

My house and the past

Thursday, 16 March 2017

It was a beautiful little mews cottage, built in the 1800s, climbing pink roses flowering outside the white stone walls, originally the stables for the big houses in the terrace behind me, now trendy accommodation for us young twenty somethings, purchased with my very first royalty cheque. My mother had seen it from the road, driving past with my younger brother, and phoned me saying it could be the perfect first home for me.

I'd only been living in the house for a few weeks when my doorbell rang.

Standing on the step was an elderly man with white hair, probably in his 70s, who looked at me and asked... "Excuse me for bothering you, but do I live here?"

"No, I do", I replied.

"Oh sorry" he said and wandered away.

Closing the door, I returned to the kitchen and continued making myself a cup of coffee. Something was bothering me.

He was obviously suffering from Alzheimers - we used to call it senility way back then, 45 years ago. I felt I should have at least invited him in or made sure he was going to be safe or perhaps called his family. Too late now - he'd gone and disappeared around the corner.

I stirred in a spoonful of honey and some milk and sat down and sipped my coffee, still disturbed and unable to concentrate.

He had been well dressed and smart, not shabby at all; well spoken and polite; not in any way threatening or unpleasant - just the opposite in fact.

But clearly slightly confused. I couldn't get him out of my head.

It was more than just guilt that I hadn't been friendlier or more helpful. After all, he'd simply asked me a question and I'd answered him.

I picked up a newspaper and tried to read it but I just couldn't put him out of my mind. Poor old thing, couldn't remember where he lived, probably had even forgotten his own name. But he'd seemed so certain that this was his house; he almost appeared to imply that I really should not be here myself.

And there was something strangely familiar about him. Had I seen his photo somewhere? Had he been on the TV news? Was he an old character actor, familiar through British movies from the first half of the century? That might explain things. My next door neighbour at the time was Kenneth More, the star of Genevieve and The 49 Steps and Reach For The Sky and other wonderful films. His wife Angela Douglas was also a reasonably successful actress. He must have been a thespian friend of theirs who had lost his way.

That relieved me. I felt I could forget him and get on with my day. But still I felt uncomfortable, no matter what I tried to do. So I got up, shrugged my shoulders and went upstairs to wash my face before going out shopping. Splashing water, drying on a towel, I caught sight of myself in the mirror and gasped. Suddenly it dawned on me why I thought I'd seen him before.

I had. He looked exactly like I would look in about 50 years time.