

The Neighbour from Hell

Judith had lived with pogonophobia ever since she could remember. Just the merest glimpse would set her to hyperventilating and sweating. The ensuing palpitations recreated death in her mind, and it could take hours of blowing into a paper bag to calm her down. Of course, in the last decade or so her phobia had abated in direct ratio to the rare appearance of her nemesis, but now, the latest trend of young men with bushy or straggly growth hiding their chins and necks saw her becoming more and more agitated and isolated. Pogonophobia – an irrational fear of beards. Ha! Judith thought, there was nothing irrational about it. She could barely take a trip to her local high street these days without some hirsute millennial sending her scuttling back to her flat. I mean, they all looked as if they'd been plucked from Tsarist Russia and were expecting to marry the Queen's great-granddaughter.

She wasn't so daft that she didn't know where her fear stemmed from. Wasn't her earliest memory an overheard conversation where her mother told a neighbour that men with beards weren't to be trusted? But didn't this same mother smack her legs when she refused to sit on Santa's knee at the Christmas Fayre? Judith hadn't the words then – the words to inform her mother that she'd seen more than just hair on Santa's chin. For cotton wool fakeries hadn't been about at the time, more's the pity. So, she'd just screamed instead. But she still recalled the tiny, waving legs and burrowing movements of the lice in Santa's long wavy, grey, greasy beard.

Strangely, moustaches didn't have the same effect. And rightly, Judith thought, because there was no clinical name for fear of upper-lip hair. No – *her* phobia was recognized, just as it should be, but how to survive in this age of laziness – for surely no other abstract noun could describe men's lack of shaving twice a day? This brought back unwanted memories of her late fiancé. He was thirty years dead, but Judith still had nightmares about the once clean-shaven Arthur. She'd only slept with him on one occasion, but she could still recall the blunt, black hairs appearing on his chin overnight. However, she'd done her time, and few believed it hadn't been in self-defence.

And now, as if she didn't have enough to contend with, her new neighbour, a young man with a silky brown beard, had knocked on her door to introduce himself. She'd stood there, aghast, while he offered her his hand, before slamming the door and listening for his retreating footsteps.

He had friends, too, all similarly bearded. Through the open window of her ground-floor flat, she could hear them in the communal garden, where they spent the summer lighting smelly barbecues and drinking beer. Students, they called themselves – studying philosophy, of all things. Huh! Judith regarded philosophy as just another religion, but with more questions allowed and better answers given. There they'd sprawl, all beards and belching, without a thought for the torture she was undergoing. She'd taken to sitting with her back to the open window so that she could hear them speaking but couldn't see their faces. Of course, she kept the curtains closed as well, just in case. Why, if one of them spotted her and approached for a chat, she would die on the spot.

The days wore on, each one as humid as the last, and the philosophers took to sleeping under the stars, even though this was against the building's tenancy rules. Judith breathed easier, as she could now listen to their theorizing without worrying about seeing their beards. She'd sit at her unlit window and wonder at the madness they spouted. Jay, her neighbour, seemed to lead the discussions, but the others; Matt, Marcus, Lucas, and Jonjo, put in their two penn'orth. Their favourite topic was whether existence was real; just an illusion of 7.5 billion separate entities, or one person's delusion – a god delusion. Matt thought that greed proved existence, and Marcus agreed with him. Lucas and Jonjo came down on the side of fear. It was fear of the unknown that proved existence because if life were one entity's delusion, it wouldn't bother to create fear for itself. Jay, however, decided love was the driving factor, or the need to procreate, which was quite a different matter.

Any moment now, Judith thought, they are going to talk about begetting. A silly biblical word she'd always giggled at. The little voice in her head spoke then, Mathew, Mark, Luke, and John, it said. Goodness, it gave her quite a fright – she hadn't heard the voice in such a long time. Perhaps she should start retaking her pills. But no, there was logic in the voice- for if Matt, Marcus, Lucas, and Jonjo were the apostles, then Jay must be Jesus. Her neighbour was Jesus, and she hated him for his beard. The argument in her head continued all night. How could she kill Jesus – it wasn't possible. Of course, if she did kill him, then the other

bearded ones wouldn't have a reason to hang around the building. Was it a test? Had they been sent by Satan to torment her? Were they really the neighbours from Hell?

The voice grew stronger, but she didn't mind. It was company, and besides, she enjoyed a good argument. It didn't frighten her the way it used to. And she must have stockpiled her medication for a reason, mustn't she? Jesus had bought a keg of beer and stored it in the bike shed. Could she spike it with crushed neuroleptics? And wasn't her name Judith? Judith. . . Judas, it wasn't too much of a stretch, was it? Yes, she'd do it. She rid herself of the neighbours from Hell before the community mental health nurse called next Tuesday.