

Odd Socks

by
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Chapter 1

He hadn't meant to buy it, a few enquiries, that was all and now look what it had led to. Mike sat stunned long after his solicitor had put down the phone.

"I think sexist screen savers should be banned in the office."

Mike spun round in his chair to see Hailey's legs stalking off towards the coffee machine. He put the phone back in its cradle absently.

"And what did they say?" Dave leaned across the opposite desk.

"I've got it." Mike nodded. The left corner of his mouth hitched up slightly.

"Chuck it over." Dave pointed at the sheet lying by the phone. Mike passed across the property details.

"Looks a bit knackered."

"I know, but that's why it was cheap."

"Ooh whose is that?" Hailey returned and snatched the paper from Dave. "Dream cottage in the countryside of Devon," she read.

"It's mine," Mike confessed.

"Gosh! So you and Carrie are moving to the South West?"

"Umm," Mike's eyebrows moved together, "probably."

"Uh oh! Don't tell me, I don't want to know." Hailey shook her head frowning and dropped the sheet of paper onto the desk. Her slender calves retreated back to the sales department.

"Haven't you told Carrie yet?" said Dave.

"No," Mike rubbed his face then slid a hand through his hair, pushing the shaggy ends away from his forehead.

"You're asking for trouble mate." Dave shook his head and started to tap away at his keyboard. Mike's eyes slid back to the photo on the paper. The cottage looked grey and damp in the blurred photo. He shoved it into his briefcase and picked up the phone. Holding the receiver he leaned across to Dave.

"Do you think anyone will notice if I leave early?" he glanced around at his colleagues.

"Mike, you're a contractor," Dave reminded raising his hands, "Since when do we decide when you can come and go? Jeez, it's never bothered you before. Besides aren't you off for a week anyway?"

"Mmmm, I guess." Mike pulled the receiver next to his ear and dialled the familiar number. He waited for the answer phone.

"Hello?"

"Err..." Mike was surprised.

"Who is this?" a female voice commanded down the phone.

Mike grimaced, "It's me."

"What? Why are you calling here at lunchtime?" Carrie demanded.

"I thought you'd be at work."

"So why did you ring? Did you expect next door's cat to answer or something?"

"No. I.. well... I've been given another contract, I need to go up to Yorkshire tonight, I'll pop home and get some of my things."

"And you were making sure I was out?" Carrie's voice was rising, "What is it with you? What are you up to?"

"I rang you at work, to tell you," Mike felt the lie squeeze between his teeth, "and they said you'd gone home early," he rushed on, "I forgot who I was ringing when you answered the phone that's why I was a bit confused. Things have been a bit hectic this morning."

"You're so weird. How long will you be in Yorkshire this time?"

“Ummm....a week,” he paused, “probably,” he added.

“So that’s another week you won’t have fixed the shower!” Carrie spat down the phone. Mike automatically moved the receiver away from his ear and noticed Dave staring at him. He rubbed his face and wiggled the mouse. Sexy Susan was instantly replaced by lines of Javascript.

“OK, Yes, I’m sorry.” Mike waited for Carrie to finish, “Yes, Bye.” Mike put the phone down again.

“I don’t get it, why is the cottage such a big secret from Carrie? Surely she’d love it.” Dave quizzed.

Mike frowned, that was probably what he was afraid of. He shook his head causing his shaggy fringe to fall forwards and obscure his face.

“Hey don’t look so grim, take it easy, whatever you’re up to, if Carrie asks, it’s Yorkshire right? Give me a shout if you want any help yeah?”

“Thanks mate.” Mike offered a half smile, shoved his hair back and packed up his desk in a few swift movements.

