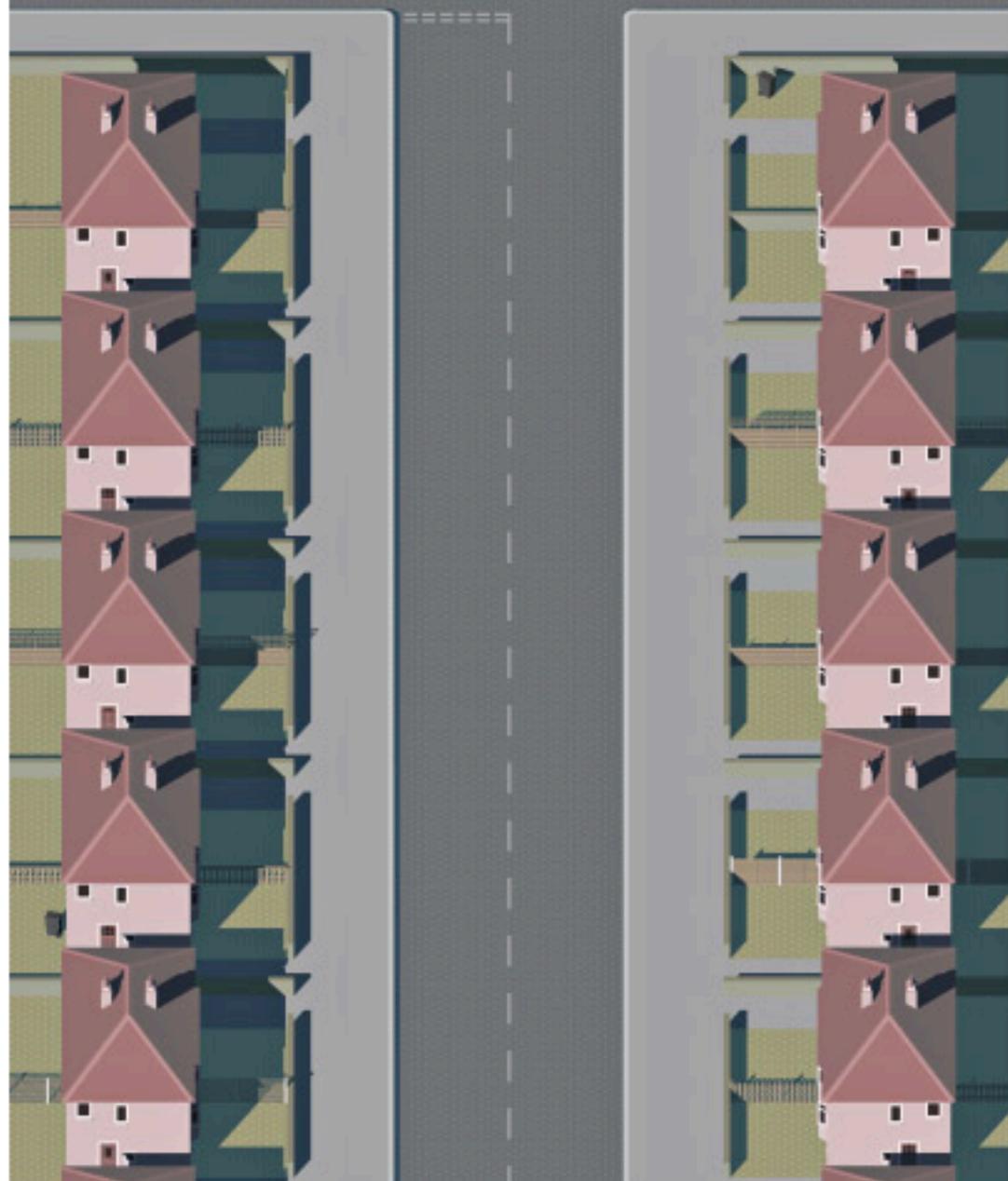


Iain Broome
A is for Angelica





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For Suzy

Angelica

If I look hard enough, it will go away.

