

Edna and Goliath

As I approach the front door I can hear their voices, their shapes like spectres behind the stained glass panels. No doubt they're having a chat, anticipating a wait, but I'm already here, proving them wrong. Although at eighty-three I might not move as quickly as I once did, I'm not as decrepit as people think.

I reach for the lock, take a deep breath. I had my hair done yesterday, my hearing aids are in and I've cleaned my teeth and glasses particularly well.

I'm ready.

I open the door to three people: that Katie woman off the local news - bleach blonde, too much makeup and slightly running to seed - and a couple of unshaven, scruffy-looking young men. Good thing Reg isn't here, he'd have had something to say about *that*. They're surrounded by boxes and bags of what I suppose is their filming equipment. Considering that everything's meant to be more compact these days, there seems to be an awful lot of it.

"Mrs Elthwaite?" Katie says. "We're from TV South, here to do the interview?"

I don't know why she phrases it as if it's a question, as if she thought I might have forgotten or misunderstood, but these days, increasingly, that's how people speak to me. But I decide to let it pass, *don't rock the boat* – I just smile and invite them in.

I lead them straight into the lounge. "Would you like some tea? Coffee?"

"No - thanks anyway, but we've not a lot of time. So perhaps, if you don't mind, you and I could just have a little chat – get you nice and relaxed – while Matt and Joe set up their stuff and then we'll be good to go."

Good to go. That's what this is all about. Three years ago the council decided that this street and half a dozen others surrounding it should be wiped out and redeveloped.

I can see Reg now, reading that first letter, his look of outraged disbelief. For months afterwards there were innumerable letters, phone calls, meetings, and then, last year, a final verdict: obliteration. No further appeal. You could see why it went that way: all the remaining residents, bar us, had gone. Now, without Reg, there's just me – stranded here like a beached sea-turtle and not at all *good to go*.

He might have thrown in the towel at that stage, but before we'd had time to really digest the news the media got hold of it and the whole thing exploded into one of those – what do they call its? – *cause celebres*. People taking sides, writing to the papers, petitioning politicians on our behalf - and now there's talk of a sit-in or something similar. Hence this interview.

"Mrs Elthwaite?" Katie says again. "Or may I call you Edna? – it makes it more personal."

"Fine." Good thing Reg isn't here, it would have been *Mr Elthwaite* or nothing. He used to go spare, even in his last days in hospital, when the nurses called him Reg.

"So, Edna. What we want to do with this piece, obviously, is to get people on your side. Make them fully aware of the terrible injustice you're facing, galvanise them into supporting your cause."

"Alright."

"I need you to really open up about how you feel about this and your fears for the future. It must be hugely painful to have your home taken from you after fifty-seven years."

"It's difficult, yes."

“Oh, excuse me, I just need to take this.” Katie makes for the door, already speaking into her phone.

Fifty-seven years. We moved here when Reg was thirty and I was twenty-six. He’d not long been promoted to office manager at the insurance company where he’d worked since leaving school and he was cock-a-hoop. His wife a school-teacher and him the first in his family with a white-collar job. He felt we were top of the heap.

When we’d married five years earlier we’d bought a tiny, unmodernised terrace on the other side of town and for a while we thought that was pretty fine. But this, a semi with all mod-cons in a single street of Victorian villas, this was something else. *A nicer class of dwelling, altogether,* I remember Reg saying.

Unsurprisingly we fell in love with it at first sight and bought it quickly - afraid that we might be unmasked as working class and not-quite-suitable buyers. And from then on, I suppose because he was so proud of what we’d achieved, and because we didn’t have children to occupy our time, Reg adopted a very proprietorial attitude towards the entire street.

There was no doubt that these houses were pretty and even though we were still young when we came, we both vastly preferred their traditional features to the stark, angular boxes being built as new housing. Equally, we loved the spaciousness of the tree-lined avenue itself and the fact that every dwelling on it had both a paved area at the front and a good-sized garden to the rear. The bucolic view that greeted you when you turned into the street settled around you like a comforting blanket. *Home.*

“Sorry about that.” Katie comes back into the room. I wonder who she’s been talking to - her husband, lover, mother? - probably nothing to do with work. These days no one ever seems to

consider the person in front of them as more important than their phone. *So bloody rude*, Reg would say.