Joe was kneeling on a piece of sacking, stabbing a trowel at a chewed cauliflower. It wasn’t much bigger than his fist but the stem held it firmly to the ground. With another hack, it fell off and rolled next to his knee. He sighed, a long strand of white hair slid forward and stuck to the beads of sweat on his forehead. He didn’t have green fingers like Mrs. Belton had, still the vegetable plot would provide him with a bit more yet. Joe stood up, one foot at a time, leaning across his raised knee. He rubbed at the base of his spine and straightened up a little more. The rest could wait. He bent to pick up the sacking, groaning as he did so. Hidden behind the roses something glinted in the low light. He went over and crouched down. An aluminium ladder lay against the wall, ivy had grown across one end. He pushed his way between the rose bushes. Pulling up the free end of the ladder, he was able to lever it into an upright position. He yanked hard, a grunt escaping his chapped lips. The ivy let go and Joe staggered out with the ladder clutched in his soiled hands. A thorn tore at his trousers leaving a thread to hang by his calf. Joe looked it over, it stood about a foot above his head in three sections. He experimented, and tried to slide the different parts extending the ladder against the house.

“My my, that’ll be useful.” The Beltons certainly didn’t need it any more. He released the catch and slid it back to size. Joe carried the ladder down the drive, pausing at the gate which yawned wide open. Beside it stood a wooden post with a placard nailed to it; “Halifax” in blue letters and underneath; “For Sale” written in red. Joe looked up the muddy lane at the sound of a vehicle approaching. A small white van trundled towards him. A man got out, collected a board from the back and nodded at Joe.

“Afternoon.”

“Hmmmphh,” Joe frowned clutching the ladder protectively. The man proceeded to hammer the notice onto the placard. He raised his eyebrows at Joe and left. Joe scowled at the sign, then turned left walking down past the long box hedge. It had grown way too large and long fronds reached out to grab the ladder as he passed. He continued around to the back of his own cottage and kicking his muddy boots against the step, he shouted.

“Ezzie! Ezzie!”

Mike slowed down and joined the back of the queue, he checked the dashboard clock to see he’d been on the M4 more than two hours already. A navy Escort pulled alongside. Two women in their twenties sat grinning at him, the driver raised her eyebrows and shook a dark mass of curls. Mike tried to look cool, sweeping his hair back in a relaxed gesture, he pressed the button for the window and hung his elbow on the edge. By turning up the heating, he

could pretend it was summer. He kept glancing to his left, they were discussing something and kept staring at him. He turned the music up a little louder and drifted forwards with the traffic. They pulled alongside again, the driver frantically winding the window down. Mike surprised, leaned across.

“Hello, ladies,” he started when something fired out of the other car. Mike pulled his head back as it flew through the window and bounced onto the seat. Mike looked at it appalled. The large gob of bubble gum had some white froth on one side.

“Fuck!” he swore, shutting the window against their shrieks of laughter. A horn sounded behind him and he realised a large gap had opened in front. He put his foot to the floor and streaked forwards. His Porsche flashed past a large lorry then came to an abrupt halt as the traffic ceased moving once again.

Joe looked in the fridge at his meagre supplies. A small lump of cheese, hard on one side, half a carton of milk, the wrapper of some sliced ham, a jar of mustard and a shrivelled apple. He took out the apple, opened the back door and chucked it into the hedge. Esmerelda, who’d been sat by the back door, watched it land and went over to investigate. Joe picked up the shopping basket and went out to the land rover. The engine coughed twice then burred to life. It rattled out onto the lane. Joe brought the vehicle to a shuddering stop and stared up at the new sign bearing “SOLD” in large blue letters. He could see the sacking and his abandoned trowel left on the driveway. The two forgotten cauliflowers turning brown.

“Damn,” he muttered. He continued up the lane and pulled out onto the main road. Joe drove slowly down the dip, where the trees hung low over the road, across the river and up the other side, the engine labouring heavily in third gear as it reached the top. He turned off by the bus stop into the village and parked behind The Grouse. The smell from the baker’s tickled his nostrils. Joe paused staring in at the display of rice crispie cookies, caramel slices, flapjacks, doughnuts, and an almost empty tray of iced chelsea buns. Joe pushed the door open, a distant buzz announcing his arrival.