So I sit and I stare.

This morning I prayed for forgiveness.

It's evening now. The sky through the window tapers up from the rooftops, red to blue, blue to black. I'm on a chair with a cushion tied to the seat. I moved it from the kitchen nearly a year ago. It doesn't belong there anymore. It's just the chair by the bed that no-one else sits on. It gives me backache. A strip of light shines through from the landing. I think about it waking her up, hurting her eyes should they open. I imagine I'm someone else looking in through the window from across the street, watching this room faintly lit by the glow of another. I hope someone sees me, follows the light through the gap in the door and writes down what I'm about to do.

Angelica walks in. She offers me a piece of chocolate cake.

'Have you finished?' she says. 'It's almost time.' I don't answer properly. I never answer properly. I sit and I stare.

'Did you know the Russians have a special word for light blue?'

She looks away. Sips her tea. Shakes her head.

'Just get on with it,' she replies. 'Before your drink gets cold.'

Benny

Benny paints pictures with his eyes closed. I keep a thick file on Benny. He paints every day between one and two in the morning and his light is always the last in the street to go out. It would be mine, but I never switch it on when I'm in the spare room, adding to a file. It's easy to write in the dark. My eyes have nothing to adjust to, or from.

Last summer, Benny became the youngest ever nominee for the Harris Manning Arts Award. It was in the local papers. A picture of him shaking hands with the mayor. He sold three of his paintings for £2000, which is far too much money to give a sixteen-year-old boy. He was in the papers for that as well, this time with his arm around an art collector from London. Benny's mother, Jenny, was standing next to him. She was holding an oversized cheque. I cut the picture out and put it with the others.

I can see into Benny's room. He has a row of five candles lined up along the windowsill. He lights them when he's painting. His window doesn't have curtains because he set fire to them. When he paints, the back of his canvas always faces the street. I've watched him painting for hours, but I've never seen one of his pictures. They never put Benny's pictures in the papers – just pictures of Benny.

When he lights his candles, I can see the air around the

flames shimmering, like when roads get hot in summer. The candles illuminate half the room. Benny disappears, flicks the switch by the door, comes back through the half-light like a ghost. He stands at his easel and picks up the paintbrush, holds it stretched in front of him, leans forward until it touches the canvas, arches his neck, lifts his head and closes his eyes. He opens them again when he's done, when there's air between his picture and the paintbrush.

I started Benny's file a year ago, the day of the fire. I sat on the end of the bed in the spare room, looking out through the window at an empty street. A row of closed curtains, darkness behind darkness. His curtains were thick enough to hide the light from the candles; close enough to catch the heat from the flames. They ate the material from the bottom up. I began to see Benny, the tops of his legs, then his stomach. He was perfectly still, revealed like the opening of a play.

And then there was movement. A paintbrush fell to the floor, the curtains opened and closed as Benny pulled and yanked them from the rail. I watched him jumping up and down, trying to put the fire out, the flames dancing across his bedroom floor, the only light in the street. Then it rose again. It hovered in the air, just for a second, and then tumbled out into the night. Benny sat on his bed in a tangle of shades, black and blacker still. A room framed like a picture, only outlines of objects to go by.

I picked up my pen and started writing.

Note: Benny Martin has an easel in his room. He set fire to his curtains and threw them out of the window. Time for fire to die = 32 minutes. Note end.

I see Benny twice a day. Once when he leaves for school in the morning and again at night when he's painting. I never see him come back because he enters the house through the back door. John Bonsall told me so. He can see him from

his kitchen, climbing over the wall and into the back garden. Benny wears the same jacket every day. It's a navy suit jacket with three badges attached to the right lapel. The badges change colour each morning. He collects them. His hair is long around his ears. Sometimes he ties it into a ponytail with a light blue band. I remember him being born in the back of his mother's Mini Metro. She wasn't driving. His father was. Before the divorce. They were on their way to hospital, but she couldn't hold on. It ruined the upholstery.

