pull up. The passenger, a sharply dressed man in his thirties, jumped out, opened the rear doors and guided three more hounds into the stadium. That would be something different, he thought, needing some distraction from his usual routine and that is how he came to meet Trevor Saddleworth of Trev's Sporting Services.

By now. You might be pondering on how and why several diverse spirits of the departed came to return to the parlour on the same night when none of them knew each other in their earthly lives. An occasion to celebrate the demise of their nemesis is obviously part of the reason, but which one instigated it? Who is the lead spirit in all this? And why on Halloween when they should all be abroad frightening souls that still had living bodies. Well it all came to pass due to a little blue notebook hidden under the thick insulation in the loft. A confession penned in the perpetrator's own hand that he now needed to bring out into the light of day. Notes he had written to salve his conscience at being the hand that brought the scythe of Old Man Time down on innocent victims - except perhaps for his mother. He knows that that shouldn't have been done, but to him she had been evil soul suppressing him in her own selfish, arrogant, social climbing way. He didn't regret what he did. Only what followed. Had she cursed him from her grave (not that she ever had one) forcing him to follow the path of a virtual serial killer?

But before we get to the answer, let me relate the tale of Sydney's unfortunate friendship with our Trev Saddleworth. Unfortunate for Trev, that is. Yes, another sticky end due to an unwitting acquaintance with a man whose brief friendships seem always to end in tragedy.

Hesitant at placing a bet on his first visit to a greyhound race meeting, Sidney watched the first event from a seat tucked away to one side of the finishing straight. He laughed to himself that he should have put a bet on the hare. It romped home ahead of all the chasing hounds. He also watched how quite a few punters streamed up to the Tote window immediately afterwards while others wandered down to the trackside bookmakers. Were they collecting winnings or just placing more bets? And which method was best to choose? He liked the idea of going down to one of the bookies, like he'd seen on some of the old films he watched on his lonely evenings at home.

Having emboldened himself to place a bet, he walked down and studied all the betting odds and decided to start conservatively with a five pound wager. He could see that a smaller bet wouldn't bring much return, nor any great loss, and he'd decided a dog on the inside of the track might have a slight advantage. Choosing a bookie at random, queued behind two others and watched what they did at a stand with the name "Trev's Sporting Services". Trev spotted immediately, from Sidney's hesitancy, that he was a first timer and put on his most gracious air of encouragement, talking Sidney into placing the bet he wanted, which won at 9-2, plus twenty pounds on a sure fire treble accumulator, which he lost on the first race.

Trev thought Sidney was a good hook for the future and congratulated him in his win and that he was going home with a little loose change after his first venture. Why didn't he try the horses. Much more choice of steeds and race meetings. Sidney was tempted. More than tempted. He paid a visit to Trev's betting shop during the following week. Trev was out front that day, not behind the counter window, and offered to advise him on how horse betting worked, which racecards held the most promise and how the form of each horse could be judged. After a few visits,

with limited success but no major losses, Trev came up to him telling him he shouldn't be saying it, but he had a great tip for the Grand National. Insider knowledge. Sidney fell for it. And placed a large each-way bet. But much to Trev's own surprise the horse actually finished within the placings for a minor payout.

Trev had cashed up for the day, his staff had left, and he was about to leave when Sidney appeared at the shop door. That was good timing for Trev. He didn't want to use his own car to drive down to the coach station and was preparing to walk, so he asked for a lift, after handing over Sidney's meagre winnings. Sidney said he would, if Trev didn't mind calling by his house first as he'd just been to Iceland and wanted to put his frozen dinners in the freezer. He rarely cooked just for himself these days. Trev looked a bit nervous but said that was okay, his bus didn't leave for nearly an hour. He picked up his big leather satchel with the day's cash takings (Grand National day being one of his most lucrative and he hadn't paid out any of his big wins yet. The heavy punters never came rushing down, preferring to celebrate first with their friends if they had a big win) and they set off.

