

# ***CLOSE QUARTERS* by Angus McAllister**

## **CONTENTS AND SAMPLE CHAPTER**

### CONTENTS

#### PROLOGUE: THE BODY IN THE LIVING ROOM

August 2000

#### 1. THE NEW TENANTS

August 2000 Jenny Martin, Flat 3/2

#### 2. A FRESH START

Summer 1981 Gus Mackinnon, Flat 3/1

#### 3. SOME FOLK WILL COMPLAIN ABOUT ANYTHING

Winter 1981 Gus Mackinnon, Flat 3/1

#### 4. THE FACTOR FACTOR

Spring 1982 Gus Mackinnon, Flat 3/1

#### 5. A DAY IN THE LIFE

Wednesday 13<sup>th</sup> October 1982 Gus Mackinnon, Flat 3/1

#### 6. THE BUGBANE CURSE

Autumn 1999 Billy Briggs, Flat 0/1

#### 7. COLLAGE

1982-1992 Gus Mackinnon, Flat 3/1

#### 8. MORE EFFORT REQUIRED

Autumn 1992 George Anderson, Flat 1/2

#### 9. OUR DUMP

September 1988 Gus Mackinnon, Flat 3/1

#### 10. HOW TO MURDER YOUR NEIGHBOUR

Autumn 1978 Henrietta Quayle, Flat 1/1

#### 11. LIKE FATHER, LIKE SON

November 1998 Gus Mackinnon, Flat 3/1

#### 12. THE GREATEST PARTY EVER HELD

Spring 2000 Tony Miller, Flat 2/2

#### EPILOGUE: WHO DONE IT

September 2000

## 2. A FRESH START

*Summer 1981*

*Gus Mackinnon, Flat 3/1*

It had been an eventful year so far. Unemployment was at its highest post-war level and there had been riots in a number of English cities. Assassination attempts had been made upon the US President and the Pope, and an unemployed 17-year-old youth had fired six blank shots at the Queen during the Trooping the Colour ceremony. IRA hunger strikers were dying in Belfast's Maze prison. The Polish trade union Solidarity was locked in a struggle with the country's communist government. On the positive side, America had launched its first space shuttle, the Yorkshire Ripper and the killer of John Lennon had both been convicted and sentenced, and Prince Charles was to marry Lady Diana Spencer on 29th July. For those remaining unmoved by any of this, there was the Rubik's Cube, a puzzle comprising a number of variously coloured smaller cubes which could be arranged into 3 billion possible combinations, only one of them correct. In Scotland alone, 30,000 people had bought a cube and been driven mad by it, though in the west end of Glasgow it was difficult to tell.

To Gus Mackinnon, all of the above took second place to a more personal disaster. At the beginning of the year, he and his wife Joyce had separated after ten years of marriage. Now she was suing him for divorce. Since the separation he had rented a furnished flat, but he had now decided that it was time to put his living arrangements on a more permanent basis. When he saw the advert for the Oldberry Road flat, he had already viewed a number of flats and made two unsuccessful offers.

He almost missed the advert, which had been placed privately by the owner rather than through an estate agent. It said that the flat was in Hyndland, a high-class residential area to the west of Byres Road. In fact it wasn't nearly far enough west to deserve this distinction. At this point in his life Gus was less alive to the convenience of living within easy walking distance of the Byres Road pubs. But he decided to have a look at the flat anyway.

He arranged to view it at 6 pm, left the office early and found that he had time for a quick pint in The Centurion before his appointment. It was a Thursday evening, and the usual early evening crowd had half-filled the bar. There was a scattering of students who thought themselves too mature for the Queen Margaret Union or the Beer Bar and who found The Centurion an acceptable halfway house on the road to adulthood. At the other end of the age divide, the Brigadier and the Brothers Grimm sat in single file, guarding their whiskies and the path to the Gents. Three sociologists from the university were having an argument about whether Solidarity or the communist government was the true voice of the Polish people; on the face of it, Solidarity had the better claim, but the support of the Pope made it politically suspect. Gus only caught a fragment of the discussion as he passed their table, but it had been going on for months and he had now put together most of it.

