

The Garden Heaters Of Kilburn

by Craig Stone

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I have had my ear pressed against the front door to my flat for over six hours listening in tense silence for signs that my landlord is at the bottom of the stairs when I realise that my light is on and it may have given away my position.

I feel like a soldier inside enemy territory caught upside down in a tree tangled in his own parachute that has accidentally fired a flare gun into his own face.

I am listening on the other side of my door trying to not make a sound for signs that Ali, my old and insane landlord that lives on the ground floor, is watching my front door from the bottom of the stairs for signs that I am in.

I can't relax inside my own flat like a recluse should be able to and if I try and leave I risk being caught in the process of leaving by Ali and his need to make he and I best friends.

To distract my imagination from picturing Ali naked on the other side of my front door with a cup up against the wall trying to hear me breathe I start cleaning.

I clean the cooker of the dark marks around its heating rings which look like bruises delivered by drunken sauce pans.

I reach the point where I want to leave my flat and risk the flight of stairs to freedom so I decide to pour myself the last glass of wine from the bottle and, somewhat recklessly, neck the contents in one gulp.

With the bottle of wine now empty and the alcohol content of my blood rising steadily like a thermometer under the wing of a grouse

trying to evade bullets being fired at its head by red faced farmers I head towards my front door and pull the handle down.

I look back one last time and see a single grain of rice standing out on the corner of the rug like an opposable thumb at a prosthetic limb convention for monkeys injured during moon landings.

I turn back so I am facing my door choosing to ignore the single grain of rice and I take a deep breath and walk out of my flat.

I scuttle down the stairs like a crab leaving a nightclub at four in the morning after a long night; edgy, paranoid and twitching nervously.

My back is pressed against the wall and my eyes dart in all directions looking for Ali.

My hands are unnecessarily pinched together forming crab-like claw shapes.

I make it to the big heavy black front door and with keys in hand I compose myself and quietly start to unlock the permanently locked inside bolt on the door.

As I jiggle my keys in the lock I draw a breath and look over to the door to Alis flat.

The jingle from my keys hitting lock is high pitched and frustratingly jaunty like a row of young teaspoons nervously chatting with each other as they take their seats in an auditorium moments before witnessing their first ever play.

The bolt unlocks without incident.

My heart pumps.

I open the main front door and close it behind me.

I am outside and I relock the door according to Ali's anti-Somalian policy.

There are no Somalians, I should make that clear, these are Somalians that live inside Ali's brain and every night Ali locks and unlocks the front door five times and checks every window twice in case they crawl out of his ears and ransack his face.

There is no sign of Ali outside either.

I have made it to the Promised Land.

The day is bright but cold. A wind chills the air and holds ice cubes against my face whilst whipping up leaves and spinning them in circles and as the leaves spin like visible puppets on invisible strings I pull my grey coat closer to my body and fasten its three buttons.

There is a tree outside the property and its roots smear under the twisting driveway and continue into the house. The tree is using the concrete to hide behind whilst reclaiming it's land like a giant octopus sucking out the brains of a sailor through the sailors own ears then using the sailors body as a coat to lure future sailors into a similar trap.

I walk to the end of the uneven path; fingers pointing outwards from my hands that rest down by my sides to increase balance.

I head across the road and walk aimlessly along pavement like a nun that has renounced religion and has swapped her bible for a one way ticket to Amsterdam.

Where do I go?

What do people do when they aren't inside wondering what to do outside?

There is a pub around the corner called The Windmill.

I will need some reading material first, to hide behind, should people attempt interaction.

The newspaper is the equivalent of the modern day castle.

As long as you have a newspaper in a pub and you are looking at it you are inside your castle and safe.

Once inside the pub and sitting at your table looking up over your newspaper and around the room is the equivalent of dropping your drawbridge; locking eye contact with another drawbridge dropper is both high risk and dangerous as every other drawbridge dropper is either a possible knight bearing humorous tales of unknown towns or a peasant carrying the plague.

