

PROPERTY

A short story by Mark Wernham

The building went up in the early 1960s. Commercial Road, London, E1. It was designed as an office block and for forty years it served its purpose. They wore it out, the thousands of employees who trudged in and out of that concrete block over the forty years. Each sacking, each retirement, each eager new recruit swallowing down his or her nerves on their first day: they all pushed open the glass swing doors and added their grease to the building's own steady and unseen excretions. There had been forty miserable Christmas office parties punctuated with some snatched beery kisses in stationery cupboards. The building had been the starting point for a couple of dozen marriages, many more short-lived affairs and even more lonely episodes of office-bound unrequited love. There had been several corporate bullies stalking its corridors over the years, some racists, more functioning heroin addicts than you would have thought, disguised in white shirts and ties and, via regular toilet visits, maintaining low-levels of comforting opiates in their blood stream, all anaesthetised smiles throughout their working days. In forty years, only two employees died on the premises; one from a heart attack while sitting at his desk (a pre-existing heart condition, a time-bomb waiting to blow), and another falling down the concrete stairs during a fire drill – she tripped on her newly purchased platform boots and pitched forward head first down the next flight on stairs and her neck was broken. She was dead by the time the ambulance arrived. It was 1974.

Eventually, the carpets began to ooze a foul-smelling black substance as the glue sticking it to the concrete floor started to decompose. The toilets – two blocks on each of its ten floors – started to reek constantly, no amount of bleach or any other cleaning products could rid them of the tell-tale aroma, the urea had penetrated deep into the

fabric of the building. Walls had become so ingrained with grime that even painting them couldn't freshen them up. Steel window frames developed tiny mountain ranges of filth along their bottom edges, inside and out, a mixture of mould, mildew and other fungal growths. Spores spread cancerously along damp basement ceilings, where rats scurried and chewed the lagging off the pipework.

In 2000, the owners gave up on the building. They couldn't waste time with a refurb, and so they bought another, new, building further out east. The purchase was partly funded by selling the old building to a developer. In a rocketing commercial premises market, the vendors got more money than they'd ever hoped for, and the developers got their hands on a building close enough to the City of London that they could charge big money for small flats. Two hundred one and two-bedroom dwellings were squeezed into the clapped-out building, which was given a considerable face-lift. They installed thick green carpet throughout, two sets of lifts which announced the floor they were opening at in a voice recorded in a lift factory in Hull, and a concierge called Paul. They put a roof garden on the top of it with decking and plants, and from there, enjoying a glass of wine, residents could look across London and admire the shining towers of the City where most of them worked.

Two hundred old telephone numbers were re-assigned to the building. The new residents were bothered by calls from people trying to reach the previous owners of their telephone number, often they were messages for the dead from the dying.

Another relic from the past which haunted the building was a man called Dave. Dave spent most of his days begging on the streets around the building. Sometimes he sat outside, mutely holding out a cupped hand and looking pathetic, other times he danced and sang and wheezed into an old harmonica. Residents, including one called Michael, about whom we will learn shortly, occasionally gave him money and would even attempt

to instigate a conversation from time to time. Michael's girlfriend, a career-oriented young woman called Michelle, would always break away and leave him to it when Michael tried to talk to Dave. Dave's responses to Michael's well-meaning enquiries were usually meandering and confusing streams of consciousness that inevitably ended with Michael calling out a cheerful, 'Well, see you then,' and walking away, leaving Dave muttering in unpredictable modulations, alternating between barely audible muttering and immensely loud shouting, which was usually followed by an intense and humourless laugh.

Michael and Michelle were among the first of the new residents of the building. Their flat was one of the four corner flats on the tenth floor. The flat's windows faced north and east, the latter affording an uninspiring view up Commercial Road, and their front door opened onto the hallway which stretched away to the west side of the building where there was the front door of another corner flat. In between the front doors of the two corner flats, the other front doors of the other flats lined up along the hallway on the north side, facing the blank opposite wall of the hallway, except for the flats that were opposite the lift doors.

