

The Invitation

David lit a cigarette and leaned back, the thin pillow no protection from the damp plaster wall. The old landlady forbade smoking in the house. Too bad. He needed to settle his nerves after his Dad's visit. "Get the hell out, son. You don't belong here." His Dad died three years ago, but as sure as David was lying there breaking house rules, his Dad was warning him from the other side.

The cigarette glowed, a red stop signal in the night. He could still feel his Dad's presence and hear him whisper. "Listen to me, son. This is no place for you."

Even in the dark, maybe especially in the dark, this room was more oppressive than a jail cell. But he'd paid a deposit and the first month's rent, sight unseen on the advice of his daughter Carol. She'd been to check it out and assured him that even though it was small, it was airy and had potential.

"It'll be fine, Dad. But there are people lined up to rent the rooms in this house so you better hurry, especially if you want this one with the conservatory off the back."

He trusted her. "Okay, where do I send the money?"

When he arrived he saw that it was one of hundreds of identical pre-war row houses, standing shoulder-to-shoulder in cramped English stoicism, windows defiant, echoing their emptiness. Ancient tree roots reached up from under neglected sidewalks to trip you on the way in – stay away. Front stairs like stiff upper lips, were protruding and miserable – leave us alone to die. And the landlords complied. Decay penetrated the air. Several wretched 'For Let' signs leaned at odd angles over sidewalks.

"Christ, what've I come to?" David thought as he double-checked the address. He yanked on the parking brake and sat there. No choice now. But he wondered how much more he could endure. Two months ago and two thousand miles away his sister lost her fight with cancer. And only last week a brain aneurysm took his younger brother. David was broke. He couldn't even afford to go and comfort his mother. His own life had fallen apart when the financial crisis folded in around his beloved wine shop and the bank auctioned off his dreams.

He had abandoned his home up north with nothing but two suitcases and some greeting cards he'd saved for some godforsaken reason. His wife was long gone, having crammed her version of their life into a pair of shoe boxes.

Carol encouraged him to move south to make a new start. Carol always knew best. She was the type of person who habitually delivered inarguable facts. And now propped up by a Masters degree, her opinion was more indisputable than ever.

Her husband Nigel sounded amicable. "We're delighted you've moved closer to us, David. You're always welcome. You are family after all. Drop in any time." Nigel said with a big smile and a hug that felt genuine.

David took it to heart. He imagined the pleasure of Carol-and-Nigel-filled Sunday afternoons, lounging around with a few pints after a pub lunch, laughing at memories of Carol's childhood and betting on football matches.

He shook his head and looked around the misery of this room. No place to store his suitcases. No TV. A barren mattress on two boxes, and a student desk. The conservatory turned out to be a hasty afterthought, a damp space surrounded by a wall of second-hand windows through which entered cold wind and slugs. The grass outside was overgrown and he could see tin cans amongst thistles. The back fence sagged sadly over a path that ran straight into a brick wall.

The first two nights David cried into the dark. During the day, he ventured out in hopes of discovering something uplifting. Instead, he was depressed even more by rain, rubbish and the sad houses that money-grubbing landlords rented to the likes of him. He tried to look on the bright side. In a few weeks, he'd be fine. He convinced himself that his despondency was not just the state of the shared slum house but an accumulation of recent events. He'd get over it. He didn't want to complain to Carol because she'd approved the place but when he told her it was less than he expected, she said, "Well, Dad, this is what you get on your budget."

A sad statement about life in general, David thought. Human beings buried alive in squashed rooms without bed linens or toilet paper. "And there's no smoking in this house." The landlady reminded him. "And don't throw grease down the drain. Oh, and you'll have to use the portable heaters because the heating man can't get to the furnace for another two weeks. Well, enjoy your room."

He ignored the sickness in his heart and his Dad's advice; he was here to build a new life near his daughter.

Weekdays were filled with job-hunting but weekends were relentless in their emptiness.

Saturday morning David was lying around on top of the unmade bed, re-scanning the paper for jobs that no one wanted when Carol's call lifted him out of the weekend funk. "Come to dinner tomorrow, Dad," she said.

She sounded bubbly. "Nigel's brother and his wife are coming down for a Sunday meal. We're planning baked ham and roasted vegetables. There'll be plenty of food. So I thought I'd ask you to join us."

"Well, I don't know, Carol. I mean, I don't want to be a bother."

"What bother, Dad? We told you, we're happy you're close to us now. And Nigel said he was delighted you're so close, didn't he? It'll be a family afternoon."

A family afternoon. He felt his heart warm. "Well, okay. You twisted my arm. What time should I come down?"

"Drop in any time after two. We'll have a drink before dinner."

"Okay, then. Sure. I'd love to come."

She hung up with her usual singsong, "Luv you. Bye."

Buoyed by the dinner plans, David wandered downtown and smiled at the few rays of sunshine that broke through the grey clouds. He'd buy a nice bottle of wine and maybe even some daisies for the dinner table.

Saturday was zipping along now and with the bottle under his arm and daisies in hand he practically skipped up the street, past the dodgy gymnasium, samosa cafe, Jamaican barber shop, two rundown pubs and three young street walkers getting an early start.

He was about halfway down the block when his mobile phone rang. It was Carol. He answered cheerily, "Hello my dear. How are you?"

"Fine thanks, Dad. But I'm calling about a change of plans." She took a breath and jumped in. "Dad, you know, the dinner invitation... well, we're going to have to give you a raincheck. You know that Nigel hardly ever sees his brother. And he wants to enjoy a nice visit with him on his own. So we thought it would be best to invite you another time. Sorry, Dad, it's nothing personal. I hope you don't mind."

"Oh, I see. Well, yeah, it's alright. I mean... I don't want to interfere with family."

"No, of course not. And I appreciate your understanding. We'll talk again soon. Luv you." Click.

Rain began to pour down, beating the heads of his sagging daisies to a pulp. Drenched, he strode towards the dismal house, then stopped at the front gate, which squeaked in the wind. "Come in if you dare, you sorry son of a bitch."

He dropped the soggy daisy remains, turned his back on the house and sought refuge in his car. He stayed there all night, leaning back behind the steering wheel, staring up through the windshield at the falling rain.

At about 2pm the next day he finally turned the key in the ignition. It stalled. But after several attempts the car shivered forward through the puddles, windows fogged up, rain bouncing off the road as high as the windshield. He kept driving. To move forward – that was his purpose. To move forward and find the end of the grey.

He glanced into the rear view mirror and saw his Dad in the back seat. "That's it son. Go for it." David burst into song, "We are the Champions, we are the champions..." His Dad grinned.

His foot heavy on the gas, the car careened down the hill, traffic lights turning green one after the other, pedestrians retreating on the sidewalks, rain stopping, sunshine spilling across the town, a rainbow stretching beyond the rooftops.

As Nigel's brother drove up for a peaceful family dinner of ham and roasted vegetables, he saw a madman at the wheel of a car. The man was singing at the top of his lungs as the car shot through Nigel's livingroom window. He thought he saw a passenger in the back seat but he couldn't be sure.