When Benny was a child he played football on his own in the street. He'd wear trousers with holes in, dribble around the parked cars and kick the ball against my fence. Sometimes I'd go out and watch him, shout encouragement from the garden. He'd ask me to join in, but I'd always tell him he was far too good for me. He'd carry on regardless, dribbling and kicking, happy as Larry. One day, while he was playing, a dog pulled free from its owner and sank its teeth into Benny's leg. It refused to let go. He never played again.

I haven't spoken to Benny since he was twelve-years-old. Apart from once. It was two years ago. I was walking home from church. I'd been in early with some leaflets from the neighbourhood watch. As I turned into the street, I saw Benny leaving his house to go to school. He walked towards me with his bag over his shoulder. His jacket had one green, one orange and one red badge attached, like upside down traffic lights. His limp seemed worse than usual.

'Good morning,' I said, as he got near.

'What are you looking at?' he replied, and carried on walking.

Birthdays

It's the day after New Year's Day, and it's my birthday. Kipling, my dog, has diarrhoea. This means I haven't taken him for his eight o'clock march to the dog mess bin. To use it you have to put your hand inside a plastic sandwich bag, pick up the mess and turn the bag inside out. You carry the bag to the bin. It's a trusted technique, but not for me. Not anymore. Not since I bought the wrong sandwich bags, the ones with two holes in the bottom to ventilate the food. I've developed a technique of my own. I time it so that Kipling gets to the bin at exactly the right moment. Then I pick him up, cut out the middleman.

Note: 7.15am feed Kipling. 8.00am take Kipling for walk. Judge speed of walk on food left in Kipling's bowl. 8.15am to 8.30am (varies) arrive at dog mess bin. Estimated saving on sandwich bags = 28 pence. Risk factor = 6. Note end.

There's a woman walking towards me from across the road. She's smiling and waving a pair of scissors in the air. I don't know who she is. I've never seen her before. She has long black hair tied back in a ponytail and she's wearing a pair of tight fitting jeans with coloured cotton embroidered around the hem: pink, purple, orange and black. The sleeve of her cardigan falls away from her shoulder as she bounces over the

kerb. I can see part of her upper arm. Thin with faint creases, like the lines on her neck when she smiles. I stare at her. And then I remember, Kipling's diarrhoea. She goes to speak to me. Her eyes are green and twinkling and I have my hand in an inside out sandwich bag, holding a soggy log of dog mess.

'Hello, my name's Angelica,' she says. 'I've just moved into twenty-three.' A pair of yellow marigold gloves half-hang out the back pockets of her jeans. Some of the fingers are inside out.

'I'm Gordon Kingdom,' I reply. She nods at me and smiles. 'I live on this side of the road. On your side you've got Ina Macaukey. She's at twenty-five and not long out of hospital. Next to her is Morris Webster and Ginger at twenty-seven. Ginger's a cat. You'll not see much of them. Then there's the Martins at twenty-one. The rest you can work out for yourself.'

'It sounds like a friendly place.'

'And like I say, I live here, number eighteen. On this side.'

'I see,' she says, looking at me. She thinks I haven't finished, that there's more to come. There's an uncomfortable pause between us and I notice how pretty she must have been, at some point. Her cheeks are flushed red, from the cold I think, though they might be her normal-coloured cheeks. Now she's staring at the inside out bag of dog mess in my hand. She can't be a day over forty-two. Ten years younger than me.

'My dog's not well. He's been sick in the house. I couldn't walk him this morning.'

'I see,' she says again, still smiling. I should leave it at that.

'He's shit on the bathroom floor as well. By the time I get in, he'll have probably shit on the landing.'

