

Spectral Road

By David Silver

A thinly sunlit November day. I was in a meeting. I always seemed to be in a meeting when my mobile phone rang, which was inevitably at the most inopportune moment when I would, as usual, be deep in discussion explaining to everyone else how the only person who knew what they were doing in this company was me. Predictably, my phone rang and with unconcealed irritation I answered it. My PA wisely kept quiet this time. At the last meeting she had suggested I turn my phone off or at least put it on silent. What planet was she from? Was she stark raving mad? Who turns their phone off these days?

"It's Peter" said the caller. Ah, Peter, my old school friend reunited after 52 years through a chance sighting in an email in which the sender had forgotten to blind copy dozens of recipients; a friendship rekindled through the sometimes beneficial 'benefits' of modern day technology. I didn't want to cut him off and lose him again after all those years. In a distant attenuated voice he continued "I've come to Watford to go to the barber but I'm lost". What? Why in hell's name would he have to come to Watford from Ruislip to visit the barber? Beside which, he was thinning on top. He didn't have much hair. Actually, he was as bald as a coot.

"Alright Peter, tell me where you are and I'll try to help".
"Spectral Road" came the reply through a sea of white noise.

I was familiar with most street names in my home town and vaguely thought I'd heard of that one. Or was I thinking of Shady Lane where the Police Station is? I'd often wondered - was the Police Station located there by some wry-humoured council bureaucrat because of the name or was the road named in honour of having a Police Station there? Anyway, I was confident that Spectral Road was within walking distance and that I could get there quickly. I told Peter "Stay where you are and I'll come and find you". There was just a gently crackling silence from the other end. Perhaps his battery had run out.

I instructed the meeting to carry on and reach a conclusion that I would approve of, then set out grumpily and briskly. I walked up Leavesden Road, certain that Spectral Road was one of the many small streets that joined it. After ten minutes and getting a bit breathless I began to doubt myself. Besides which, the road seemed to be rising in elevation. That wasn't how I'd remembered it, and the far end of the road didn't seem to be getting any closer. I reached for my phone thinking I would use the mapping feature to assist me then realised, with even more annoyance, that I'd left it in the meeting room. Fark!

Against my better judgement I decided to ask a passer by for directions. I was reluctant because the steady flow of fellow pedestrians were, if the truth be known, all looking a little odd. They seemed to appear as if from nowhere out of the slight mist that had descended, coming towards me on my pavement whilst the one opposite was devoid of anyone. Nobody seemed to be going in my direction, or at least nobody had overtaken me, but I was after all in an furious hurry. I needed to get back to my meeting. Time is success and business is everything.

There appeared one of those self-important 'Me, PLC' types with what I believe is called a 'classic pompadour haircut with taper' beloved by what used to be called yuppies. One hand was holding a phone to his left ear, the other clutching a burger and somehow there was a fag on the go at the same time. He appeared to be eating, smoking and talking all at the same time. I'm certain I heard him mumble "I'm eatin' a burger" into his phone, the bolus of semi-chewed pap churning disgustingly in his mouth. No, I wasn't going to ask him.

The next was a real surprise. Two children were pushing a pram containing a small woman who appeared to be their mother. A German Shepherd tethered to the pram by its lead ran furiously behind in an effort to keep up, although the buggy seemed to be travelling at a snail's pace. They all seemed to be travelling in different time zones. I tried to gain the woman's attention but her gaze was fixed ahead and she seemed oblivious to my presence.

A man carrying a doctor's bag came into focus next. That's more like it, an educated person, I'll ask him. Then I observed that he was walking along with a thermometer in his mouth.

Next was a monkey pushing a barrel organ with a chestnut brazier blazing merrily atop. Then a man in overalls being nudged forward by his wheelbarrow. As they went by I saw that the barrow itself was being propelled by a tortoise with 'The World's Smallest House' painted on its shell. A policeman on his beat appeared and eyed me suspiciously before muttering "Evenin' Al!" and passing on. Or could it have been "Evenin' Al", which was strange because Al is my name.

I considered knocking on the door of one of the houses and asking for directions. Out of curiosity I peered through the window and gap in the lace curtains into the front parlour of one house and observed a parrot sitting on a settee watching a black and white television programme whilst a cat in a birdcage appeared to be chattering and gesticulating wildly to it. I gave up on that idea.

I was becoming quite breathless by now as the elevation steepened. I considered my situation and it didn't look good. I was disquieted by the strange illusions I was experiencing, almost like the distorted images of a poorly remembered childhood. I didn't want to abandon Peter and was on the point of turning back with a view to returning to the office and getting my car, but as I looked back in the direction from whence I'd come, I was horrified to see that the road stretched away into a hazy vanishing point. Other than a rag and bone man on his cart shouting what sounded like "Ho! Ney yo-a nary o" above the clip-clopping of his horse, no vehicles had passed for the whole duration of my outing, so there was no chance of hailing a taxi.

At this point a wizened little man came to my rescue. He appeared out of the mist and to my surprise actually engaged with me. "May I help you?" he enquired in a thin, sibilant old man's voice. He had just three blackened teeth in his mouth. "Ah, Spectral Road is not too far. Take the next turning on the left and cross a footbridge. You'll know you've arrived when you get there". What a curious description. I thanked him and walked a few steps. I looked back but, like everyone and everything else, he'd disappeared. He must have gone into one of the small terraced cottages that line Leavesden Road. He'd mentioned a footbridge. That implied a railway line. I knew the West Coast Main Line ran somewhere over to the left but there wasn't a bridge over the railway for miles.

Yes, the next left, there it was, a narrow road and yes, there was a street sign high up on the wall of the corner house. Spectral Road. A hundred yards or so along and the landscape opened out into bombed scrubland on either side, but there was a bridge ahead. I didn't recognise any of this. I stepped tentatively onto the bridge and looked down. My heart lurched with shock. I was high up in the air! Far below was what looked like a shunting yard with seemingly dozens of railway lines going off in all directions. But what really attracted my attention was what looked like a small boy, short-trousered and with a mop of curly hair. Surely that couldn't be ... He looked up. Even from this distance I could tell it was Peter. My senses swam. I reached for the rusty balustrade but lost my balance and my weight caused the railing to give way. My last thought as I fell was that in those days we weren't plagued with Elfen Saifty.

We crouch down by the railway line. We've sneaked through the broken fence as all the kids do to play there. "John Minter in Mrs Burrows's class says if you put a ha'penny on a train line then after it's been run over it looks like a penny and the old lady who runs No Name Sweet Shop won't know the difference". Peter knows so many things, he's so clever. But neither of us has a ha'penny and as my grazed knee has now stopped bleeding we go off to find somewhere else to play.

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