Michelle had a job in The City, Michael had no job. The flat had been expensive. The address, once a no-go area for property speculators, merely downwind of the centre of London's sewage stink, was now exclusive and convenient for both Aldgate, Aldgate East and Whitechapel tube stations. Michelle had needed to borrow a great deal of money for the deposit, and her parents were named on the mortgage deeds as guarantors. Both parents had questioned Michael's financial input and commitment to the purchase of the flat, and Michelle had loyally batted the queries away, assuring her parents that he was doing 'his bit'. Michael's bit was, however, a very little bit, if any bit at all. Since losing his job, a low grade job at an advertising agency, the kind of low-grade job that involves an ambitious young person arranging taxis for clients and 'creatives', making tea and coffee and answering telephones, Michael earned no money. He didn't earn that much to

start with. It was while Michelle was negotiating with her parents for deposit money, the offer already in on the flat, that Michael lost his job.

'I got sacked,' he had said when she arrived home late to the rented flat they shared. Michael had drunk most of a bottle of red wine, eaten a takeaway pizza, and smoked 14 cigarettes since being sacked.

'Christ, Michael,' she had replied, wearily. Make-up cracked around the lines which were starting to appear by her eyes.

It started with the rubbish chute and two pizza boxes. One morning, Michael took a full bin bag from the small kitchen of the expensive two bedroom flat to put it into the rubbish chute. In a small utility area behind a door just to the left of the front door of Michelle's flat there two rubbish chutes. They were intended for the use of all the residents on the east side of the building. There was another, identical utility area on the west side. Michael had never ventured to the west side. He could see the west side from the spy hole in Michelle's front door, an alien area situated on the far side of the building, joined to the east side by the long, deeply carpeted hallway that stretched away into the distance like a landing strip, the distance exaggerated by the fish-eye lens of the door's peep-hole. Downlighters in the ceiling shone pools of yellow light outside each identical front door, twenty four hours a day. There were twenty front doors on each floor, each of which opened into flats with the same carpet. Only a carpet bar marked the threshold of each territory.

Michael always checked the spy-hole before he left the flat. He didn't want to bump into anyone. He didn't need to make conversation with any other residents of the building, not when he was out of work and his girlfriend's patience was running out. And so Michael, bin-bag in hand, checked the spy-hole. The corridor was empty, as it always was. Everyone who lived on the tenth floor had gone to work. He left the flat and tip-

toed to the utility area where the rubbish chutes were. He pulled open the hinged steel hopper and lifted the bin-bag to push it in. And then he noticed the two pizza boxes. They were blocking the chute. Someone had carelessly shoved the boxes in and they had jammed. A stench of rotting household waste from the industrial-sized bins below engulfed Michael as he stared at the pizza boxes.

'What idiot would do that?' he asked himself, the voice in his head ramping from a whisper to vicious rage in five words. He tugged the offending pizza boxes out of the chute, angrily threw them on the floor and put his bin-bag into the hopper. He hoped the person who had blocked the chute would see the pizza boxes and be suitably chastised. The bin-bags slid noisily down the chute and landed with a thump in the bin below.

That night, when Michelle came home from work, late again, exhausted after a day and an evening working in the insurance company office, trying to earn back the money she'd borrowed for her parents to pay the deposit on the flat in which she seemed to spend very little time, Michael talked about the pizza boxes in the rubbish chute. He was still angry about it.

'I mean,' he said, 'what sort of idiot would do that? Block the rubbish chute like that?'

Michelle shook her head and asked Michael whether he'd applied for any jobs.

'No,' he said, mystified that she wasn't sharing his outrage.

Michelle went to bed. When the flat was quiet, Michael went out into the utility area. The pizza boxes were still there.

'Unbelievable,' muttered Michael to himself, spitting each syllable out in a hissing whisper through his grinding teeth. His lips went white where they were drawn tightly over his teeth. He kicked the boxes all over the utility room until they were in tatters, pieces of them scattered around, hanging off the window sills and leaning drunkenly in corners. Then he went to bed, where Michelle was already asleep.

The next morning, long after Michelle and the other employed residents of the building had left for work, Michael checked the spy-hole and, while still in his pyjamas, scuttled out of the flat and peeked into the utility room. The pizza boxes had gone, but there was a hand-written sign hanging on the handle of one of the two steel hoppers. It read:

'Would residents please refrain from leaving the utility area in a mess.'

Michael felt another undulating wave of rage flood both his brain and his thumping heart.

'Oh,' he hissed at himself, his inner voice sharp with sarcasm, 'so it's me now, is it? I'm the one making a mess in the utility area, am I?'

