

Age Rage

That morning I could find nowhere to park. It wasn't a special day; just another bad one. The young mums had been out in their urban tractors, dropping their darlings off at school and had now abandoned their steeds to embark on their shopping expeditions. They were parked like tanks; front end up on the kerb and backside sticking out into the road. I've seen horses tied up neater outside a saloon. Damned things!

On top of that, the blasted road works were chewing up half the kerbside; the council once again throwing our money away. I don't know where they expect people to park. I'd get myself a bike if it weren't pandering to the green brigade and their precious environment.

Anyway, I parked in a little cul-de-sac just behind the school. It was a fair walk to the shops but I thought it'd give the old arthritis a bit of an airing. Even this out-of-the-way corner of the world was full of cars but I managed to park in front of an old Astra – shunted it a bit as I was reversing but no damage done. My nose was poking over the driveway of a house, but there was no car on the drive, and besides, you could have got a bus through the gap.

I walked to the shops, knee creating something terrible and back twinging as well these last few days. I don't know about a bike, I thought, it'll be a wheelchair before long the way it's going.

Damned shops were all full. I queued to buy a stamp, I queued to buy a pie and I queued to get money out of the damned machine.

Ruddy banks! They're quick enough to demand money with menaces if you're late with your repayments, but they make you queue to get your own off them. I was only three months in arrears – they knew they were going to get it eventually. No

need to send around the thumbscrews.

I'd considered selling the old abode if the smelly stuff hit the whirly thing. It wouldn't be pleasant, though; an Englishman's home and all that.

I had to go and pick up some photographs from the developers and when I got there they told me (after queuing) that they weren't ready. Four days they'd had them - guaranteed twenty-four hours. Short staffed, the girl said. They must have a list of excuses ready for the poor mugs who trust them with their snaps. I can have them for nothing for my inconvenience. It didn't make my knee feel any better.

I had a look in the estate agents window. There was nothing for less than £100,000. A two-up two-down - £106,000; bloody ridiculous! Still, I'll get more than that for mine, I thought, if the smelly stuff...etc.

To top it all, I bought a Hovis and a Mail and the damned girl short-changed me. I gave her £2 and she only gave me 30p change. I didn't notice until I was halfway back to the car and my knee was protesting too much to go back, so I wrote it off. They're all filling their pockets at my expense and all I can do is moan and complain... and limp.

I kept weighing up my options. I could go into Sheltered Housing, but I like to think I'm a bit young for that, yet, and certainly too young for an Old Folks', Home. They should have Homes For People With Nowhere To Live; that'd be a corker of an idea. Mind you, you'd get all the riff-raff off the streets malingering in there. I wouldn't want one of those as a neighbour.

I cursed my blasted knee and sat down on a bench for a breather, after checking for chewing gum and any other unsavoury deposits. Blow me, a woman sits down at the other end of the bench with a mobile phone grafted to her ear. She didn't need a phone. Whoever she was talking to would have heard her without. They don't lower

their voices; they think everyone wants to hear. Katy was home from Plymouth; she likes her new job; more responsibility and a lot more money. Good for Katy! Dennis gets an Audi next week; he's pleased about that because he was getting fed up with the Renault. Bless him!

She wasn't going to shut up so I got up and shot her a few daggers as I limped by. A waste of time. I could have set fire to her and she wouldn't have noticed.

I eventually got back to the cul-de-sac and as soon as I turned the corner I could see the glass on the floor. The nearside light in pieces on the footpath: sidelight, indicator, and a graze of blue paint the fingerprint of the culprit; a Corsa nestling on the drive where before there had been nothing.

You can't leave anything anywhere these days. I suppose I should have been grateful that my car was still there. I sighed, shook my head, took a deep breath and marched up the drive as smartly as my limp would allow.

The woman who answered my knock looked harassed and impatient. She was an old bird, well, about my age, not so old. She looked a bit weather-worn but the framework looked sound enough; nothing that a bit of upholstery couldn't put right.

"Do you know you've nudged my car as you drove on to your drive?" I asked, reasonably enough.

She gasped. I thought she'd taken her last breath.

"It's you, is it? How do you expect me to get on to my drive with your car in front of it?" Her voice was rather high-pitched; hysterical, even.

"It's not in front of your drive! You could get a 747 through there." I pointed. "I've seen narrower hangars!"

"Coat hangers, you mean?" Very witty!

Her eyes were brilliant blue, similar to her car, and framed by golden spectacles. I

don't know why, but they seemed to have a calming effect on me. They must have been therapeutic eyes.

"Anyway," she carries on, "I've rung the police. I've given them your registration number. They'll be here as soon as they've got anyone to spare."

She obviously didn't realise that this meant days or weeks rather than minutes.

"Do you know, I've had that car for seven years and this is the first time anyone's put a mark on it?" I said.

"Well," she said, "I'm surprised if that's an example of your parking. You're parked a good three feet over my drive."

"And your drive's ten feet wide. How do you manage in a narrow street?"

"Don't try switching the blame to me. You're the one at fault." She pointed wildly at my car.

"My car was stationary at the time. How can I be at fault? It's like running into a lamp post and blaming the lamp post."

"You were blocking my drive."

"Well, if you couldn't get through, you should have waited."

"Where? Where should I have waited? The street's full of cars that don't belong here."

She suddenly put a hand to her forehead and leaned against the doorframe.

"Are you all right?" I asked.

She nodded behind her hand but otherwise didn't move. I thought she swayed a little and I moved to take her arm.

"I'm fine! Just leave me!" She whipped her arm away and almost fell backwards into her hallway.

"Here," I said, taking her arm again. "Let me help you inside. Do you mind if I

come inside?”

She lowered her other hand and shook her head. She looked pale and close to tears. All the excitement, I supposed.

She allowed me to support her by holding on to her arm, which was an experience in itself. It had been a long time since I took a woman by the arm – too long. I supported her to where she guided me and we ended up in the kitchen. She flopped on to a chair at the table and propped her head in her hands.

“Can I, er... can I do anything?” I asked. “Shall I make a cup of tea?” I looked around for the implements.

She nodded. “Thank you.” She was a lot more pleasant when she was subdued.

I got on with it and took in my surroundings. It was very nice. All the appliances were there. And the hallway, too. Very tidy. The old girl looked after herself.

“Look,” I said, “I’m sorry if I lost my temper. I was getting impatient. I couldn’t find anywhere to park. Sugar?”

“Well,” she said, looking at me with those eyes, “I’m as much to blame. I get a little impatient myself, sometimes. No, thank you. No sugar.” She smiled at me.

“You’re very kind. I just went a little dizzy. Must have been all that shouting.”

I carried the cup to her, rattling in its saucer, and placed it in front of her. Her hand shook as she picked it up and I sat down opposite her.

“May I?”

She smiled at me again and I smiled back.

And that was how it all began.