Various business people, fresh from their west end offices, stood or sat at the counter, trying to distance themselves from the rest of the clientele. Among them was Norrie Spence whom Gus joined, at the same time nodding across the bar to Danny Boyd. Danny often drank with the sociologists, but tonight was with a man Gus didn't know; he looked familiar, however, a west end face, part of the human background furniture of the area's incestuous social scene.

"Hi Gus," said Norrie, putting aside the *Glasgow Herald* crossword "Want a pint?"

Gus brought over a vacant stool and sat beside him. "I'm only in for one. I'm viewing a flat at six."

"No problem," said Norrie, waving over the barman. "I'll add it to the list. Where's the flat?"

"Oldberry Road. The advert said it was in Hyndland."

“Cheeky. It’s in Partick, isn’t it?”

“Or Dowanhill maybe,” said Gus. “Hyndland’s definitely stretching it a bit. It’s just round the corner in fact.”

The barman brought over the drink and Norrie paid for it. “Cheers,” said Gus.

“Cheers.”

Gus took a long drink from his pint and some of the day’s stress began to wash away. For a few moments he said nothing, but enjoyed being away from the end of a phone, having no one competing for his attention. Norrie understood this and returned to his crossword.

“How’s it goin’, Gus,” said Danny Boyd, who had just come up to the bar. His drinking companion, Gus noticed, had just gone out the front door.

“Hi Danny,” said Gus. “Want a pint?”

“Naw, it’s OK,” said Danny. “I’ve just ordered one. Thanks anyway.”

Danny was unemployed, but he never cadged drinks. How did he manage it, Gus wondered? He was able to survive without spending his day continually in overdrive, taking incessant phone calls, meeting clients, supervising staff, doing a continual juggling act with several dozen transactions, all requiring his individual and immediate attention. When he took a drink it was for recreation, not to ease the tension that had quickly built up in the morning, remaining constant all day; it was a prelude to a free evening, not a necessary dose of medication before going home with a briefcase full of title deeds and other documents which required a period of sustained concentration impossible in the office. Of course, Danny didn’t have to pay for a wife and two children who lived in a villa in the suburbs, while still having to take on a second mortgage in order to find a bed for himself. It seemed like a much simpler life.

A life, Gus realised, with its own, quite different pressures. How did you achieve a balance between the two extremes? On the face of it, Norrie seemed to have succeeded. If he was working harder than Gus, incurring even more stress, it didn’t show. And it wasn’t because he had settled for a more modest lifestyle. He was the same age as Gus and, like him, was a partner in a firm of solicitors. By Gus’s reckoning Norrie shouldn’t have been earning any more than him. And yet, not only did he also support an ex-wife and two children, but he had remarried, started a new family and was occupying, not a modest flat, but a villa in North Kelvinside.

“You got your invitation yet?” Danny asked.

“Invitation?”

“Tae the royal weddin’.”

“No,” said Gus. “It must have been sent to my old address. I’ve been meaning to ask the wife about it, but she isn’t talking to me.”

“Bloody parasites,” said Danny.

“That’s not fair, I’m supposed to support my family.”

“Naw, I mean Charlie an’ his bird. Why the fuck should we support them?”

“Why the fuck should we support you, pal?” said Norrie, when Danny had returned to his seat. Norrie never spoke to Danny and had remained with his newspaper while Danny was at the counter.

“Uch, Danny’s all right. Live and let live.”

“You shouldn’t offer him drink.”

“He never accepts it.”

“But he never seems to go dry. If he spent some of his money on a haircut, he might be able to get a job.”

“Him and two and a half million others. If it was that easy, I’d buy a share in a barber’s shop.” Gus quickly finished his drink and stood up. “Anyway, I’d better get over and see this flat. Thanks for the pint.”