After he'd stacked his food in the freezer Sidney offered Trev a drink and a quick bite before he set off on his coach journey. Perhaps coffee and freshly baked cake. He'd learnt that Trev was travelling to Newmarket to glean some more inside knowledge. A misdirection because he was really going in the opposite direction to the Scottish Highlands. And not intending coming back. He had more than the day's takings in his satchel. He had a month's worth. But he'd left the bank's foreclosure letter and a pile of unpaid bills for others to sort out.

Unfortunately, in his haste to stuff all the cash into the satchel, he'd removed some items, most unnecessary, and being in a nervous state he'd forgotten to replace one vital one. His EpiPen. When he took a bite or two of the slice of cake Sidney had

baked, which looked like a plain Victoria sponge he suddenly started choking, feeling extremely nauseous and clammy skinned. Sidney had used the same mixing bowl that he'd used for a coffee and walnut cake, which he was saving for his birthday, without properly cleaning it out. The barely audible, strangled cries from Trev's constricted throat telling Sidney to get his pen out the satchel drove Sidney into action, but he had the shock of his life when he dived his hand in and found thousands of pounds in mostly used notes - but no EpiPen. Trev was now doubled up with pain, eyes staring, fight for air when his already weak heart stopped and within seconds lay flat on his back on the hearth rug.

Sidney was perplexed. Another death on the parlour floor. All that money. Should he call an ambulance? Or the police? A bit late for the ambulance, he thought as checked for a pulse and found none. And did he want the police poking around? Definitely not. That satchel of money could be useful though. Constant maintenance on the old house was draining his savings. That just meant disposing of yet another corpse.

This time he'd take a trip further afield. He remembered a quiet cove backed by steep cliffs where he used to be taken on holiday as a child. He checked it out on Google Earth and it looked perfect. No sign of any new habitation close to it, no beach, just sharp rocks with interesting rock pools at low tide and pounding surf at high tide. Trev was a slight, weaselly man and no trouble to lift into the boot of his car and his late night arrival at his chosen spot went unnoticed. Which was lucky, because a man struggling with a heavy rolled up carpet would have drawn curiosity if seen. Unrolling the carpet to reveal its core, Trev was unceremoniously tipped over the highest point of the cliff into an incoming tide thrashing against the rocks. An article in the local paper, some two months later, stated that a man found washed out to sea had been identified as local turf accountant Trevor Saddleworth. It

appeared from his extensive injuries that he had fallen from a nearby cliff top and further investigation by the police into his financial status suggested he was in irrecoverable debt and might have absconded with a large sum of money before, and in an unbalanced state of mind, ended his own life. The coroner recorded the incident as suicide. The missing money had not been recovered.

Sidney put the paper down and went outside to admire the recently repainted frontage of his house and the new black and gold railings that were being installed on top of his freshly repointed front garden wall. He was having the parlour redecorated, too, restoring its original Victorian elegance and adding a beautiful crystal chandelier he'd found in an antique shop.

Now, as you would expect with a good accountant, the rest of the bonus money he had acquired had been spread between safe investments and an access account for those rainy day jobs - and pleasures - occasionally needed. Dipping into it a little at a time, he decided to broaden his horizon from his usual gastro pubs and restaurants to the more luxurious surroundings offered by up market hotels and their fancy bars. Places out of town where he was not likely to be recognised by office staff and local acquaintances. It was while having a pre-dinner drink at one of these bars, lounging casually on a bar stool, that a well-built young lady tripped over his outstretched right foot. He apologised and she apologised for not looking where she was going, her having been glued to one of those new-fangled phones. The ones you could see You Tube videos on. She carried on to her table where she seemed to have an argument with one of the waiters. A furious look on her face she stomped back up to the bar and ordered a double scotch and splash. Turning to Sidney she said, 'Something hot and fiery to match my mood. Wretch of a

boyfriend has cancelled our table and gone off to France to watch some rugby match. Forgot it clashed, he said.'

Needless to say, Sidney's soft heart melted and she ended up at the table he had booked, the waiter laying an extra place. He hadn't enjoyed a woman's company since that fateful liaison with the library assistant. But he felt comfortable with this outgoing girl who was so different and who was explaining to him the new vogue of vlogging. His phone only took voice calls and texts, but he immediately resolved to get his own smartphone. Nothing more was said when they went their separate ways after the meal was over, paid for by Sidney, though they did exchange phone numbers, in case he wanted any more advice on choosing a phone.