Enter a pub alone without reading material and to everyone else in the pub already reading you are the peasant with the plague; needy and desperate to penetrate the walls of any castle.

I enter a shop thinking that I will buy the Guardian. If I am in a pub reading the Guardian and drinking a wine then I'm a civilised man of the world, but, if I'm in a pub drinking without the Guardian I am just an alcoholic that the people with books will think illiterate.

The flaw in my plan is that I am in Kilburn, South East London.

Whereas in some places the Guardian would get an all knowing nod of approval from a local gentleman in his Sunday best walking his dog, in Kilburn it is going to suggest that I have spare change to give the annoying alcoholic that stands outside the shop asking everybody for £1.

He doesn't even pretend to be homeless.

When he gets £1 he goes into the shop and buys a can of Stella, sits outside the shop on the floor, drinks it and then goes back to asking people for £1. That is his whole day.

Occasionally he will cross the road to enter the cafe and shout sexually aggressive verbiage at the two blonde girls trying their best to serve customers.

He is always inexplicably covered in dust and he has that look about him that tells me he spends his evenings going round and round inside a cement mixer in an old dusty attic blowing dead air from the surface of paintings long since forgotten into his hair.

I enter the shop and notice the shop doesn't sell The Guardian.

I look at my reading options "The Sun" — if there is an attractive intelligent girl in the pub she would think of me as beneath her IQ before even meeting me.

I'm single and the only reason I leave my flat on the occasions I do is in the hope that the sleeve of my coat will somehow get caught in the hood of a woman as she passes by; both of us laughing and trying to untangle ourselves as we look up and for a moment catch each other's eyes.

"The Mirror" strikes me as a stupid name for anything constituted from paper and if I looked in a real mirror and saw a daily tabloid staring back at me I'd be pretty frightened.

I'm not sure if I grew when I entered the shop but now I am inside the shop it feels small, like I am stuffed under a toy bed inside a dolls house.

The newspaper rack is too near my face and there is no distance from me to the counter.

I realise when I look away from the newspaper rack and towards the sound of a breathing bear that the reason the shop feels tiny is the presence of the shop worker; a man so large that he makes the shop feel small and the outside seem so far away but vast and oxygenated.

I am staring at the shop-keeper equivalent to the giant man inside the smart car.

He is of Asian complexion and has short black hair.

His head is the size of the average PC monitor and is shaped like a Tetris block.

His nose spreads flat against his face and a quick instinctive glance down to witness the space where his knuckles should be on his wild boar-head sized hands tells me that this isn't a man I want to upset but from the direction of his one eyebrow, which he is pointing directly at me; I appear to have succeeded in doing exactly that.

“Are you going to buy something?”

His voice sounds like someone punching a small dog in the face with a big dog; it is a barking, growling snarl that yelps up at the end of his sentence making his question sound like a threat.

As he speaks he leans towards me and I feel my testicles shrivel in my jeans.

In fairness to the shopkeeper, his question has made me realise how long I have been standing in front of two newspapers — not even reading them, just watching the front pages whilst thinking about how small the world feels sometimes.

I mutter meekly about needing something to read in the pub and I grab The Sun.

I hand over my money but I already know there is no way I am reading this paper in the pub. Really I don't want either paper, but

this hulk of a shopkeeper has forced my hand and before I know it I am back out on the sidewalk having spent sixty pence on a newspaper I have no intentions of reading.

I walk the few yards from the shop to the pub and pause for a moment before going in.

Knowing I have a newspaper but one I am not going to read essentially means I am about to enter the pub with no reading material. Despite knowing the rules of the castle I am about to enter as nothing more than one of the annoying plague bearing peasants.

Anyone with any sense will turn their back on me the moment they see me coming.

I enter the pub using the door on the left. The pub has one bar which runs along the upper left wall. The main room is uncommonly circular shaped and there are three booths to my right.

A cartel of round tables and chairs take up the space between the bar and the booths. I always imagine 1920's gangsters huddling around these tables, smoking from pipes in thin pin-striped suits with thinner moustaches and fine-lined morals.

In the far right of the main room are the toilets.