It took him only a few minutes to walk to Oldberry Road. When he turned off Byres Road, he passed from a busy thoroughfare, filled with people, traffic, shops and pubs into a residential area. The traffic noise faded a little as he walked away from the main road, between long blocks of old tenement flats. One of the nice things about the west end was that it had remained mostly untouched while elsewhere so much of the old city had been obliterated by redevelopment. Dumbarton Road, which cut through the centre of Partick at a right angle to Byres Road, was like a time capsule, a sort of urban national park preserving a portion of the old Glasgow that had been bulldozed away elsewhere. On the ground floors of its unbroken line of tenements, not only were all basic human needs catered for, from alcohol to curry, but you would also find all sorts of funny little shops that you'd never see in a modern shopping centre. As you moved northwards, parallel to Byres Road, the housing became grander, the flats bigger, tenements eventually giving way to terraces, though many of the latter were subdivided for occupancy by students and other itinerants.

Gus was now in an area about halfway up this uncertain social ladder. Number 13 Oldberry Road was a four-storey block of flats, at the end of a long block, uniform in design. It stood at the junction of two roads, and there was a small grocer's shop on the ground floor. It would have been built, Gus estimated, towards the end of the nineteenth century and its red sandstone was now darkened by a hundred years' accumulation of grime. Otherwise it looked good. The small garden in front of the only ground-floor flat was well maintained, the green-tiled close and stairwell clean. A wally close where people did their turn of the stairs. On his way up to the top floor, he looked out of the stairwell window to inspect the back yard. The grass was cut short, though the concrete surround was cracked in places and there was a derelict washhouse. Four aluminium dustbins, dirty and battered, sat in a small brick shelter.

He reached the top floor flat he was looking for and rang the bell. The storm door was open, and both it and the inner door looked in need of painting, in contrast to the bright frontage of the flat opposite. He heard footsteps within the flat and the inner door opened. He immediately recognised the man who opened it. He was Danny Boyd's drinking companion from *The Centurion*, the reason for his early departure now apparent.

He looked about 30 – perhaps a year or two younger than Gus – and was casually dressed in jeans, trainers and an open-necked shirt. His dark hair was long, though not quite as long as Danny's.

“Mr Welsh?”

“That's right. You must be Mr Mackinnon. Come on in.”

Gus followed him into the hall. “Do I know you from somewhere?” Welsh asked.

“I just saw you in *The Centurion*. You were drinking with Danny Boyd.”

“That's right. You know Danny?”

“Oh aye.”

“Small world, eh man?”

He showed Gus round the flat. It looked as if he lived on his own: at least there was no one else in evidence, and the place had the feel of a house that had lacked a woman's touch for some time. Welsh appeared to sleep in the back bedroom, which contained a king-size bed and a large, old-fashioned wardrobe, but although the front bedroom did contain a bed, it seemed mainly to be used as a box room. There were gas fires in the kitchen and living room and a gas cooker in the kitchen. Welsh had obviously tidied up prior to the viewing, but nothing could disguise the generally shabby condition of the flat. The decoration was old, the furniture older, and there were none of the modern features – like double glazing, central heating or a fitted kitchen – that you would take for granted in a modern property.

On the other hand, the place had potential. The rooms were large, the ceilings high. The living room had a large bay window and ornate cornicing on the ceiling. The old-fashioned fireplaces had been retained and the doors had the original wood panelling, though

Gus suspected that this had resulted from indolence rather than any conservationist instinct. It looked like the sort of flat that would go on the market after the death of an old person who had lived in it all his or her life. Gus discovered later that Welsh had bought it in exactly these circumstances, thereafter showing a talent for inertia beyond his years.

Welsh said very little while Gus was looking round. He seemed very relaxed, showing none of the eagerness to impress that sellers often displayed.

“What’s included in the sale?” Gus asked.

“I’m not with you, man.”

“What fittings are you leaving behind? The gas fires?”

“I hadn’t thought about it. Yes, I suppose so.”

“The cooker?”

“Definitely.”

“Carpets and curtains?”

“They’re not up to much, but sure, you can have them.”

*He’s right, Gus thought, they definitely aren’t up to much.* But if he did end up buying the place, they would provide him with some sort of start, and he wouldn’t have to renew everything right away.