Now she's staring, not smiling. Her jacket has opened slightly at the top. She's wearing a bright yellow v-neck underneath. The colour matches the gloves in her pockets. I see the slightest centimetre of cleavage, a smidgeon, an ounce. And I can't believe she made me say shit. Twice.

'So how's the house?' I ask.

'It's fine. Empty though. The van's coming this afternoon. I just brought a few boxes over in the car.'

'Where is it?'

'The van?'

'No, the car.'

'Oh, it wasn't mine.'

There's another uncomfortable pause. Her ponytail sways because she's slowly shifting her weight from one foot to the other. She must be cold.

'So, how's the house?' I ask.

'You just asked me that.'

'Yes. Sorry. Is there anything else you want to know?'

'Not really. Who am I replacing?'

'What do you mean?'

'Who lived here before me?'

'Karen Carpenter.'

'Really? *The* Karen Carpenter?'

'No. This one was Welsh.'

'Did she live on her own?'

'No. She lived with a husband.'

'Well, I'm only renting at the moment.'

'So were they. For fifteen years.'

'Why did they leave?'

'I think they found somewhere better.'

'I see,' she says. And then we stop again, just long enough for her to have legitimate grounds to say, 'Well I'd better get on with it, get it finished before the van arrives,' and for me to reply, 'Of course, I'd better let you go.'

I watch her turn and walk away. She looks younger from behind. Slimmer. She opens her front door.

'It's my birthday!' I shout.

She turns and shouts back, 'Mine too!'

'You're joking!'

'No! Happy Birthday!'

She's joking. She has to be. But either way, I don't mind,

so I shout, 'Happy birthday to you too!' and crouch behind the garden fence where she can't see me. As if I'd been down here beforehand. I look at the dog mess in my hand, squeezing into shapes inside the bag. I think I hear her shout something else. Then a door closing. I stand up and she's gone.

It snowed this afternoon. I watched the flakes settle on the grass, cars and pavement as I opened a new folder, filed Angelica under A. Now it's dark and there's a veil of white draped across the street like a just-washed tablecloth. I take Angelica's file and make notes about our conversation this morning. I write s*** instead of shit and try to describe the way she walked across the road, both towards and away from me. Her small steps and folded arms. Scissors poking out of her back pocket.

At half past midnight, I put her file back and go downstairs. Kipling is in the kitchen, asleep in his basket. I stroke his head and check his bowl to see if he's eaten any food, but he hasn't touched it. I pull a dining chair out from under the table and sit on it, trying not to wake him as I struggle to squeeze my feet into my gardening boots. I tip-toe across to the fridge and take out the cake I baked this afternoon. It has a single candle on it. There's enough for one helping.

I put it on a plate. Place it on the table. Look at it.

Then I pick it up again, walk to the front door and out into the street. My spade is on the floor by the Christmas tree and a box of sandwich bags. I take it and walk across the road to Angelica's house. Everything is silent apart from the buzz of the street lights and the sound of my rubber boots breaking the snow. There's no-one to disturb. I bend down, put the cake on Angelica's doorstep and take my matches from my pocket. I light the candle. The flame goes out immediately. I turn and look at my footprints, take one step backwards so my foot lands in the exact same place it had been before. Then I scrape my spade in the snow and use its sharpest edge to level

out the nearest footprint to the doorstep, make it disappear. It takes fifteen minutes to get home, walking backwards across an empty street.

I close the door, leave my boots in the hallway and go upstairs to the spare room. I stand at the end of the bed and think about what happened last night. Before this morning. Before Angelica moved in. And it feels too much to bear. So I look at my watch. It's five past one. I sit for a while, watching Benny painting pictures with his eyes closed.

Cressington Vale

I hid behind curtains before I met Angelica.

