**16 FOWEY FESTIVAL – ADULT SHORT STORY COMPETITION March 2018**

**‘DON’T LOOK NOW’**

**Based on True Events: One House with Two Faces**

**Part I**

It’s the 1960’s. I am eight years old, tall for my age, plump with a smiley face. Dark hair, green eyes and the typical English complexion. I am one of four children but when I look back I don’t remember my brother much in our childhood, he was away at boarding school, only returning fleetingly on Sundays to enjoy the best of the roast potatoes and Yorkshire pudding. The favoured only son of a proud mother and father.

And so it was that my childhood memories revolve around the three of us. A sisterhood united in a make believe world with unlimited freedom. Happy days and evenings spent in a Tudor home with rambling gardens and woodland, that I now realise were privileged circumstances. It was a different age, protected from the wonders and obsessions of modern technology.

Our father was a wonderful gardener so our competitive pony games with tack made of dog leads, had a back drop of colourful Victorian plants and greenery. A vegetable garden that Mr McGregor would have been proud of which made a challenging bike track, plus an array of garden sheds and greenhouses with more hiding places than the Tower of London. We used to find all sorts of treasure in those places; old letters, cigar butts, an aged pen. It was the best home and playground we could have wished for.

We were ignorant of the history of our home. It never mattered to us. The gargoyles on the outside walls with hideous expressions and bulging eyes were perfect for coded messages. Once we grew mustard and cress in their heads. We never worried about doors opening or closing at whim nor the mysteries of the deep well. Some of the secrets that the house held worked in our favour, like the bookcase in the sitting room - if you could find the hidden handle, the whole bookcase would swing out to reveal tiny stairs rising up to the first floor. When our parents had dinner parties, we’d sneak out of our beds and climb down the tiny stairs and sit peering out of the gloom, through the gaps in the books, onto a brightly lit social gathering. We learnt a lot that way about the village, heard school parent gossip, jokes we never understood and saw a different side to our parents. It was our very own virtual reality show.

The only concession we made to the house was to recognise that it was old. That the creaks in the floorboards, noises in the attic and groans in the old beams were normal for a living, breathing house. When we played hide and seek our greatest fear were the spiders that lurked in dark spaces. It wasn’t until I was much older that my father told me that there had been a suicide in the house, worst still that it had been in my bedroom but by then we had lived in the house for many years. What was there to fear?

It was a Tuesday. Our parents were in London and my sisters and I were in the kitchen heating something up in readiness for Star Trek on TV. The phone rang. It was coming from the hidden cupboard where the old phone was kept. The little door was hidden in the hall panelling and my sister, Di pulled out the old phone and slid it towards her on its base. The phone stopped before she could pick up the handle. A missed call? We never knew.

A few minutes later a bell rang in the boiler room. We knew immediately that it must have been one the bell indicators used for servants. My younger sister, Jackie confirmed it. She shouted that the red and white flag was still swinging in its little window. The bell board was now disconnected apart from the dining room where a small foot pad existed by the carver chair at the top of the table. No one should have been in the dining room and the door was firmly shut. I opened it quickly and switched on the old brass lights. It was a beautiful oak panelled room with small rose carvings and special panels for pictures. A portrait of our parents hung on opposing walls, their eyes so real they would look directly at you wherever you stood in the room. I remember it feeling cold but that wasn’t surprising since the heating was low in that room. No one was there.

I turned to look back at Di standing in the hall and shrugged my shoulders. She was looking back at me, through me, with the hardest of stares. She didn’t flinch and didn’t move. *'There is someone behind you'* she mouthed. Then she fell, eyes still open, eyes still looking. I never looked back but it was something she was to say again years later when she was very sick and I stood at her bedside.

My name is Ali Large (nee Wreford) My childhood home was Winter's Grace.

**Part II**

It’s 1928 and I am 29 years old, dark hair, moustache and if I might say, rather distinguished looking with a high forehead although annoyingly my hair is beginning to receed. I am one of 3 children, our father was a greengrocer and whilst initially I joined my brothers in fishmongery (a smelly business) I went onto work with the Telegraph and moved into their advertising department. This led to a love of all things creative from typography to gardening and beyond. I am currently working with films.

It’s always been important to me to make a great impression with those I come into contact with. First impressions are very important. I’ve been living with my wife of two years, Alma in a flat in London, she’s the best cook in the world as my waistline will testify. On 7th July we had a little girl who we’ve called Patricia. Pat for short. She can be rather exhausting. Whilst working in Surrey I I decided that it would be nice to buy a cottage for weekends, to keep Alma and Pat amused and for my own entertainment and entertaining. A small 16th century Tudor cottage caught my eye and despite the estate agent I have decided to buy it. It has some 10 acres of grounds, lovely walks and a uniqueness about it. The agent in trying to sell it, drew a glass of water from the septic tank to prove its purity. I remember thinking I’d have been more impressed if he’d drunk it.

For the sum of £2,500, the farmworkers cottage became mine but because the ceilings are low and rooms small, I have hired an architect, Woodward, to design and extend it. I need an impressive entrance hall, stairs, dining room, kitchen, two distinctive bathrooms and an extra bedroom. I’ve always liked the big barn style and so Woodward will reproduce a valuted barn ceiling in our upstairs bedroom. He has been insistent that new oak should be used throughout the extension. He clearly doesn’t pay the bills but I like the idea that it will be built using old techniques, with an adze and beams secured with wooden pegs. He shares my love of drama, theatre and dark humour. Woodward knows I want this home to impress, entertain and surprise. He’s also a stickler for keeping the authenticity and even plans to use irregular beams for the ridge of the roof to give it a genuine sag.

I enjoy adding some twists to the new house with gargoyles and stone carvings from Pugin’s Victorian Gothic Houses of Parliament which is currently under restoration. The builders seemed happy for me to pick a few choice stones and I have selected a range of interesting, contorted faces and some with my initials which will look perfect over our grand front door. We are also having fun creating a secret staircase from the old cottage stairs which will look like a book case and designing little cupboards and nooks and crannies, to say nothing of the art deco, green bathrooms with steps and mirrors. Outside, we continue the theme with brick walls, pillars, patios and steps, more crazy gargoyles, secret spaces, curved flower beds and gentle landscaping down to the wood. It is slowly taking on my personality and is becoming part of me. Alma says I am conflicted inside and so is the house. I disagree. My obsession together with Woodward’s skill is producing art.

I am not to know that I will enjoy the house for many years. It will be a weekend retreat for my family and a place to entertain some famous faces but it will also be the last resting place of my dear brother who will take his own life there.

My name is Alfred Hitchcock and my renovated house is Winter’s Grace