“What about entry?”

Welsh seemed uncertain. “Whenever you like. I’ve already got somewhere else to live. Just give me a week or so to get organised.”

“OK,” Gus said. “I’ll give it some thought. If I’m interested, you’ll hear from me soon. Who’s your lawyer?”

“Waddell & Co.”

“Bob Waddell?”

“That’s right. You know him?”

“Oh aye. I’m a lawyer myself.”

“Is that so? Better watch what I say.”

“I wouldn’t worry about it.”

He didn’t look worried. He didn’t look as if he had ever been worried in his life. “I’m going back to The Centurion. Fancy a pint?”

“Why not?” said Gus. “I expect Danny will still be there.”

When they left, Welsh locked the storm door with an ancient iron key, 6 inches long. It looked like the key to a dungeon rather than a flat. He kept it separate from his other keys, and when he put it in the pocket of his jeans it made an obvious bulge.

As they were walking down the street, Gus said. “What are the neighbours like?”

“Oh, they’re all right. I never see them.”

“I thought I saw someone looking out of a window at us.”

“I didn’t notice.”

Later, Gus would wonder whether Welsh had sounded evasive. However, at the time he seemed as casual as he had been about everything else.

When they arrived back at The Centurion, Norrie, who had a family to return to, had gone. Danny was sitting in the same position as before, the level of his pint – which might or might not have been the same one – a few inches lower. A couple, Andy and Sarah, whom Gus knew only slightly, had joined him. They greeted the newcomers in unison.

“Hello Gus.”

“Hello Toby.”

“Didnae know you two knew each other,” said Danny.

“We’ve just met,” said Gus. “I was up viewing his flat.”

Gus went up to the bar and bought a drink for Toby Welsh and himself. The others declined his offer.

“You buyin’ a place?” asked Danny when Gus returned to the table.

“Fraid so. Looks as though the wife and I won’t be getting back together.”

“That’s a shame,” said Danny. “I’m really sorry to hear that, Gus.”

“One of these things.”

“So where’s the fancy woman?” asked Andy.

“There’s no fancy woman,” said Gus. “Or rather, she’s called a legal practice.”

They nodded, but didn’t comment further. Gus could see that they didn’t really understand. To them, a lawyer was someone of impossible wealth. The west end, and The Centurion in particular, might contain an egalitarian social mix, much less rigidly classified than elsewhere, but there were times when tact was required. People who were unemployed or in low-paid jobs didn’t want to hear complaints from a solicitor about his stressful day. Gus decided that it would be better to drop the subject.

The conversation turned to the royal wedding, which seemed to be Danny’s *idée fixe* for the day, perhaps for the whole month. “It’s bad enough that half the country’s signin’ on, without all that shite as well. It really gets up my nose.”

“Bad scene, man,” said Toby. “You’d be better off with a snort of coke.”

“Aye, right,” said Danny. “I mean, if I was a taxpayer I’d object to my money bein’ spent on that pair. What do you think, Gus?”

“I don’t really care,” said Gus. He didn’t, nor, unlike Norrie, did he care about whether it was spent on Danny or his friends. None of that figured high among his current concerns. “At least he’s marrying a commoner.”

“Is he fuck, her faither’s an earl.”

“I thought she had a job,” said Gus, who had paid very little attention to the story of the developing royal romance. It had been a difficult issue to ignore recently, but he had succeeded well.

“That job’s just a hobby. Stolen fae some worker that really needs it.”

“She’s a nice-looking chick,” said Toby.

“Oh, don’t get me wrang,” said Danny. “I’d gie her one if she was stuck.”

“I can’t see her ever bein’ that stuck,” said Sarah.

“Fuck off. What do you think, Andy?”

“I’m sayin’ nothin’.”

This, with variations, made up the conversation for some time. Toby Welsh contributed as much as anyone else, though Gus felt he was learning very little about the man. Then he offered to buy Gus a drink, though without making the same offer to the others. Gus accepted and Toby went up to the bar.

“You really goany buy his hoose?” asked Danny.

“Maybe. I haven’t made my mind up.”