A week later he received a text message. Did you buy one? He had. And one of the first things he did was go to YouTube and search for Barbie Bateswell. There it was. Barbie B's Fashion & Styling Tips in gaudy bold script letters alongside her smiling face, big blue eyes and heavy false eyelashes, combing her peroxide hair. What followed left him nonplussed but he assumed it was what passed for fashion and styling for the modern young woman. Though Barbie didn't seem that young in reality. But that's what make-up and video tricks can do for you, he thought. He replied he had a new phone and said how good her vlog seemed. Though, of course, he didn't have much with which to compare it, being new to the medium and this strange concept of vlogging. He never expected to hear more, but a day later Barbie called him, a perfectly ordinary voice call, and said he had been so kind to her listening to her moaning about her now dumped boyfriend and going on about her vlogging that she would like to repay his sympathy with a lunch time drink in another society prized hotel bar.

Sidney had no wish to get trapped in another relationship. Not yet anyway. He accepted her offer though and followed up with

three or four more lunchtime rendezvous. It was at the last of these she was saying that she wanted to do something a bit different from other vloggers. In her little flat with plain décor she looked no different from countless others. So he suggested that she might like to use his Victorian parlour as a background. She jumped at it.

She had made three videos in the parlour, and her followers had more than doubled, so she bought some new lighting off eBay which she brought around one evening. It looked well-worn but serviceable and he'd screwed in new photoflood bulbs. He helped her set them up, but because he had never got around to upgrading all his electrical circuits he had to use adapters in two old round pin sockets she needed for them. The lights were bright and brought out some of the exquisite detailing of the fire surround. He'd lit some logs so that there was a flicker of flame and bright embers. Perfect for the Autumn Fashion theme of her next video. Slipping out to fetch a plate of ginger nuts and an oversized mug of hot chocolate, which she wanted in shot on the fireside coffee table, he admired the scene as walked back in, forgetting that there were lamp cables trailing across the floor over which he tripped, stumbled against one of tripod stands, and sent the top heavy lamp flying straight towards poor Barbie. As the biscuits and chocolate crashed messily to the floor, she put out her hand to stop the lamp following them, catching it by the wires at the base of the lamp head. There was an almighty flash, crackle and smell of burnt flesh as the improperly earthed wires parted company with their loose connector, leaving Sidney to stare at yet another inert body on the parlour floor. By now Sidney could recognise a dead body when he saw one and this one had definitely been fried beyond redemption. But what to do next?

Now it just so happened that Sidney had started to clear his large vegetable patch that that morning, using his petrol driven

rotovator to turn over the soil. He had cleared about half, left a strip of autumn produce and still had the final section to do. He waited until it was almost fully dark before fetching his garden trolley, the large one with four wheels and a tipping bin; a replacement for his original large wheelbarrow. Luckily he still kept up his fitness training twice a week, albeit at a different gym than when he started, so he was able lift Barbie into it, folded in half with her head between her legs and trundle her down the garden path once full darkness had descended.

Luck shined on him again as there was a generous slice of moon shining from the night sky, as he dug a deep hole in the vegetable plot. He tipped the body out into his garden grave, but because of the initial convulsion from the electric shock and the position of the body in a warm room next to a fire, rigor mortis was already advanced. He had to wrestle her stiffening frame to straighten it. He buried her vanity case, autumn fashions and switched off phone beside her, emptying a bag of lime and spreading the first layers of earth into the hole. The following morning he rotovated the remainder of his plot so that it was all evenly cultivated. As an extra precaution, he phoned the local chicken farm and had half a lorry load of very ripe chicken manure delivered which, faced masked and eyes streaming, he spread across the rotovated area, ready to dig in later. He had a complaint from one of the neighbouring properties and promised to use horse manure the next year. Finally, he fixed the wiring on the photo lamps and resold them, again on eBay. Barbie's videos were missed, Barbie was missed, but in the ever blossoming world of social media, both were soon forgotten. And as she had been at pains to keep her video location secret, nobody came calling to see where she was.