“Afternoon Joe, what can I do you for?” asked a petite lady almost hidden behind the counter. Beyond her head were wooden shelves layered with paper and crumbs, a round white loaf stood on its own at one end.

“Iced bun,” he stated, “and that loaf.” Stepping outside, Joe paused to break a small corner from the bun, he pushed the dough into his mouth.

Mike shot along the country lanes, tucking the Porsche close into the tight bends and accelerating fast on the straights. After four hours on the road, he was relieved to see the sign for Greenford appear from under a tree. He plucked the yellow post-it from the dashboard and tried to decipher his scribble.

“Right at the phone box,” he said aloud. Small shops appeared on either side, a few pedestrians dotted on the pavement. Mike stared in the post office window as it breezed past.

Joe didn’t hear the Porsche, it had a low purr that belied its proximity, he munched on the dough, a currant squashing between his teeth, the sweet juice melting onto his tongue.

Mike glanced up from the post-it, a brown figure moved out from the curb.

“Fuck!” His foot stamped down on the brake, his chest pressing into the seat belt. Joe froze, his eyes fixed on the red car’s bonnet as it dipped down sharply. Joe noted the wide eyes of a dark young man behind the windscreen, he narrowed his own. A wisp of white hair blew forward, reaching out to the glass. Mike swerved, a neat S pattern that would have left a signature on the road if it hadn’t been for antilock brakes. The bottom of Joe’s coat lifted and swept to the side following the car’s wake.

“Don’t see many of them around here,” commented someone behind Joe. He watched the Porsche disappear around a bend and swallowed the currant.

‘Bloody stupid idiot,’ he thought.

Mike breathed deeply feeling his heart still hammering. ‘Stupid old fool,’ he thought. He turned right past the new phone cubicle and headed up Church Lane. He could see the B&B sign at the top.

Chapter 2

It was about five as Mike pulled into the drive. He got out and opened the boot. The late afternoon sun glinted from the many square panes of the lower windows. The heavy oak door swung wide, a brass knocker of a lion disappearing into the hall. A rounded lady with an apron on stood smiling filling the doorway. Mrs. Morley he assumed.

“Mr. Goodall, come in, come in, I trust you had a pleasant drive. Where was it you said you were coming from?” she smiled politely.

“Reading.” He followed her into the hall, a dark carpet leading towards the back of the house. Behind the door a wooden staircase lined with original oils, mostly of flowers or fruit in dark glossy colours.

“I trust it was a good journey, you probably beat most of the Friday traffic I expect. Not that Brian and I tend to drive that way. We have family in Falmouth and holiday from Bristol airport.” They climbed the stairs and turned into an identical corridor. Oak panels reached into the distance. Mrs. Morley stopped at the second door and went in, a key with a plastic fob banged against the wood. It was a spacious room; lacy pillows on the bed and pale pink flowers adorned the walls. A dressing table beneath a long mirror with a pink satin covered stool.

“I’ve put some towels on the hot rail in the bathroom. The water’s hot so you just go ahead.” She walked around the bed and pushed the heavy drapes back to allow more light to filter through the net curtains.

“Would you like a cup of tea or something?” She picked up a pillow and fluffed it vigorously.

“This is lovely, thank you,” Mike replied placing the holdall on the floor. At least it was warm in here, with a luxurious carpet squashing beneath his feet. Mrs. Morley nodded and went to the door.

“A drink then?” she inquired.

“No actually, I’m fine, I think I’ll take a shower.”

Mrs. Morley nodded. “We’ll be having supper at seven, you’re welcome to join us, I charge twelve pounds for a two course meal. We’re having pork steaks and creamed leeks. A particular favourite of Brian’s.”

“Oh, well yes, that sounds great, thanks.”

