

Uncle John

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Uncle John was my father's brother, and for every way that my father was harsh, frightening and unpredictable, John was his opposite – gentle, calm and familiar. From a very early age this man had intrigued me – he was so alike my father in appearance it was uncanny, but so unlike him in temperament, and I grew to be very fond of him.

John never married, and after both my grandparents died, he lived on in their house, with the smell of his father's pipe and mother's snuff all around him. Years after they died, I fancied I could still smell both of them in that house, so I presumed he still could, and it became all too clear that for his own good, he should have moved elsewhere after they passed on.

The first time I remember him experiencing problems was that on one of my frequent visits he insisted on showing me a birthday card that was simply signed 'Love from an admirer'. Instead of being intrigued in a 'positive' way, I recall there being a great deal of anxiety in his demeanour, and he felt that he was being made fun of. Though I was young at the time, I had simply said that maybe he had made a favourable impression on a lady friend in the local bar he frequented, who simply wanted to wish him Happy Birthday, but was too shy to reveal her name. Unfortunately he would have none of it, and became quite agitated, so I attempted to change the subject.

This incident was brought up at several of the visits I paid later in that month, and it concerned me in a way I didn't fully understand. Then for reasons I understood even less, the subject was never brought up again, as he now was worried that the people who lived in the flat above him were spying on him and then 'tittle-tattling' all of his

'business' in the local pub. He explained to me that they had wired up microphones in their floor, so that they could listen to him through his ceiling. Evidence that this was taking place was that 'everyone' was talking about him.

Matters for me came to an abrupt halt on the visit at which he announced that not only were his neighbours spying on him, they were also stealing his electricity. In his efforts to stop them doing this, he had 're-wired' his flat so that everything was now connected to a single switched socket in his kitchen. As this 're-wiring' included the lights, there were festoons of thin cable all over the flat.

That evening, I told my Dad what I'd seen, and I suppose I expected him to be shocked – I know I was. I was at that time building and repairing radios as a hobby and I was afraid that John was in danger of electrocuting himself. Dad asked if there was anything else, and I told him the whole saga, although I felt pretty mean for telling tales. He said he would visit his brother and find out what was going on.

It was later on the next week, when after his promised visit he told me that he'd spoken to John, and that the matter was being 'sorted out', and I wasn't to worry. I did. I have to admit to being a little scared of John's behaviour, and stopped paying him any visits – so John started to call in at our home. Not that he wasn't welcome, my Mum was fond of him and I felt safer on home territory. Sadly, it was on one of these visits that he asked my advice about TV cameras – and didn't have much hesitation in telling me that the reason he asked was that the neighbours were now employing cameras to snoop on him. Later I related this to my Dad, who had started to shake his head and hold his chin between thumb and finger whenever John's name was mentioned.

So it was then that some time later, Dad was called on by the police to go with them to John's house, where he had barricaded himself in and was steadfastly refusing to budge

to let the police detain him under the Mental Health Act. Dad managed to convince John that it was better to walk out himself, rather than be dragged out kicking and screaming.

It seems that those troublesome neighbours had been busy again, this time stealing his gas, so in an effort to stop them, he had dug up his kitchen floor and severed the gas main that ran underneath each house in the street, the families of which were then under dire threat of involuntarily joining in John's unintended self-immolation.

John spent some time in a local mental health establishment, but was eventually pronounced 'fit' and discharged. On his way home from the unit, John stepped out in front of a bus, and ended up in hospital – again. I felt guilty about John – I felt guilty that I hadn't been able to help him when he needed it most. Looking back, I was only a boy, and found it difficult to understand what was happening, but I still felt guilty, and probably because of that feeling, didn't visit John as often as I should have – which I feel even more guilty about.