We have one guest left to talk about. One who frequently liked to talk about himself. And departing his body hasn't stopped

him. Jocelyn Horton. An actor who boasted of his many parts in blockbusting films. Mostly as an extra. Twice speaking lines, one, 'Your hat sir,' cast as an hotel porter opening the door for the film's hero. The other in a French comedy, 'Non mademoiselle, la gare est par là,' as a baton twirling traffic policier. His more characteristic appearances were with town or touring repertory companies, plus voiceovers for a motor trader's radio commercials. But there was no doubting his enthusiasm for his chosen profession, as Sidney was to find out. Though the ensuing drama wasn't a part for which Jocelyn had willingly auditioned.

Sidney still couldn't bring himself to socialise with his work colleagues and they no longer encouraged him to join them after work or on the occasional office celebration. He read many books, watched drama series on the TV, saw all of the most praised feature films in the cinema and, as I've implied before, kept a stock of dinners-for-one in the freezer. His big house was looking decidedly tired, despite his short flurry of renovation and being isolated from his neighbours by a generous garden surrounding all sides, nobody ever came to see how he was. His only regular visitor was the postman. Age was creeping up on him, and he felt he must try something to stave off decaying in loneliness. Something more creative than adding up numbers every day (which the office computer did anyway); some way of expanding his monochrome life and bring colour to his remaining years. A promotional email from the local council caught his eye. A talk by an actor entitled from "From Rags to Rags - my journey with the Stars of Stage and Screen", to be held in a lecture room within the council chambers. Or, as it turned out, a windowless room, lit by fluorescent strip lights, a barely raised wooden platform and a load of stackable chairs.

Sidney wandered in and easily found a seat amongst the sparse audience of less than a dozen, mostly having come for the

coffee and biscuits afterwards. Right on cue, at the advertised time, led by one of the councillors - not an important one, Sidney noticed, like the Mayor or Leader of the Council - an imposing figure walked in through the door, sporting mutton chop whiskers and dressed in a red lined cloak and three piece dark suit complemented by a gold Albert chain for his pocket watch and black leather gloves. He was he was introduced as character actor Mr Jocelyn Horton and the councillor read out a list of well-known film titles in which he had appeared, off a printed card that Jocelyn had brought with him. No mention, however, of the insignificant parts he had played in them.

For someone supposed to be enthralling his audience with graphic examples of his famed career, he proved surprisingly boring. His anecdotal brushes with stardom, something which he obviously never attained, showed no more than a mediocre journey of chance meetings, mostly on set while waiting for the cameras to roll. More like observations of the stars than any dialogue with them. It was a relief when two waitresses came with tea and coffee supplies and uncovered the plates of biscuits laid out on two trestle tables at the back of the room. Jocelyn had finished and promised to circulate amongst his audience to answer any questions over refreshments.

Sidney found himself standing next to the man as he poured coffee into his cup, nobody seeming to have any questions other than 'Are there any chocolate ones?' as they hovered over the plates of biscuits. He asked Jocelyn if he acted in the theatre as well as films, to which the man's eyes lit up, saying, 'My favourite roles, dear man. All in little theatres, touring the towns. Historical dramas, period melodramas and the macabre. I love playing the villain. Especially when I can bring death and destruction to unsuspecting souls.'

Sidney nearly said they have something in common in that but quickly stopped himself, saying instead, 'Don't you find taking a life rather daunting, indeed frightening?'

Jocelyn gave a high voiced, almost girlish laugh. 'In real life, dear man, that might be so, but on stage I can have the luxury of slaying a beautiful young lady or a frail old man, without impunity, no fear of incarceration and knowing that the following night I can do it again, my victim returned more solid than any ghostly spirit. Moreover we can retire to a bar somewhere afterwards and enjoy true spirits of a different kind. You should try it, my man. Join a drama group my fellow. It clears the mind of everyday woes. Should be offered on the NHS.'