“I’ll call you for supper at seven,” the door closing softly behind her.

“Well?” asked Mrs. Morley’s husband as she washed the grit off some leeks in the sink.

“Tall, handsome. Hair’s a bit long but seems polite. Lovely blue eyes,” Mrs. Morley commented, shaking off the excess drips.

“Young then.”

“Late twenties at a guess,” she affirmed, “too young for me,” she giggled, pausing to kiss the top of Mr. Morley’s head as she crossed the kitchen to the chopping board.

“He’s got a Porsche,” he said, standing to stare from the kitchen window. “Must have plenty of money if he can afford one of them,”

“Yes. But then he’s going to need it, if he wants to put that cottage to rights. It’s been empty what, two years now?” She chopped the leeks into neat rings. “Do you think Joe knows he’s about to have a new neighbour?”

Mr. Morley smiled at the gleaming paintwork.

“I doubt it,” he chuckled, “I’d like to see how those two get on.”

“Now Brian, don’t be mean. He’s not such a bad sort.”

Brian turned to his wife, eyes widening, “What do you mean? Don’t you remember when Joe-”

“Yes, yes, alright,” she interrupted, “Let’s just hope Mr. Goodall knows what he’s doing,” She pulled out a saucepan and plonked it on the hob. “Have you finished the crossword?”

Mike sat on the edge of the bed. His knees high as he sunk into the soft mattress. The estate agent’s print out in his hands. He stared at the blurry picture of his new cottage. He had only seen it once. He rubbed his stomach unconsciously. What would Carrie say when she found out? Maybe he’d been too rash. He read through the description again: “Period cottage of attractive design. two- bedroomed property with interior bathroom, kitchen, dining room and lounge complete with open fire. Superb countryside views beside quaint village of Sandford. Private lane with easy access to the A30. Needs work.” Mike stared at the final sentence. Just how much work wasn’t clear. The surveyors report had obviously spelled it out, but it was all words and figures. Never mind, tomorrow he would see it, get to go in it. Finally assess his new home in person.

The Porsche bumped over the potholes, splashing through the puddles and spreading a thick layer of muck over the red paintwork. Hedges on either side clawed at the doors, screeching down the sides. Mike cursed, maybe his first job would have to be trimming this jungle. As he veered around the worst of the rocks and holes, he almost hit a huge branch sticking out of the hedge on his left. Big enough to smash his headlight let alone mark the paintwork. He slid to a stop. Getting out, his trainer plunged into the freezing water.

“Fuck!” he exclaimed.

He slugged around to the front of his car and using both hands yanked on the broken end of the branch. It came away without a sound. His arms pin wheeled backwards with the short stub of dead wood arcing high behind him. His feet paddled for grip in the soft clay. He let out a loud grunt as his back connected solidly with the ground. He lay there staring up through the leaves at a grey sky. The wetness seeped through his shirt.

“Fuck, Fuck, FUCK!”

He groped his way up hanging onto the front bumper and sloped his way back to the driver’s side. He pulled open the door, lost his footing again, dangled from the doorframe and grappled his body back into the seat. He gripped the steering wheel tightly and stared out of the windscreen. Reaching his left hand down, he saw the slimy mud he had deposited on the wheel.

“FUCK IT!” he yelled, the sound singing in his ears as it bounced around him.

A quiet clunk was followed by a twig sliding down the windscreen. It came to rest entangled in the windscreen wipers. Mike thrust the car forward, the wheels spinning then gripping to weave their way down the lane. Another turn and he could see the weather-beaten gate hanging open. The Halifax Sold sign was leaning at an angle by the gatepost. Turning into the drive, the car dipped into a crater then grinded up the other side.

Mike extracted his sticky shirt from the back of his seat and stepped out to survey his new home. He must be mad to take this on. He stared at the untidy tiles. Flakes of grey paint were peeling away from the windowsill on the ground floor exposing the rotten wood. The front door stood darkly awaiting his hand; a small cracked window blindly watched his approach.