The floors, bar and tables are all made from the same dark wood and three large windows take up the entire length of the wall opposite the bar.

These windows are tinted, and the tinted windows combine with the dark wooden floors to make sitting in The Windmill feel very much like sitting in a mafia owned illegally licensed lighthouse.

The main room thins into a fireplace where two old light brown leather sofas face each other like two retired American daytime TV show hosts arguing over whose face transplant has been more successful at standing the test of time. The two withering TV hosts are divided from coming to blows by a pot-marked, scratched table that resembles a retired chicken that participated in cock fights before being mauled by a fox leaving the chicken unbalanced and with an ashtray on top of its head.

Continue walking past the battered sofas and damaged table and you end up in the garden, which is The Windmills main feature.

Over hanging plants, bushes, winding concrete paths and lanterns make the garden resemble the Blue Peter garden on acid.

The pub is busy, far busier than usual and I look up behind a cue of heads to see that a football match is about to kick off.

I manage to shuffle to the front of the bar where I thumb nervously at the edge of the wood and wait twice as long as anyone else to be served because I am too polite in an environment where the philosophy seems to be oppositional to waiting anywhere else.

If people wait for a bus they line up. If people wait at a cash point, they line up. When people wait at a bar to be served alcohol they barge their way to the front and wave their money around whilst shouting facts about their monthly salary, penis size and how many bedrooms their home has.

I am eventually served by a young guy with beautiful hair and an infectious smile. I like this guy because he is intelligent. Whilst the cattle of angry drunk cows moo at him to milk them first he ambles around like he is trying to find the right size shoe at a bowling alley.

To the background noise of a hundred mooing cows I take grip of my large white wine and as my fingers touch the base of the glass the mooing cows become singing angels and I don't mind how they queue.

I glance up to the top left corner and briefly take in the screen that everyone is watching.

Between the computer screen at home and work, the television screen at home and my mobile phone which carries a screen between my home and work screens I decide that today I am going to avoid people and flashing screens.

I shuffle out of the immediate herd and head around the bar, past the two retired melting TV hosts and into the garden.

There is a TV in the garden; naturally.

The television has been mounted underneath a section that is protected from rain by a roof and underneath the mounted television there are two more battered sofas and several dented coffee tables.

There must be a shelter nearby that houses abused sofas.

I look around and take note of the people in the garden watching the television.

These days even gardens need televisions.

In the future people won't go outside to watch the sunrise; they will watch the sunrise on televisions whilst huddled in dark rooms behind closed curtains.

I take a seat on an empty bench and I am immediately overwhelmed by the heat coming from the heater above me. The day is not warm, but this heater feels like it has been burning all night long and may have been the inspiration behind the 1983 Lionel Ritchie hit.

If I had a couple of eggs in my pockets I could crack them on the table and have fried eggs and wine.

The off button for the heater that is fusing my coat to my skin appears to be directly above me; but it looks complicated because there is more than one button.

There is a strong possibility I could stand and try and turn it off, fail, and be publically humiliated.

The button could potentially embarrass me in the same way that someone on a train tries to close a window but aren't strong enough.

I look around because I know I can't be the only person suffering in silence and sure enough every sweaty red face I glance at in the garden screams for someone else to be the first person to stand up and summon the help of someone with the appropriate knowledge to spare us from burning alive in a pub garden in central London.

I can't quite bring myself to be the person that stands up and says what everyone else is thinking, so I, like them, try and convince myself that I can't possibly be as hot as I think I am. I know they are trying to convince themselves that they aren't as hot as they think they are too.

We are all in this lie of pretending the temperature levels in the garden are normal, and we are all in this lie together; just to fit in.

We all look to the door, all hoping that the next person that leaves the pub and joins us in the garden of hell will be stronger than us. We need a more expressive, less patient and volatile type.

We need a leader.

The doors to the garden swing open and an older lady in a long pink skirt and flowery shirt makes a hash of walking down the one step and eventually takes a seat under the last empty table in nature's garden of man-made heat, electronic screens and people smoking heavily.