Sidney asked how he could find a group that would accept him without having previous acting skills. Jocelyn said there was one in the town that he was hoping to visit and would gladly have introduced him, but unfortunately all the decent hotels were booked up so he wouldn't be able to stay over for the next day. Which is how he came to accept Sidney's generosity and enjoyed a hearty breakfast the next day in a grand Victorian detached that would have suited some of the characters he most liked to play.

A little later, admiring the parlour, he said that it could easily be used as a film set, his whole house could be a location find, especially with such a glorious garden and all the space to accommodate equipment and crew. Would his host be interested? Sidney gave a hesitant maybe, thinking probably no. Did he want strangers tramping all over his lawns, their feet spreading muddy footprints in every room they used? If the film or TV drama was a great success, would he be beleaguered with fans gawping at his gate, or even ringing his bell trying to get access inside the house? Definitely not what he would want. But it was something interesting to talk about.

Jocelyn was getting really enthused, describing plays, characters and scenes for which the house would be a perfect. He was literally jumping from corner to corner, reciting lines, saying we need a carved planter here with a huge aspidistra, a toasting fork held to the fire, bread slowly browning, a sleeping golden labrador, or should it be black, or a growling hound in the open doorway, so many possibilities. 'Don't suppose you've got a tame ghost haunting you from some ugly deed in the place's history?' Sidney felt himself flush at the memories of past events. He'd never seen any ghosts, but sometimes felt an overbearing presence, especially when cleaning some trinket or vase in his hand that belonged to his mother.

Jocelyn suddenly stopped. His face looked a little florid. It was only for a moment, and he put his hand to his breastbone, saying that the lavish breakfast had brought on a bout of acid indigestion. Had Sidney got any antacid tablets. He thought so and went up to the bathroom to look in his medicine cabinet. Jocelyn settled down in the wing backed armchair and stared at the flickering fire. Not a real one, now, but a gas simulation that avoided the mess of ash he used to have to deal with.

There was nothing in medicine cabinet, but Sidney remembered that there was some bicarbonate of soda in one of the kitchen cupboards that might help, so he went hunting for that. Finding it, he mixed a little with water in a glass and took it into the parlour, where he could see, from behind, Jocelyn's legs stretched out before the fire, obviously peacefully relaxed in the armchair, no doubt musing on the many scenarios he envisaged in his mind. Only when Sidney stood in front of him, proffering the bicarb did he realise that his guest was much more than relaxed. At peace, yes, eyes staring into infinity, but not in thought, not even breathing, flesh going grey, and obviously dead to the world.

Properly dead. No Pulse. Not one sign of life. Beyond resuscitation. By Sidney, anyway.

Too much. One too many. Enough. This time the paramedics came at Sidney's call. And an ambulance. A doctor. The police. And poor Jocelyn was taken away. What followed was harrowing, but not as much as previous times with DIY body disposals. The coroner was satisfied that Jocelyn Horton died from Coronary Artery Disease, exacerbated by missing out his hypertension medication (although prescribed there was none found on him or in his belongings), excess ingestion of fatty foods and hyperactivity immediately preceding his demise.

There was only one way to stop another occurrence, whether Sidney had been to blame for each death or not. He closed up the house, paid up and cancelled every service that sent him a bill and told everyone that he knew (mainly those at his office) that his mother had surfaced somewhere in South America, and he was going to join her. Whereas he actually stayed indoors, drew the parlour curtains and took down the crystal chandelier from its sturdy hook in the high ceiling, then expertly tied a hangman's noose and secured it in its place. Standing on a chair he fed his head through the noose, tightened it with his hands and jumped forward, feeling a sudden crack in his neck as he swung back and toppled the chair on its side as his feet struck it. In agonising pain, he quickly lost consciousness.

For over a year no one even bothered to look in a window of the deserted old house. Eventually a Town Council officer tried to gain access in order to serve notice for unpaid rates, but without success. Long after that, bailiffs arrived and forced entry, only to find the grisly sight of Sidney's decayed body suspended from the ceiling. They left hurriedly after informing the authorities and refused to return. They could feel the coldness of the house and the presence of something unknown.