He went back into the flat and sat on the sofa with a cup of tea in his hand and fumed. On the television, a daytime programme continued in its cheery way, but Michael thought only of how he could discover who the pizza box culprit was, and how he could take revenge.

By two in the afternoon, Michael had come up with, and executed, a plan. Using gaffa tape, he rigged up a tiny wireless camera, purchased from one of the many computer peripherals stores on the Tottenham Court Road, to the spy-hole in the front door. The camera boasted an impressive signal range and beamed to his computer a black and white image of the long hallway. The image appeared as a circle inside the rectangular frame on the computer software that displayed the camera's images. The spy-hole's wide-angle distortion was further bent out of shape by the camera's wide-angle lens, causing the walls of the hallway, with the front doors of the other flats, curve away dramatically. The green carpeted hallway itself appeared to stretch away into infinity, but filled the bottom half of the image as if it was a football pitch. It was an altogether hallucinatory vision, in 256 shades of grey. Michael sat at his computer in the office

staring into this bulbous and pixelated representation of reality outside his front door.

'I'll get you,' he muttered to himself.

At seven, the phone rang.

'Hello?'

'It's Michelle.'

'Oh, I'm glad you called. Be careful when you come in, I've got a camera rigged up on the door. It should be fine, it's fixed pretty hard, but don't push the door right back, because it'll knock against the wall and that might break it.'

There was a long silence. Michael thought that Michelle's mobile phone had run out of battery or had just lost its signal. He took the telephone from his ear, looked at it and said, 'Hello?' and shook the receiver a bit. He clamped the ear-piece back to the side of his head.

'I'm going to be late tonight, Michael. It's Claire's birthday. There's a meal.'

'Claire?'

'I assumed you wouldn't want to come.'

'Right.'

There was a click in Michael's ear when Michelle put the phone down, but Michael was distracted by movement in the globe-like image on his computer screen. One of the doors in the hallway opened. A head peeped out and looked first one way and then the other. Apparently satisfied that there was no one else in the hallway, a man stepped out. He was carrying a black bin-bag. He scuttled towards the camera and darted into the utility room next to Michelle's flat. Michael sat up in his chair and watched the man. He waited until the man appeared again and watched as he skulked back to his flat and disappeared inside. Then Michael went to investigate.

In the utility room, a black bin-bag had been left, leaning against the wall under the rubbish chute hoppers. Michael opened the hoppers. The stink of rotten waste belched into the utility room once more. It was obvious that the both chutes were blocked again. Michael went back into the flat and found torch under the sink. Back in the utility room, he shone the torch down each chute. Both of the were blocked with pizza boxes. The man who had left his bin bags by the chutes had obviously seen that they were blocked. He then had the choice to either leave his bag by the chute and trust that when someone came along to clear the blockage, they would throw the bag down the chute, or he could have got into the lift and gone down ten floors to the ground floor, and then taken a door which led to the basement car park, and then into the bin area, where the chutes opened out into two large industrial waste containers which were supposed to be emptied every morning.

Michael stood and glared at the bin-bag and the chute. The chutes stared back at him, big square black empty eyes, with a bin-bag nose between them. He needed to think of a better way to ensnare the culprit who was blocking the chutes. The problem with the camera in the spy-hole was that it only captured people coming and going. Michael knew he needed to see into the utility room itself if he was going to succeed. If he placed the camera up high in a corner, he ran the risk of not seeing the culprit's face. He needed to place cameras inside the chute themselves, so that when the pizza box man opened up and crammed his over-sized boxes into the chutes, Michael would get a full face image of him. He was planning how he would make a poster of the man's face, and place copies on the chutes; some kind of wanted poster with the simple phrase: 'This man is responsible for blocking the rubbish chutes', or possibly just 'Moron'. That would set things straight.

Another visit to the computer shop on the Tottenham Court Road saw Michael purchasing a second wireless camera. On his return, he went into the utility room with his toolkit, leaving a sign printed out on his computer that read: 'No access during

maintenance work'. Once inside the room, he wedged one of Michelle's dining chairs under the door handle and set to work. He attached a camera to the inside of each of the rubbish chute's hoppers. He left them open and let himself back into the flat to check the camera angles on the computer. He was confident the cameras would capture every face attached to every person who would use the chutes. He removed the sign from the utility room door, closed the chutes and went back to flat.

