

HOUSING

SHORT SHORT STORY NO.25

Stephen stood in his front garden, looking at his house and nodding happily. Earlier that day he had painted the gables and put a fresh coat of varnish around the window frames. He'd been living there for twenty-two years and took pride in the fact that the garden was always neat, the hedges were well trimmed and the front door got a fresh coat of paint every three years.

He could hear two people walking along the path outside but paid no attention until they were passing by on the other side of the hedgerows.

'They were probably quite nice in the '70s,' one of them was saying. 'But I wouldn't want to live in one now. They're just so... I don't know... *ordinary*.'

Stephen turned around just as the couple passed within sight and the young man who had spoken caught his eye and looked a little embarrassed by the fact that he had been overheard. They walked on quickly and Stephen turned again to look at his home, suddenly seeing it in a different light entirely.

After all, the pebble dash along the lower half of the house was chipped and irregular.

And the lattice across the bedroom windows was archaic.

The whole thing was just so suburban that he felt a sudden rush of heart-sickness, as if he had wasted his life entirely.

He stepped inside and looked at his wife, Jane, who was standing by the fridge. 'I'm making toasted sandwiches for lunch,' she said. 'There's a bit of ham and cheese I want to get rid of.'

That was the last straw. The ham and cheese sandwich. There was no way back after that.

A year later, Stephen was sailing down the Ganges, talking to a young woman of Italian extraction named Jovanna, who had lost an arm in a boating accident two years before. The age difference between them was enormous but he liked her humour and she enjoyed his passion for life and they slept together before saying goodbye.

Back home, Jane had begun a new relationship too, although the chap in question bored her and she knew it wouldn't last. When she received a postcard from Stephen, sent from near the Wailing Wall, she wrote back to say that she regretted their separation.

'There's still time,' he wrote back. 'Why not put the house on the market and we'll become a couple of hobos?'

She went outside and stood in the garden staring at the house where she had lived all her married life and decided that she would do it. Life was too short, after all.

Two people were walking past and she overheard their conversation.

'You can't buy these kind of houses now,' one of them was saying. 'And only a madman would sell. They don't build homes with this kind of space anymore.'

She watched as they passed by and frowned, biting her lip, unsure what to do with the rest of her life.