“Watch him. He thinks he’s a fly man.”

“What does he do?”

“As little as possible. Or, tae put it another way, anybody he can.”

“I’ll make sure I get a good lawyer.”

“Anyway,” said Danny, “I wouldnae offer too much for his flat. He’s been tryin’ tae sell it for ages, but he’s no’ had a nibble.”

“Why’s he selling?”

“He needs the money.”

Toby returned with the drinks and Gus was prevented from learning more. The conversation refocused on the wedding.

Half an hour later he left for home. The others were all still there and looked settled for the evening. He bought himself a Chinese takeaway and headed back towards the two-room furnished flat, part of a subdivided terrace house, that he presently occupied.

Gus had arranged to get a loan from a building society with which he did regular business. When he phoned them to arrange a survey, he persuaded them to appoint a particular surveyor who was known to him, one he knew he could trust. At the same time he sent his secretary to the Mitchell Library to check back issues of the *Glasgow Herald*. This confirmed what Danny had said. The flat had been advertised every week for the last five weeks.

Why was it taking so long to sell? West end flats usually sold quickly: if Gus hadn't already known that, his earlier, unsuccessful offers for other flats would have confirmed it.

There were a number of possible reasons, not all of them sinister. The housing market was sluggish during the summer, and that was a time when the aggressive sales techniques of an estate agent could be useful, when selling privately could be a false economy. Many potential buyers would have been put off by the amount of work the house needed. And Gus suspected that Toby Welsh was asking for too high a price; he felt sure that some property investors, amateur and professional, would have been sniffing around, but possibly hadn't offered enough to take care of Toby's financial problems.

Of course Toby's solicitor should have been able to advise him on a better approach. But Gus knew his solicitor and was not surprised.

The survey report took unusually long to arrive, but when it eventually came it confirmed his instinct. The property was sound and the asking price too high. The reason for the delay was the difficulty the surveyor had experienced in finding the owner at home. Gus wished that he had given the surveyor the names of a few Byres Road pubs to look in; that might have speeded things up a little.

By now he had decided that he wanted the flat; his lease was due to end in a month, he didn't want to have to renew it, and he was too busy at work to devote any more time to house-hunting. He sent a formal offer to Waddell & Co to buy the flat at £1,000 below the asking price. The offer included a clause providing that the price would include the gas cooker and fires and all carpets and curtains. He also inserted a four-day time limit for acceptance, hoping that a deadline might focus Toby's mind; from what he had seen, his mind might be in need of focus.

On the day before the expiry of the time limit he had still received no reply. He went into The Centurion for a pint on the way home and told Norrie about it.

"Who's his lawyer?" Norrie asked.

"Bob Waddell."

"For fuck's sake."

"Exactly."

"So," said Norrie, "abandon all thoughts of conspiracy. Simple incompetence is the explanation."

"Still, it seems a bit of a coincidence that Bob should be acting for him."

"Not really, from what you tell me about the seller. You know how Bob finds business. He does a pub crawl of Byres Road, hoovering up clients."

"You're right. I'll phone the bugger in the morning. I can always extend the deadline if I have to."

But he was given an opportunity for earlier action a few minutes later when Toby Welsh entered the bar. Gus waved to him and he came over. "Did your lawyer get my offer?" Gus asked him.

"What offer?"

"I sent an offer to your lawyer. It expires at noon tomorrow. I might be able to extend it if you're interested."

"How much did you offer?"

Gus told him. Toby seemed a little disappointed, but didn't comment further. "Mr Waddell seems to be a wee bit careless," he said. "Is that typical?"

Norrie laughed. For the first time a hint of alarm showed through Toby's normal nonchalance.

"I can't comment on that," said Gus.

"He'll remember to send you his bill," said Norrie. "I wouldn't worry about that."

This didn't seem to give Toby much reassurance. "I'll give him a ring in the morning," he said, and went over to join some other people whom Gus didn't know.

"I should report you to the Law Society," said Norrie. "Dealing with the other side's client behind his lawyer's back."