Michael set the software on the computer to record when it detected a change in the behaviour of the pixels coming its way from the cameras, and then decided to clean the flat. He always was a vigorous cleaner, one attribute that Michelle had once liked about him, and the roaring of the vacuum cleaner encouraged him to push the brush around with force. While poking the brush under a table, it hit the skirting board. Michael felt something give. He switched off the vacuum cleaner and knelt to examine the skirting board. It had come loose at the top. He could feel along the top ridge of the skirting board and was even able to push a finger or two behind it. He tugged, and entire board came away, a length of two metres, with a splitting sound and a puff of plaster dust.

Michael opened his palms in ironic supplication to some unseen power responsible for shoddy finishing skills in new-build flats. He pulled the length of skirting board out from under the table, and heard it splinter some more as it came. The wall behind the skirting board was crumbling. He had revealed the battered old cheap brickwork that lay behind the fresh cosmetic work of the developers. He saw a spider scurry back into a hole, and noticed with distaste the thick web the spider had been spinning undisturbed for months, possibly even years. Michael poked a finger into the decayed pointing, and he felt a slight puff of breeze. He pushed the crumbs of mortar aside and worked his finger further into the gap. Parts of brickwork started to fall away as he burrowed deeper, scratching at the wound he had opened, working at it obsessively. A last jab of the forefinger and he achieved what he thought he would, a hole that revealed daylight.

Strangely elated by the damage, Michael went to the kitchen to make himself a cup of tea. He planned on having a think about what to do about the damaged skirting board, and whether he was going to tell Michelle about it, and if he was going to tell her, exactly how would he tell her. He reached up to open the cupboard where the tea bags were kept and simultaneously pulled open a drawer at his waist where the teaspoons were. He pulled a little too hard, probably because he was trying to do two things at once, and the entire drawer jumped its runners and dropped down, with Michael still holding the handle. The cutlery fell to the kitchen floor in a spectacular array of shiny stainless steel. Bewildered but thrilled at this turn of events, Michael knelt down and gathered the cutlery back into the draw. He stood up fast, forgetting that he had left the cupboard door open, and the back of his head met the corner of the cupboard door with the velocity of a hammer being swung. Michael actually saw stars in his eyes, they danced around and briefly fizzed like sparklers. He had time to exhale loudly, but not long enough to fully register the pain, before he collapsed. His knees hit the ground first, then his face struck the oven door. Already unconscious, he keeled over to his right and his head struck the handle of another cupboard before finally coming to rest on the kitchen floor. The cutlery fell again and scattered noisily around him. Quite a lot of blood came out of the two wounds on his head.

While he was unconscious, the phone rang. The answer machine picked it up. Michelle's voice sounded small and lonely in the flat through the tiny speaker and the low resolution digital signal. No one was listening to her. She sighed and then said: 'Michael, it's me. I'm going to stay with Claire for a few days. I need to some time to myself, to think things over.'

Michael lay on the kitchen floor for an hour before he regained consciousness. He noticed the blood first, then the pain in his head, then the pain in his shoulder – a throbbing which pulsed out from a wrenched muscle caused by the fall. He stood up, and cutlery rained down from his body, as if a magnetic charge had been switched off. He

touched his head where it had been split by the collision with the cupboard door and felt the congealing blood there. He brought his hand to his face and examined the blood, touched his head several more times in quick succession to see just how much had been spilt, he even sniffed it. He couldn't smell anything. The sharp pain in his head concentrated in his left eye, which felt to Michael as if a steel dart had been pushed into it. He couldn't see properly, a dark circle appeared in the centre of his vision, which sloped off to one side when tried to focus on it. When he ignored it, it flattened his depth perception and made him clumsy and uncertain when he moved around.

The phone rang. Michael stumbled and lurched out of the kitchen. The telephone's gentle trilling set his heartbeat off into a loping gallop. He wondered if he might have even have a heart attack and die right there, with the phone in one hand, the person on the other end having witnessed his death via fibre optic telephony. He picked up the phone. He didn't say anything, but a voice came down the line without introduction, as if Michael had parachuted into someone else's conversation when it was in mid-flow.