More years passed as deliberations were made as to what should be done with the property, there being no trace of an owner as Sidney had left no will and no relatives could be found, nor any interested party having a valid claim over his estate. Eventually, the house passed to The Crown. And then sold to a property developer.

However, Sidney's spirit remained in the parlour and one by one he found that the unfortunately departed souls of those other parlour deceased all returned on their anniversaries to relive their demise. He obtained forgiveness from them all. Except his mother. But she, having been briefly reunited with his father, who told her she deserved what she got before exorcising her presence, now showed toleration to the fact that her son had joined the spirit community by the same hand that deprived her of her life. His.

Now, on All Hallows Eve, they have, for the first time, all come together at Sidney's invitation, in an act of union as much as reunion. The house is due to be demolished to make way for more matchbox houses, all alike, cheaply built and apparently affordable. Whatever that really means. Unless some form of action can be taken, they will all have nowhere to which they can return. Already the site is fenced off and waiting machinery has ploughed ruts into the once pristine lawns, now unkempt and overgrown with invasive weeds.

All assembled, the departed spirits each relive their dramas so that all know how each other member of this motley crew suffered their fate. For Sidney, it was interesting to hear their side of the story and how much they blamed him, but apart from his mother, they seemed to accept he wasn't fully in control of the ill-fated situations. His mother apart, there was no intent to harm. And he has now become their unifying focus as they celebrate their paranormal force. But will it be enough to save their spiritual home from destruction?

The biggest problem is that they don't operate well in daylight. They're just not so scary. So they gather around and decide where their separate skills can be used. And in short, they do not have much of great use. A weightlifter well past his prime, a junior librarian who's shy, except in sensual situations, a YouTube influencer in love with herself, a turf accountant of dubious honesty, an aged actor of no great reputation and my mother. Yes, I am (or was, if you don't believe in ghosts) Sidney Brownlowe. But you probably already guessed that.

Time for scare tactics. There is a small cabin on the front lawn. And one those Tardis like workmen's loos you find on most construction sites. Well demolition site for now. So when the security guy pops into that cubicle Jocelyn slips across to the site cabin, switches off the light and locks the door from the inside. Easy when you can pass through walls to get out. Now Super Seb has worked on a few building sites and can operate an excavator, so he takes the keys that Jocelyn took of a hook in the cabin and goes out the back to start it up. The noise alerts the security guy, and he bounds out the cubicle still fastening his trousers, races to his cabin to fetch his flashlight and can't understand why the door won't open. So he speeds round to the back of the house to find out what's happening, only to see an apparently driverless excavator scooping up a dump truck and turning it on its side, then spinning around and heading straight towards him. He retreats hastily, around to the front of the house and, while standing on the front steps hoping he's safe there and phoning for help, watches the big digger lift the loo cubicle onto the roof of the site cabin. He was thankful he wasn't still in it. I was a little disappointed.

Already shaky, the unfortunate man had yet another fright when the locked and bolted front door opened behind him and he felt a blast of icy air on the back of his neck. Turning wide eyed to

see me standing there, pretty well solid but with a slight shimmer still, he froze. And when I asked what he was doing on my property and politely asked that he get all this machinery and other paraphernalia removed as soon as possible he turned and ran to his car and was off. Round one to me.

Reassembled in our little group we conferred on what to do next. All agreed that unlike most Halloween spirits we needn't disappear at daybreak but would welcome the workforce that was due to start demolition the next day with a few mischievous tricks that would send them all packing.

It all ended with missing tools, an erratically operating excavator with a mind of its own and strange creaks and groans from the house itself - on top of the surprise of finding the loo cubicle on top of the site cabin. The workforce downed tools (well those that they could find) and drove away at some speed.

They never did come back, except some brave lads from the rental companies to retrieve their cabins and equipment. And that was five years back. Since when I've lived peacefully with my mother in our house, undisturbed except for occasional visits from our kindred souls - and a neighbour's cat.

It's still a bit of a lonely existence but we get by. Although, since you know our story, when your time comes, you're very welcome to pay us a visit.

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