"Fuck off," said Gus. "Anyway, I was wearing my buyer's hat, not my lawyer's one. And I doubt if Bob Waddell even knows how to spell 'professional etiquette'."

"I can't argue with that."

Next morning he managed to get through to Bob Waddell on the third attempt; it seemed that Toby Welsh had found him in Tennents Bar the night before and instructed him to accept Gus's offer. Gus got the impression that Bob had already forgotten about this by the time he phoned, but the call managed to evoke a response and a written acceptance of Gus's offer, agreeing to all of its conditions, was hand-delivered before noon. It contained several typing errors, but made enough sense to be legally binding, and Bob had remembered to sign it.

Gus relaxed, for a short time at least. His house hunting was over.

The day of the royal wedding arrived, 700 million people across the world (who presumably disagreed with Danny Boyd) watched it on TV, and the newlyweds sailed off on the royal yacht for their honeymoon. The west end and the rest of the planet found new obsessions to fix upon. In Gus's case, they remained much the same as before.

The agreed date of entry for his new flat was three weeks after the conclusion of the contract, which was a little tight. Gus managed to get the conveyancing transaction settled in time by hounding Bob Waddell through every stage, having letters delivered rather than posted, even doing some of the work that should have been the responsibility of the seller's solicitor. On the morning of the date of entry, he went personally to Bob's office to hand over his cheque and collect the title deeds and keys, a time-consuming service that would never have been afforded to a mere client.

Bob's office was in the west end, not far from that of Norrie. He had a one-man practice and he took on all kinds of legal business: conveyancing, executries, civil and criminal court work, anything sufficiently legal in nature to justify the issue of a fee note. He displayed the versatility conferred by incompetence: if you were sure to bungle everything you did, there was no need to specialise.

It was some time since Gus had visited Bob's office, but it was as he remembered it. Everything was for show: flashy business sign, brightly painted rooms, luxurious carpets, hardly a piece of paper to be seen on the desks of Bob or any of his staff. All the mess had been swept under the carpet, or rather into some back room that constituted a fire hazard. There were several people in the waiting room, some of them looking bored, others angry, none of them happy about Gus being able to jump the queue.

"You've been a bit pushy about this one," said Bob. "You're worse than the bloody Law Society."

"For Christ's sake, Bob. This is my own house."

Bob waited impatiently while Gus carefully inspected all of the documents, not only to check that they were in order, but also to make sure they were the right ones. "Don't you trust me?" said Bob.

"Of course I do, Bob," said Gus, hoping that he sounded sincere. "I just like to do things properly, you know that."

“Waste of time, if you ask me,” said Bob, finally accepting Gus’s cheque and handing over the keys. Gus knew that they were the right keys: one small Yale and one solid iron giant. “What’s that for?” Bob asked. “Has it got an outside lavy?”

Gus laughed. “I don’t think there are many of those around any longer, Bob. Otherwise I’m sure you’d be selling them as starter flats.”

“Fuck off.”

“It’s for the storm door. I should be able to repel all boarders.”

Since he was in the area, he would have liked to check out the flat right away, but he was already late for another appointment and went straight back to his own office. His trip to the west end had left him behind with his work and it was nearly 7.30 before he managed to finish up for the day. He made straight for Oldberry Road, for once managing to bypass The Centurion.

As he was unlocking the storm door – turning the big key required some strength of wrist – he heard a door open on the floor below him. He paused for a moment but there was no further sound; no one came upstairs, or went downstairs, nor did the door close again. He decided to ignore it: if one of his new neighbours wanted to meet him, he could show himself first. He swung the storm door back and used the Yale key to open the inner door.

The first thing he noticed after entering the hall was that he was standing on bare floorboards. There was also a faint smell of gas, so he put his cigarettes and lighter back in his pocket. The light was dim and it took him a moment or two to find the light switch. He operated the switch but nothing happened. Toby must have switched off the power at the mains, a good idea. But then his eyes adjusted to the gloom and he noticed a simpler explanation: a bare light fitting, with no shade and no bulb.