A woman's voice, an old woman, with an old East End accent:

'I said he didn't look well, I said he should go to the hospital, but would he? No. Too much bother he said. It was nothing, he said. Just indigestion, he said. But it wasn't indigestion, was it? Moaning, all the that moaning. It's all I hear now when I switch out the light. I can't sleep, haven't slept a wink since. Sweating he was, and gulping, like he couldn't breathe. Well, I knew, I did, I knew before, but then I rang 999. They came too late. He was dead by the time they came thumping into the flat waking up the neighbours. They took him out in his pyjamas. All the neighbours out on the balconies, the blue lights off the ambulance woke them up. Terrible. I can't sleep..'

Michael listened dumbly, the pain in his head gradually receding. He gently placed the telephone back in the cradle. He felt a sudden thirst, it made him panicky. Loss of fluids, he supposed, not really understanding what that meant, but knowing that it was often a

cause of problems after an accident. He was torn between a need to replace fluids in his body and the desire to check the computer. The thirst won the day, and Michael sensibly decided to make himself a cup of tea. In a hurry and leaning backwards out of the kitchen, trying to keep an eye on the computer screen through the open door of the computer room, he pushed the dirty plates in the sink to one side and filled the kettle. The sink was blocked with detritus and a nasty cold scum had formed on the top. Michael turned on the hot tap and left it running to draw the hot water, intending to wash up. While the kettle boiled, he realised he was also hungry. He had forgotten about the computer screen, his damaged head emptying his short-term memory like RAM in a computer losing unsaved data. He turned on the gas and started to heat a can of beans. He also popped a couple of slices of bread into the toaster. While his impromptu meal was in progress, he strolled to the computer room. He was startled to see that somehow, as he watched, the cameras had both been dislodged from their hiding places in the rubbish chutes, and thrown down the chutes. He could see their journey, captured at six frames per second, as they clattered downwards. The next clear image was of a man's face, staring with a mixture of alarm and excitement into the lens. It was Dave, Dave the tramp. Images on the computer screen continued to dance in front of his eyes. He recognised the street scene he saw which was pitching and rolling wildly from side to side. It was the street outside the building. Dave the tramp was making off with the cameras. It looked like he had attached them to the side of his head somehow. Michael imagined, correctly as it turned out, that Dave had been foraging in the bins at the bottom of the rubbish chutes when the cameras came rattling down and that he had grabbed the techno booty and pushed a camera under his woolly hat above each ear and wandered off cackling to himself. The cameras were now giving Michael a Dave's-eye-view of London, passers-by glancing at him nervously at him as they scurried past, hoping not to make eye contact, some smiling with doe-eyed sympathy, but still walking past not slowing their pace. Michael stared at the screen in astonishment. In his head he

could hear Dave the tramps familiar drawling as he staggered through the streets: 'Gerroff us you! I'll fight you! Grrr...' and so on.

Every now and then Dave's fists appeared before the camera's lenses, waving at nothing in particular. More often, Dave's feet popped in and out of the bottom of the screen as he trudged down Commercial Road, head bowed. Michael realised that he needed to wait until Dave stopped somewhere. If he was lucky, he would still be there when Michael ran in Dave's footsteps to catch up. If he went after Dave now, there would be no way of knowing where he might head. Michael waited, watching the two images jog around as Dave's head wobbled. He recognised the route, towards Aldgate tube station. He saw bin-bags strewn across the pavement and watched as Dave kicked them open and delved into them, hunting for something to eat or sell. He saw Dave seize a box from a fast food outlet that had been left in the gutter, and pick at a meaty chicken bone he found inside. He saw a gang of boys walk past, jeering at Dave and making obscene hand gestures at him. Dave's fists came windmilling into view again. The boys laughed and walked on.

Sure enough, Dave stopped outside Aldgate tube station. It was nearing five o'clock, the tube station would soon be disgorging crowds of suited high-earners, some of whom might take pity and guiltily throw a few coins Dave's way. Michael made his decision. He bolted out of the front door, his kitchen preparations abandoned, the pain in his head returning and his vision severely impaired. The front door closed behind him, and Michael didn't stop to register that not only had he forgotten to put on his jacket, where his flat keys were, but that also he had left a hot tap running into a blocked sink and a pan filled with beans on a gas ring. He hadn't noticed the wet carpet underfoot as he ran the few steps to the front door.