Energised by the need not to fail, he returned to the car and gathered some things from the small vanity sized boot and deposited them in the hall. His scuffling and banging echoed off the bare walls. He stroked his hand across the hard surface. On closer inspection he could see the fine lines and pale cracks. The entire bottom floor was painted a powdery pink. The

carpets too had their own distinction giving off a pungent smell that immediately took his mind back to Grandad and his starched looking room in the Mount View nursing home. Mike shivered against the cool draft and shut the open door. He didn't dare light a fire, not that he would have a clue what to do without a large can of kerosene anyway. The guy from the Home Warmth shop had promised to come and check the chimney tomorrow at nine. Mike pulled out a small bottle of beer from one of the boxes and twisted the top. It stuck firm.

"Fuck," he was sure he'd chosen the twist-offs.

He looked around for something suitable, then reached up to the doorjamb giving a quick pull against the edge of the cap. A chunk of wood bounced off his head and showered his hair with dust. The bottle remained unopened.

"Fuck it," he said again and dropped the bottle back into the box. He couldn't remember anything in the surveyor's report about interior wood. He pulled at the lintel causing more to come away and crumble at his feet.

Three hours later he sat leaning back in an old wicker chair. Open beer in hand, the kitchen felt better even if it didn't look a lot different. It had been the easiest place to start. Scrubbing from top to bottom only pausing to make notes of any repairs that were needed. A couple of screws for the open shelves, a washer for the dripping tap. He'd discovered large slate slabs under the vinyl and had ripped up the old brown flowers leaving hard glue stuck behind. He would need a good solvent to get it off entirely. The cupboards seemed to be in good nick, just new hinges for one of the oak doors. The drawers were another matter; none of them opened smoothly and one had point blank refused to be kicked home. It sat half out at an angle mocking him. He took another swig from the green bottle. He'd made a start, and that was what mattered. He smiled to himself imagining his mother's face if she'd seen him with his marigolds on under the sink. He swung his legs up onto the box of cleaning equipment. The chair creaked, and then emitted a loud crack like a gunshot, spilling Mike onto the floor.

"Fuck it!"

Joe set the ladder up against the front of his cottage. His own ladder had finally rotted through last autumn and this new aluminium item was perfect. Joe climbed up one step at a time. His left knee twinged angrily so he had to use his right leg to gain each higher step, slowly bringing up his left to join it. Up under the eaves he could see the twigs where the sparrow had started to build its nest. He leant in against the ladder and pulled the screwdriver out of his back pocket. Holding it in one hand, he removed twigs with his fingers then used the tool to poke out the parts he couldn't reach. Satisfied that all was clear, he reached behind to secure the screwdriver. A loud grating noise drew his attention to the Beltons cottage. A small car with a shiny red roof appeared. The colour seemed to merge into a dusky brown half way down the vehicle. As he watched, a young man climbed out. The man stood staring at the cottage, hands on hips. Joe frowned, the same dusky brown seemed to cover the man's back too, and even down the backs of his legs.

Meanwhile the sparrow had returned with more twigs and was inspecting this unusual phenomenon next to her nest site. She looked to the corner then back to the old man several times before she could convince herself that she was, in fact, in the right place. She had had to fight beak and feather with a chaffinch for this spot and wasn't about to give it up easily. She let out a shrill retort. Joe twitched, the screwdriver slipping from his fingers, and clattering to the ground below. His arm flailed out to the right. The ladder started to slide, Joe grasped the top rung tightly and waited. The ladder stopped. The sparrow eyed him narrowly; Joe glared back muttering under his breath. He looked down and descended left foot first in slow methodical steps to the chirping of the sparrow.

Back on solid ground, Joe decided to make a strong cup of sweet tea. Afterwards, he returned to the ladder. Looking up, he could see the sparrow perched on the top rung with a beak full of twigs.

