**Golden memories**

1 I can still vaguely recall the men who built the walls, and raised the roof, even though it was many families ago. The master from the manor house over the way needed a lodge for his groundsman, and found a clearing in the huge orchard which ran up and down the hills. He sent workmen to haul the golden stone from the local quarry and they spent three months constructing two cottages in the park.

2 I only see my neighbour side-on. I've never seen him from the front, but I do know that strangely, although we're identical, we're the exact opposite of each other, with my front door facing east and my neighbour's facing west, my bedroom in the back over his kitchen, my kitchen under his bedroom in the front. I think I'm the lucky one because each morning, my stone gleams in the sunlight.

3 The groundsman tended the orchards and the gardens around the manor house, so the trees in autumn were always bowed down with apples and pears, and as the days grew shorter the land around was teeming with helpers picking the fruit and rounding up the windfalls to take to the manor house, or to market in town down the way.

4 Apart from the autumn, it was quiet here, and the groundsman seemed forlorn until one day, he brought a young woman home. I was soon filled with the sounds of conversation and laughter, and the smell of cooking. While the groundsman was at work on the estate, the woman tended the garden around me, planting roses, daffodils and tulips, summer plants and chrysanthemums. There was a riot of colours, from blossom tinged with pink in early spring to the dark golden colours of late autumn. It felt good to look after the happy couple.

5 Soon there were children to look after too, first a girl, who gurgled happily and slept deeply, and then a boy with powerful lungs, who kept us all awake. But both were content and well-behaved. They played quietly together inside or in the garden, and gradually grew older and taller. One of my happiest memories is of one warm summer's day. High up in the topmost bough of one of the apple trees rested the boy, reading his favourite book.

6 My windows are my eyes, and they look onto woodland and fields, with distant, low hills nestling the whole scene in their arms. In the distance is a city of spires, silent except on days when the bells peal. On these days, the groundsman and his family used to dress smartly and leave the house for several hours.

7 The children grew up, and the daughter disappeared, only to return with a young man on her arm. Then the son went missing, and one day, I saw the postman arrive with a bundle of letters, and give the groundsman and his wife a telegram. When they read it, she cried out and fainted. For some time after this, they sat on my porch clasping each other in a tight embrace and weeping.

8 As the years passed by, the couple grew older, and suddenly the house was deserted. We had grown up together, but I didn't have a chance to say goodbye.

9 A new family arrived, a smart man and wife, with two children. He vanished every morning carrying his briefcase, only to return home at night. The children disappeared too during the day, but would later bring their friends back to play in the garden, climbing trees and kicking footballs. Around this time, the view from my windows began to change. My neighbour and I were no longer the only homes around, because opposite there were new terraced and semi-detached houses being built. They were made of bricks and looked taller and thinner than we were. I thought they looked rather coarse against my handsome stone. And many more people came to live around here as well, the streets became quite congested with people teeming up and down on their way somewhere. It seemed as if no one spent much time at home any more.

10 As the years passed, there were new families who came to stay. Two middle-aged women spent several years here, and I liked them because of the care they showed to my rooms and my garden. Everything was spick and span; it was as if they had furnished the house in the same style as when I was first built. They also installed electricity – I hadn't realized how bright the lights could be or how gloomy my rooms must have appeared. But then they concluded that the outside bathroom was no longer suitable for their needs, and I had to abandon one of the bedrooms so they could fit a bathtub and lavatory indoors. The old well by the front gate was transformed so that water was piped underground directly into the house. And gradually they installed all sorts of appliances, such as a cooker and washing machine. But we were all warm and clean, and although it was different, it wasn't unpleasant.

11 Soon more houses were built and more people came. I got used to the horse-drawn deliveries made by the milkman, or the rag-and-bone man calling from his cart for old cloth and metal things we no longer needed. But then horseless carriages started to pass the front of the house. At first it was no more than whirring and clanking going past every hour or so, but over the years, the road became jammed with traffic, and soon there were lines of buses and cars waiting at the crossroads.

12 At home I had another family to look after. At different times in the morning, both the man and the woman left me and walked down the hill or waited for the bus. When their children came home, they let themselves in with their key, and watched television for hours until the parents returned. They had a pet dog who sat outside all day, barking and howling, or digging up my garden, which I have to admit I resented.

13 I liked the last person who lived with me. Joseph worked at home assembling furniture, so I saw him all day, and we kept each other company. He wasn't a young man, and had difficulty moving around, taking small steps, using his hands to steady himself, sometimes stopping to catch his breath.

14 Of course, I'm not the home I used to be either. My floorboards creak, and ghosts moan throughout the night. There are traces of everyone who has lived with me, scuff marks on the walls, carved initials on the banisters, doors which don't close properly. They are my golden memories, of course, but in fact, I look and feel my age.

15 Joseph hasn't been here for a while, and there's a deathly hush. The garden is full of decaying apples and dead leaves. No one has collected them this year. The front gate has fallen off its hinges, and someone has sprayed some words on the stonework at the side of the house. I'm afraid to admit that there's even dirt and mould inside the house. Even the neighbourhood isn't what it used to be, full of loud music and shouting late at nights, and frankly, the traffic is impossible to live with.

16 Suddenly today, there is some excitement outside. At the front of the house, a lorry stops and a gang of workmen get out, all carrying bags and other devices. Perhaps they're coming to live with me. But around the corner, I can hear a very loud screeching sound coming closer, and actually, it's quite frightening. Round the bend comes a large crane with a kind of ball and chain. I do hope it will go away.