Once outside the building, the dark sky surprised him. It glowered and pushed down on the street. He felt spits of rain on his face as he ran, and as his feet pounded heavily

on the hard pavement, blood pumped through his body, and the pain in his left eye twisted into a nausea-inducing cloud inside his brain. His running deteriorated into an ungainly hobble as he tried to avoid the pedestrians coming in a solid flow against him the nearer he got the tube station. People stepped aside when they saw him coming, finely tuned as most of them were to avoiding sudden outbursts of violence initiated by the unstable. Michael could see Dave dancing outside the entrance to the tube station, which was actually both a shopping centre and an underpass for pedestrians trying to navigate the deafening roar of rush hour traffic which careered aggressively around the impossibly complex three lane one-way system. He waved and shouted: 'Dave! Dave! My cameras!'

Dave noticed Michael. He was the only person in the street running. Dave instinctively knew that the running and shouting man was after him. The street was by now thick with a coagulating mass of commuters. The rain was coming down more heavily now, and Dave noticed that the running shouting man had blood coming from his head and a bloodshot eye. Michael was finding it difficult to move through the mobbing mass, his head was hurting very badly now, and he couldn't see anything at all through his left eye. He was panting and his chest was hurting again. He pushed past several people, shoving them rudely. Dave saw the commotion and knew it was time for him to make his decision. He ran. The pavement was wide enough for him to run past Michael, making sure there were too many people between him and his would-be attacker for anything to happen. Dave ran back the way Michael had come, back towards the building.

Up in Michael's computer room, the computer screen was showing the surreal chase in a flurry of blurred images which occasionally cleared to show the twisted face of Michael, his mouth open in a shouting grimace, blood smeared across his face. The camera also captured the horrified stares of the passers-by unwillingly caught up in yet another piece of London street drama. There was no one to watch the images on the screen as they came and went, and there was no one to hear the Michelle's voice on the

answer machine as she left another message for Michael.

'Michael, are you there? Michael?' Michelle sighed heavily. The sound of it distorted on the answer machine. Water continued pouring out of the sink and out through the front door. It crept towards the lift doors, unnoticed. The beans had turned to cinders in the pan on the stove, and flames licked up the wall where the plastic handle ignited. 'Listen,' Michelle's voice continued in the empty flat, 'I think we should have some time apart. I'm coming back tonight. We'll talk, but I want you to find somewhere else. I don't see why I should be the one to move out. I'm paying for it, after all. Michael? Are you there?'

On the computer screen, Dave's escape up Commercial Road continued. The images swung wildly from left to right, and then behind, where there was glimpse of Michael in pursuit. And then the cameras fell from Dave's woolly hat to the pavement. By the time Michael arrived back at the building, he was out of stamina. He couldn't run any longer. He had realised that he had locked himself out of the flat. The cameras, still beaming their images to the computer ten floors up, were by his feet. He didn't notice them. Defeated, Michael pushed open the glass swing doors of the building's lobby. Paul the concierge wasn't at his desk. He was standing in the lobby, staring helplessly at four open lift doors, each of which revealed the grey concrete of a lift shaft, but no lift. Instead, a waterfall poured down each shaft in a glistening flood. For a moment, through his bad eye, the water looked to Michael like a shower of diamonds falling from heaven, raining down into the grimy basement where he imagined them piling up in the rotten vegetables and other rubbish down there. He had a brief urge to dive down after them, but he knew that it was just filthy washing-up water raining down.

Michael stepped back into the street and looked up to the tenth floor, to the windows of the flat he shared with Michelle. There was a muffled thump, followed by the unmistakable ringing of breaking glass. A cloud of fragments of toughened glass fell to the street, landing on parked cars, creating a crunchy carpet on the road. It was almost

festive in its sparkling heaps. Michael imagined them as more precious gems, before he noticed the shards disappearing into the oily black mud in the gutters, reminding him where he was once again. Up on the tenth floor, flame burst out of the window frames, free at last, gobbling up fresh oxygen in its gaping, snapping orange mouth. Black, poisonous smoke billowed out, too. The fire had already got hold in the flat below, and the decking on the roof was also consumed. Despite the rain, the building succumbed quickly to the cleansing fire as poorly fitted gas pipes snapped and belched more fuel into the conflagration.

Michael watched until the fire engines started to arrive. He walked away slowly, hoping he might find Dave.

THE END