The two young men are waiting now, camera and microphone at the ready. “We need to get on,” one mutters.

“Okay. So, Edna, I’m just going to do an introductory piece to camera – setting the scene, and then I’ll ask you some questions. Please say what you think, but keep it short if you can. Ready...?”

I nod and she glances at her notepad and launches into her speech. *David and Goliath... victims... valiant struggle... defenceless old people... support...* I don’t need to listen to her every word.

Living here meant everything to Reg. He never wanted to move again, even when we might have afforded a place in the really posh part of town: *Grand of course, but not as graceful as our street.*

For quite some years we knew exactly who lived in every house. Of course, it helped that Reg was the Neighbourhood Watch organiser but even so, the people here were *our sort of people*, as he often said. So we had street parties – the first for the Queen’s Silver Jubilee, and then because everyone had loved it so much, one every summer after that. And fireworks, barbecues, best garden in the street competitions ... it was a glorious time.

But then, as children grew and left home and the world itself changed, our neighbours started to sell-up, drift away. Partly this was fuelled by the streets around us being taken over by immigrants which didn’t bother me - I found it very interesting - though Reg was far from impressed. *It’s not that I’m a racist, they just do things differently*, he’d say. And after a while he didn’t say anything at all, for fear that his words might be misconstrued.

At last Katie turns to me. “So, Edna, being forced to leave your home - how do you feel about that?”

My brain freezes for a moment, but I make myself concentrate. “It’s sad, a waste. It’s a shame they can’t do something with these houses rather than just knock them down. And in this street they’ll be uprooting all the trees and gardens too.”

“You must be angry?”

“I suppose so. All that work people once did, all the pride they took in where they lived. It’ll all be gone”

“And your husband - I understand that, sadly, he died six months ago. What do you think he would be feeling now?”

“Reg would still be fighting. He wasn’t the sort of man who would ever give up.” I can see from Katie’s look that she wants me to say more. But what? If I really told her what Reg was like we’d be here for hours. So I just murmur, “It’s different when you’re alone.”

She smiles, looking uncomfortable. “And what do you think about this plan for a sit-in – do you think it will make a difference?”

“Probably not. But some people believe it will.” If we were just chatting I might have told her that I organised one of those once, years ago, when they were threatening to close the school. Teachers and parents - a real wartime spirit - three days it went on for. And it made them change their minds. That was worth fighting for. But this, a house, a street, me – what does it matter?

“So what would you say to anyone else who’s facing this sort of situation – little people being crushed by faceless bureaucracy?”

“I think I’d tell them to be careful.”

She looks at me strangely. “Right. And finally, is there anything you’d like to add, Edna?”

I pause. There’s plenty I’d like to say, but nothing she’d want to hear. Everyone’s made so many assumptions over all these months but, like Reg, but no-one’s yet asked, *What do you want, Edna?*

If they had, they’d know that all I ever wanted was to leave, make a fresh start somewhere in a little flat, perhaps by the sea. This was Reg’s fight, not mine. He’s gone now, and as far as I’m concerned life has moved on and I’d like to move with it, but the big machine that swept us up is just churning on, refusing to spit me out.

All those people with their interfering and patronising, they’re following their own agendas, not mine. They think that because I’m old I’m stupid, but inside I feel just the same as ever, I’m not a different person.

The only thing that keeps me sane is the book, the saga of this whole perturbing episode that I’ve been writing ever since Reg died. It tells the story from my point of view, and all I need now is to know how it ends.

But I decided before they came that I’d mention none of this, I couldn’t trust myself not to get angry. So I simply look at the camera. “I’d just like to thank everyone, on behalf of Reg. It’s shown me a side of people that not everyone gets to see.”

“Okay?” Katie looks up at the two men who give her a thumbs-up. “Great, Edna, thanks for that. And good luck with the next steps. Onwards and upwards!”

I force a smile. Let them think what they want. During sixty-two years with Reg I learnt when it’s best to keep my mouth shut.