The empty table that the lady now sits on is directly under a furnace moonlighting as standard outdoor heating equipment.

Circumstances have made her one of us.

She is pale skinned and perhaps in her forties or possibly older; her hair blends from blonde to grey as it is entering the menopausal phase when women's hair shrinks into tight curly balls and sits on top of their heads like scrunches of wool, blowing in the wind, hanging from the mouths of recently shot deer.

Her cheeks are large and wide, her eyes small and her nose too tiny to describe; she very much resembles a puffer fish in an ill-fitting wig tiring from defending herself from an invisible enemy that lives in her pocket, which might also explain the scowl on her forehead that looks permanent.

She has a face that looks like she has given up on waiting for something exciting to happen in her life; which could very well be good news for the overheating people in the garden because that mindset is the mindset of an activist.

Her drink of choice is also a good sign.

She is drinking a coffee which shows that she is more than happy to do things her way regardless of her environment.

She doesn't need to fit in; she doesn't require invisibility to sustain comfort.

She is drinking cappuccino, not regular filter coffee, so standard as a standard is not acceptable to her. This is a subtle conflict because the implication is that she does therefore care at least how some people think of her; but not us. Not the beer drinking, wine guzzling class of Willesden Green.

Her face twists like a bee has flown into her nose and she looks up in anger up and stares into the flames of the heater.

We all know what she is feeling, we all share that feeling.

Complain.

For the love of God complain women.

I watch as her lips purse together and in slow motion the beautiful sounding tut she makes falls from her lips and spills across the garden like an iron barrel rumbling over a floor of musical triangles usually played at Christmas in children's nativity plays.

This is the start of our revolution. She is going to turn around and tut once more and then say something like "honestly, it's like a bloody oven out here isn't it?" and everyone will agree.

This woman may not be wearing a kilt, but she is our William Wallace.

We will build signs and find pitchforks and storm into the manager's office and demand for the heaters to be turned off and we will be led by this woman; this wonderful puffer fish-faced woman and once the dust has settled we will petition the council and ask nicely for a statue of her to commemorate our finest hour.

The woman stands, picks up her cappuccino and walks wobble-bottomed away from the heater, through the arches and to the area of the garden with the tables without heaters where she sits down with a smile in relative comfort.

By simply moving to a table without a heater the woman has managed to surprise us all.

Moving is not in the rules; everyone else in the garden knows the British way is to not help yourself and then complain about not being helped.

The rest of us briefly glance at each other and return to our slightly charred papers and over-heated conversations red faced and sweaty palmed and with the understanding that we will not be moving.

We have stuck our flags in these overheated tables and we don't care if we burn alive.

Our potential coffee drinking leader has instead become a symbol of our enemy. We, the garden people, baton down our hatches in the belief that soon the winds will change and a storm will come.

The coffee drinking woman will be sitting on the wrong table then, and our stubborn ways will be proved correct.

I take a large glug of warm wine in celebration.

Darkness slowly starts to creep up on the day as it fades into early evening and I can feel that the top of my head is possibly burnt from failing to sit anywhere else.

From underneath my burning heater I look left as a girl looks right.

I'm not sure if I look at people as they look away, or if people never look at me or if when I look at people they look away because they were looking at me.

If this was a movie that girl would have held my eye contact and I would have thought of a charming first line to captivate her heart and mind. Instead, I look away at the awkward timing, hurry up and finish the last of my wine, and decide to go home to moisturise my burning scalp.

I make it back into my flat with no signs of Ali.

The time is now around half nine in the evening and I am sitting on my bed; the television flashes and the wine glass in my hand whispers that there isn't enough of it in the world.

The front door downstairs (the main door to the house) opens and then closes. There is a locking noise, and then the door opens again followed by another locking noise before it finally shuts.

Ali is checking the front door is locked for the Somalians that live inside his head and as I close my eyes I wonder what it must be like to be scared of someone in your own home.

Tomorrow I will have to hide from him again, I will peek through my keyhole and sit against the door and drink a little more.

The End

