

## **In the soup**

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When the leaves have gone, I can usually see across the street and over to the park beyond. But not today. The unholy mixture of fog, sulphur and soot was so dense it was impossible to tell if it was light outside or not. I checked my watch and yes, it was time I was off.

I edged my way along the narrow pavement, using the kerb as a guide. The smell was acrid and I could almost feel the pollution eating into my lungs. After a while I heard a low groaning sound. I flattened myself against the wall. It was a tram, lights blazing and moving at less than walking pace.

The tram passed and I pressed on. I have made this journey many times before, so I know how the low wall curves and where to turn. Not much further to go now. I climbed the stone steps up to No. 32 Welford Road and when I twisted the knob, the door swung open on its heavy hinges.

It took me a moment to realise that something was wrong and that the pattern on the tiled floor was different. Usually there are lozenges in a star shape of black, white and ochre, but today there was a border and a rectangular design in the same colours. What with the smog and all I must have made a mistake. I was about to leave when I heard the lock being turned from the outside.

I couldn't see much in the gloom but there was a fan light above the entrance and when my eyes adjusted, I discovered there were doors leading off to the left and to the right, and one straight ahead. I tried each in turn, but all were shut. I banged as hard as I could. No one responded. I banged again and shouted at the top of my voice: 'Help, help, please let me out'. It was quiet and I was alone in the dark.

Had I been trapped by mistake or was it deliberate? I sat on the coir mat to avoid the cold tile floor and waited for some sign of life. Minutes - or maybe it was hours - later I heard a sound coming from the room on the right. It was a woman's voice, and I could just make out the words. 'She'd kill us if she could'. Another door slammed and I heard no more. A shiver ran down my spine. Who was 'she' and who was she was intending to kill?

There was nothing I could do but wait. I must have drifted off to sleep because I woke to a thudding noise, this time coming from behind the door on the left. It was as if someone or something was being bludgeoned to death. Thwack, thump, thwack, and a small yelp. I froze. Was this the victim of the people I'd heard earlier, or was it they who were being attacked? I didn't know and I didn't care either. In large houses like these the rooms often connect and at this moment I didn't want to be found.

After the commotion there was silence and then a faint click as the front door was unlocked. If someone came in, I'd be discovered right away and then what? Instinctively I crouched down but to my amazement nothing happened. I took my chance, pushed the door open and ran out into the thick pea souper.

I paused to catch my breath at the entrance to a cobbled alleyway. I couldn't see more than a few yards ahead and I'd lost all sense of time. There was another rumbling, and another ghostly tram went past on the other side of the road. There was no number on the front, and I had no idea where it was going. My senses were adrift, and my mind was starting to play tricks but when my gasps slowed, I heard two people coming towards me. My spirits lifted. Help was at hand! As the couple got closer, I recognised the voices. 'Let's put her down beside this dustbin' .. 'What if someone sees us' .. 'Don't be silly, no one knows we are here'.

Thank goodness I was hidden from view. There must have been a murder and the killers were now disposing of the body in this very spot. I shuddered. There was another bump, but no one spoke. I waited for what seemed like an age. When I figured the coast was clear, I edged out of the alleyway and turned left. A bit further on, a low curved wall came into view, and I read the street name above: Welford Road.

I must have walked round in a circle!

I knew my way home from here, and I knew that I'd have to pass the solicitor's office I'd worked in for the last five and a half years. As I got closer, I saw that the door to No. 32 was wide open. I usually climb the steps and go straight through to my desk but on this occasion I was not so sure. I hate being late, and if I'd had any sense at all, I'd have kept going and called in sick. Instead, I peeked through the door: there was the familiar star-shaped pattern of black, white and ochre tiles.



The sound of someone approaching from the street below made me jump, but I needn't have worried: the sinister figure looming out of the murk was none other than Mr Smith, my boss.

'Well, you made it at last, we were wondering what happened to you.' With those words, he ushered me into the hall. The last thing I remember was the sound of the front door locking shut.