It started the day I caught the vicar's wife masturbating with the blinds open, her full-length mirror tipped at an unfortunate angle. In truth, he's not really a vicar and she's not really his wife. He's a Jehovah's Witness. She's his bit on the side. I thought about slipping a note discreetly under the door to stop it happening again, but I decided against it. Besides, she should've known better. She's older than me. After that, I found myself sitting by the window for hours on end, surveying the street. Letting the world drift past. Taking my mind off things. I watched my neighbours and got to know them better than I ever had before. Their changes in behaviour. Their simplest of movements. Their finest of details.

These are skills that I've developed. I never kept watch when I was young. But I listened hard and heard everything. Like the things my friends would say when they thought I'd left the room. And my parents having intercourse. I only heard them once, but the worry stopped me sleeping. I made nightly interventions, which included coughing loudly and walking to the bathroom to flush the toilet. Anything to let them know that I was there and still awake. Anything to stop it. Sometimes one of them would get up and come to my room. They'd ask me what was wrong and I'd tell them I'd had nightmares. This went on for over a year, until my mother said she was going

to take me to the doctor. So I told her the truth. She was silent for more than fifteen seconds. Then she laughed quietly and rubbed her eyes to show me that she was tired. 'Your mum and dad both love each other,' she said by way of explanation. As if that changed a thing.

I listened hard at work too, when things were different. When I had a job to go to, an office to work in and meetings to attend. But those things are gone. Cressington Vale is my office now. It's better than a real job. There are no conversations with colleagues who are younger than me, who feign interest in my weekends. No sitting at a desk, watching through a gap in a blind as they leave early to drink together. No listening to other people's conversations through thin, fabricated walls. No waiting for someone else to do his or her job properly so that I can do mine. There's none of this. These are things that used to happen. These are things that will never happen again. My life is different now. I don't go to work. I don't have an office. I stay at home, hide behind curtains and make notes. I wait for something to happen.

For example, the average bay window for a house on Cressington Vale is approximately three and a half feet from the floor, so when someone sits in their front room to watch the television, or eat their dinner on a tray, I only see them from the neck up. Each day I make a list of the time each head-in-the-window becomes a body and gets up to close the curtains. Ina Macaukey is always the last. She sits and crochets in the light from her television. Its colours always changing. When all the curtains are closed, I make supper, read the newspaper or go upstairs and sit by the spare room window. That's where all the action is. It's where I keep my files. I can see up and down the street, over the trees in the road and occasionally into bedrooms. I avert my eyes at the slightest sign of nakedness. I'm never indiscreet. But there have been incidences. First there was the 'vicar's wife', and then the unpleasantness of glimpsing a penis at number nineteen. I turned away, but not

quickly enough to avoid registering the offending member as not belonging to Peter Smith, as perhaps I might have expected, what with his wife, Janice, closing the downstairs curtains just half an hour before. I never say anything though. These matters are not my business. Not any more.

I used to be part of the neighbourhood watch committee. I was watch coordinator for fifteen years, six months and twenty-five days, appointed following a spate of muggings in the local area and around six weeks after the previous coordinator resigned. She'd been one of the victims. Before then I'd been watch secretary. My responsibilities included planning meetings and taking minutes. I also set up and provided a reminder service, where I would ring committee members approximately three hours prior to a meeting. I'd let the phone ring twice and then hang up. To track attendance I created spreadsheets, which I ruled out by hand and completed in pencil, then traced the lines with a thin marker.

These days there is no neighbourhood watch. In fact sometimes it feels like I'm the only one who does any watching at all. Cressington Vale is a quiet street and one of the oldest in town, tucked away from the new housing estates. But misdemeanours take place on quiet streets. They still need rules and boundaries. So I keep a file labelled 'Suspicious behaviour', which I add to almost every other day. It's a dossier of unusual happenings. Most involve neighbours. Like when Andrea Turner returned home late from work with a towel wrapped round her head. She'd been to her first aqua aerobics. Or when Don Donald, my oldest friend, left his mattress on the front lawn. He'd been bitten twenty-seven times in the night and only on his legs. He said he wanted to give it some air.

I've found that if you ask directly, people will explain themselves.