“Damn it!” He shook the ladder, the sparrow hopped onto the edge of the roof. He released the catch on the ladder and slid it into a manageable size. Hoisting it under his arm, he limped back around the house and in through the kitchen door, banging the ladder heavily against the doorjamb as he manhandled it around and deposited it behind the door.

‘Darn nuisance,’ he thought to himself. Ever since the last barn had been sold off he had had to store what useful items he could in the back half of the kitchen. It wasn’t the clutter he minded as much as having to haul things in and out through the back door. He had to stoop to avoid bumping his head. He slid the bucket aside and pulled a deck chair out. The broom fell with a clunk as he lifted it past the shears and his Wellington boots. Tucking it under his arm, he bashed his way back out the door and around to the front. Looking up at the roof, he positioned the chair and set it to the fully reclined notch. Then stooping down in the driveway he began to gather small stones. As he straightened up he staggered slightly and reached to rub his lower back. He picked up an empty flowerpot from off the wall and let the stones slide from his hand making a satisfying clapping sound. Gently he lowered himself into the deck chair. His bottom sliding to the frayed side where it bulged between the wood and the sun-bleached fabric. Staring up at the roof, he waited, flowerpot held casually against his stomach and a stone ready in his right hand.

The sparrow had been watching all this from the safety of the hedge. Now that things were settled again she resumed her search for the right material. Back up under the roof she began to rearrange the new items she’d found. The first stone swished past her tail and thudded loudly against the wood. She squawked and rose swiftly into the air. Joe grinned broadly; he hadn’t lost his aim then. He’d always been good at throwing, bowling for the school cricket team as a youngster, then later for the village with his uncle. The sparrow returned hesitantly twenty minutes later. Another stone knocked two of the twigs down. Half an hour more and the sparrow decided her favourite spot hadn’t been worth fighting for. Joe sat smugly and dozed on and off for another hour, just to be sure.

The cloud that had been hanging over the lane all day had begun to darken, solidifying itself into a dark grey roof. The gentle drops pattered onto Joe’s upturned face. A large drop tickled the hairs that sprouted from his nose, and he jerked awake upsetting the pot of stones, that rolled off his stomach and showered the ground. He leaned forward and attempted to push himself upwards but his weight was too far back. He waved his legs around trying to swivel to the side but only managed to wedge his bottom even lower between the fabric and the wood. The rain clamped his shirt against his body. He began to wriggle with increasing frustration, legs and arms waving madly until finally the chair toppled sideways and dumped him into the flowerbed. Panting he raised himself to his knees and stood up swaying slightly.

“Damn it!” he huffed and limped into the cottage.

Joe had finally found the binoculars in one of the drawers of the sideboard. He had spent over an hour shuffling around the house peering into cupboards, under shoes and behind chairs. The problem was not that he’d lost them, more that he wasn’t sure which of his special places he had carefully put them. Joe was not a methodical man and so sifting through the chaos in some sort of order didn’t occur to him. Instead he would open the top drawer of the chest in his bedroom, rummage through the vests then climb down onto his hands and knees to look under the bed totally ignoring the other two drawers. It wasn’t as if his mind wandered and he didn’t remember to look in the other drawers. It was more a case of dogged obstinacy, kidding himself that he more or less knew where the item was. This inevitably led to him checking the vests three times, pulling out the old bottles from under the stairs and then

tripping over them, and moving the armchair out from the wall at least half a dozen times. He now stood by the kitchen sink with the cumbersome eyeglasses pinned to his face.

“Damn it,” he couldn’t see a bloody thing.

