

## Out of Nowhere and Back

Bill Albert

Robert Treadmarsh parked his car alongside the high brick wall and turned off the engine. Resting his head on the steering wheel, he closed his eyes and sighed deeply, letting the vibration and noise of the long drive settle out of him. Not lifting his head he turned his eyes upward. Lights were on in the kitchen of his first floor flat.

After a few moments he sat back, sighed again and then reached over and lifted the heavy briefcase from the backseat. He tripped the switch to retract the car aerial. There was a slight whine as metal tubes slid into each other and then a click as they settled in place flush against the top of the front wing. He pushed the release buttons on the radio. It slid easily out of the bracket. Opening the briefcase he carefully placed the radio inside and snapped the catch shut. After checking the headlights were off and the locks down he opened the door and swung his legs out, setting his feet on the gravel.

It was at the instant, poised on the edge of the seat, feet planted, ready to push himself upward, thoughts relaxed and unfocused that he noticed it. Later he couldn't remember whether he had first heard it or seen it, caught against the bushes, flapping in the wind. It shouldn't have been there. Not in front of their new executive flat.

He straightened up, hefted his briefcase and slammed the door, maybe a little too hard. The pressure of his thumb on the flat plastic box attached to a key ring was answered by a two-tone beep from under the bonnet of the car. Turning his back on the bushes he walked quickly across to the entrance.

His hands shook slightly making it difficult to open the two locks on the front door. By the time he had climbed the stairs to his own flat he was calmer. He had no difficulty with the Yale or the dead bolt.

'Fish and chips paper', he announced, surprised at the anxiety held back in his voice.

'Strange', his wife replied, 'Fish and chips paper? Are you sure, Bob? Did you look closely?'

'Closely? No,' he shook his head. 'Not too closely. But it was there, I tell you. Just like in the city. Remember? Come on, you can probably see it from here.'

He walked over to the window, parted the curtain a few inches and peered out cautiously. His wife sat unmoving at the kitchen table.

'No', he said. 'Too dark to see anything. Want to go down with me right now? I'll show you.'

'No, Bob. I'm too damn tired for all this carry on. It's not important anyway. What does it matter? Fish and chips paper. What does it matter?'

'Matter? How can you say that? Of course it matters, Ellen. I mean, you know, ... you know it matters ...'.

He couldn't get the words in the right order to explain it to her or to himself. The curtain fell back in stiff folds sealing them off from the darkness outside.

About an hour later he heard feet running too hard on the gravel. There was shouting and laughing. Something clanged loudly and there was more harsh laughter. The noise surged towards the flat. His stomach tightened and then slowly relaxed as the voices faded, along with the disappearing thud of heavy shoes. He went to the window again but didn't touch the curtain.

He spent the evening working on tax forms.

The next morning the piece of paper was gone. He looked carefully at the bush to see if it had been pushed more deeply inside. It hadn't. He gazed out across the lawn to the screen of trees which formed a border along one side. The paper wasn't there either. In the hazy morning sun everything was quiet, everything was clean, the gravel drive smooth and unbroken.

When he returned home that evening it was waiting for him. He couldn't be sure whether it was the same piece of paper, but it was fluttering

from the same bush. After looking around to make sure no one was watching he walked over and stared down at the whitish-brown sheet. There were traces of grease at its centre. He bent down and smelled it to make sure. Grasping the paper at one edge, he gingerly plucked it from the dark green leaves and then crushed it in his hands.

Holding the ball of paper he walked across the lawn. From where he stood behind the trees he could just make out the silhouetted rows of brick chimneys and the slate roofs of the council estate on the other side of the woods. A gust of wind bent the tree branches and for a moment he thought he detected the misty glow of red neon. The wind died, the branches sagged and the glow disappeared.

He placed the crumpled fish and chips paper in the middle of the kitchen table.

'It was supposed to be completely private. That's what they said, totally, completely private.'

'You can't stop litter, Bob. What does litter know about being private.'

'Through the woods? Come on, Ellen. The wind is blowing the other way.'

She shrugged.

'Those kids maybe? The ones from last night?'

'Maybe', she replied.

That evening it was impossible for him to concentrate on his work. The figures jumped columns and blurred. He sat listening for the voices. They didn't come.

The following night as he came up the driveway his headlight beams picked it out, like a white flag stuck firmly on the top of the bush. He smiled and shook his head. He told himself that he wasn't going to worry about a stupid piece of paper, but when he got out of his car it wasn't there.

'You've got to stop this, Bob. Please! Please!'

'I saw it. I definitely saw it. Just like before. The same place as before. On the bush, Ellen. On that same damn bush!'

'OK. OK. You saw it, but isn't there now. Would you like it better if the bushes were littered with fish and chips papers? Is that what you want?'

'What? Littered with... ? No, of course not, that's not the point, Ellen. I saw it and then it wasn't there. Like it had never been there.'

'Reflections, Bob. That's all, reflections.'

At nine o'clock he heard the footsteps advancing across the gravel. They were walking slowly, voices low and urgent. They stopped in front of the flats. He stood by the window and strained to hear what they were saying.

'Bob!'

Startled, he leaped back from the window, knocking into a tall standing lamp. The light slashed up against the curtains as it fell. He lunged and caught the thin shaft, righting the lamp.

'For Christ's sake', she shouted. 'Will you get hold of yourself!'

'Ellen!', he hissed, flapping a hand at her. 'Shush, please! Not so loud. Not so loud.'

Outside the voices had stopped. Leaning towards the curtained window he held his breath. Low mummings then a burst of cackling laughter pushed through from outside.

'Bob!'

Bending low and hunching his shoulders he hopped crabwise away from the window and across to the settee.

'Ellen, please don't do this to me !', he whimpered.

'Not me, Bob. It's you. You're doing it to yourself. If those boys bother you so much, if their silly fish and chips papers bother you so much, I'll just go down and tell them to go away.'

She stood up and started for the door.

‘NO!’, he shouted, grabbing her arm. ‘No, not that Ellen! Not that.’

She glared down at his clutching hand. He followed her eyes and after a long second he jerked his hand away. He then began to stroke her arm, all the while talking low and rapidly.

‘I don’t know for sure if it’s them. You see, not sure at all. It could be anyone, anyone that did it. Maybe it was them who took it away the other night. Sure. That’s it’, he laughed. ‘They took it. And, there wasn’t any paper there tonight. Nothing at all. You see. You see, Ellen?’

He put on a grin and held out his empty hands to her.

‘Nothing at all.’

Outside there was the sound of retreating footfalls.