He turned the binoculars over in his hands and realised there were two lens caps. He pulled them off, and then noticing the dusty glass, proceeded to rub each one with the corner of his sweaty shirt. Satisfied, he squinted through them again. Everything was blurred and seemed to make two separate circles. He tried closing one eye which reduced the images to one. He studied the binoculars again and noticed a small catch. He released it and holding them up to his eyes, he bent them until the two circles became one. His grubby thumb flicking against the notched wheel until gradually the image came into focus. The sparrow filled the circle; its head twisted this way and that, each beady eye staring back at Joe. A piece of straw and a feather clamped firmly in her beak.

“Damn it,” he yelled at the kitchen window. He waved his fist as if to remove the sparrow from sight. The next time he looked, he focused on the hedge then beyond to the grey smear which, with a little more flicking of the wheel, clarified into the roof of his neighbour’s cottage. He couldn’t see below the top window, there was too much greenery in the way. Maybe if he could make himself higher. He glanced around the kitchen and dragged the wooden chair over from the table. He set it squarely against the counter then holding onto the chair back lifted up his right knee. His foot dangled two inches below the seat. He breathed deeply pointing his toes towards the ceiling; he managed to get the toe of his shoe onto the edge. He pushed forward but only succeeded in pushing the chair away.

A couple of minutes later and he was stooping against the ceiling, the binoculars clamped to his face. He still couldn’t see enough. He stepped down onto the bricks he’d retrieved from the garden, pulled out the shears, exchanged his shoes for the green wellies and stomped outside. He attacked the hedge with some vigour. Quickly clearing a large hole between the hedge and the overhanging tree. Long spindly branches lay scattered at his feet. Breathing hard and sweating he returned to the kitchen and sat heavily on the chair. Up again on his perch he focused on the roof but discovered with dismay that nothing had changed. He lowered the binoculars and glared out of the kitchen window frowning.

“Damn it.” The hole he had cut was too far to the right to be of any use.

Mike dropped the wet cloth back into the bucket and pulled off the rubber gloves. He wandered outside to the vegetable patch, unzipped his trousers then thought again. Re-zipping, he followed the hedge along to the side. He thought it best to distribute his urea widely so as not to upset the plants too much in any one area. The plumbing was off since Mike had started to fix the bathroom so the garden was the obvious choice, at least for now. A thinner bit of greenery allowed Mike to peer through at his neighbour’s cottage. He unzipped, gazing through the leaves. He heard a click then steps coming towards him, Mike tried to see where the person was going, he shuffled his feet to the right where the hedge was thicker. The footsteps stopped on the other side. Mike pressed into the hedge hoping the closer he got to the leaves, the less noise his piss would make. It splattered onto the greenery, splashing back onto his trousers. A loud clip noise, then a pause and another loud snip. Mike could see a shape on the other side; his or her arms appeared to be reaching upwards. He tried to bend his knees a bit, and ducked his head down, the flow beginning to ease off.

Joe clipped slowly with more deliberation partly because the shears seemed to have doubled in weight. He kept stopping and turning around to the kitchen window trying to guess the line of sight.

Mike zipped up his trousers, ducked down some more and hurried off towards the driveway. When he could no longer see the shadow, he straightened up and reapproached, stamping forcefully across the grass.

“Ahem! Hello!” he called at the shadow.

The clipping stopped and there was silence. Joe held the shears by his knees and cocked his head.

Mike waited for a response then tried again. “Err Hello!” he called.

Joe peered into the bush and realised there was a dark shape on the other side, his eyebrows shot upwards. He looked at the twigs and branches that lay at his feet, then at his shears, and finally at the thick hedge behind which the figure stood. A murmur of wind rustled the leaves, and a bird chirped from high above their heads. Joe turned swiftly and returned to the kitchen. He shut the door firmly and sat on his chair.

Mike watched the figure recede, shrugged his shoulders and returned to his cleaning, cursing at the dark splashes on his jeans.

Joe didn't return to the garden again until late that afternoon. Instead he made himself some tea, switched on the radio in the lounge and eased into his favourite chair. It was eleven o'clock and time for women's hour. Joe smiled as he allowed himself to be lulled by the voices.