It took him only a few minutes to confirm that the house had been stripped bare. There were no carpets, no curtains, no bulbs or shades. The gas fires and cooker were gone. Everything detachable, plus a few things that shouldn’t have been, had been taken away.

Gus walked from room to room several times, trying to collect his thoughts. Then he realised that there was little more that he could do that night. He made sure that all of the gas taps were turned off and decided to open a few windows, to air the place a little. Most of them remained stuck or jammed shut, but he managed to open those in the bathroom and back bedroom by a few inches. He found the gas and electricity meters in the hall cupboard; high on the wall a small window, bisected vertically by a single iron bar, looked out upon the landing, admitting just enough light to see by. He decided against using his cigarette lighter for further illumination. He turned off the main electricity switch and checked the tap beside the gas meter. It appeared to be turned off.

Alone among his confused thoughts there was one fact of which he was sure. He needed a pint. He was less certain about whether or not he wanted to run into Toby Welsh.

He pulled the inner door shut and locked the storm door. As the big key turned noisily in the lock, he heard a door open on the landing below. It was as if both doors operated in tandem, one locking and the other opening by a single turn of the key.

Gus went downstairs. A man was standing in the vestibule of the house immediately below his. “Good evening,” Gus said.

The man didn’t return the pleasantries. “Have you bought the flat upstairs?” he asked. He had a mild manner of speaking, but it sounded a little like an accusation. He was a smallish man, almost completely bald, and wore glasses with thick plastic rims. He also wore carpet slippers and a woollen cardigan with most of the buttons fastened. His age was difficult to determine, but he was possibly in his forties; he looked like the type who acquired a middle-aged look early in life, thereafter remaining identical for the next 40 years or so.

“That’s right,” said Gus, extending his hand. “I’m Gus Mackinnon.”

The man shook his hand, a little reluctantly it seemed to Gus, and his grip was weak. “Walter Bain. Gus, you said. Is that short for Angus or Fergus?”

“Neither.”

Gus wondered if Bain was going to invite him into his house, but he seemed content to carry on the conversation on the landing. He was still regarding Gus suspiciously. “Do you know the fellow who lived up there before you?”

“I just bought the flat from him.”

“I mean, did you know him before you bought the flat?”

“No, I answered an advert in the paper.”

“I thought I saw you and him going down the road together.”

“We’ve got friends in common. Why, is there a problem?”

“No, oh no. I just wondered if you were friends, that’s all.”

“No,” said Gus, “and I don’t think we ever will be.” Bain still seemed reluctant to believe him. Gus quickly told him about the stripping of the flat. He needed to tell someone, and this man was keeping him away from The Centurion.

Bain appeared unmoved by the story. “These things belonged to him, didn’t they?”

Gus decided against giving him a lecture on the law of contract and the legal principles relating to heritable fixtures. “He was supposed to leave them. Anyway, taking all the light bulbs, is that not a bit much?”

“I don’t know,” said Bain. “Light bulbs cost a lot of money these days.”

“Do they? I suppose I’m about to find out.”

“Oh yes,” said Bain. “He wasn’t a very good neighbour, you know. I was always having to phone the police about him. It cost me a fortune in phone calls.”

“The police? What did he do?”

“The noise he made! The people he invited back! This is a family building, you know. I hope you realise that.”

“I think I’m reasonably well house-trained,” said Gus, a little irritated. It seemed that his guilt was to be presumed until he could prove otherwise. “Anyway, I think I’d better be —”

“What is it you do?” Bain asked.

“I’m a solicitor.”

Bain’s manner changed immediately. The air of suspicion was gone and he smiled at Gus. “A solicitor? Is that so?”

“Yes. What do you do?”

“I work for an insurance company. A solicitor, eh? That could be very useful.”

He didn’t elaborate upon this, but Gus began to have forebodings. Like most lawyers – as well as doctors, accountants and many other professional people – he tended to be reluctant to admit his calling, as this normally earmarked him as a recipient of boring confidences and a source of free advice. “Well,” he said, “it’s time I was —”

But Bain would not let him go. “Are you married?”

“I’m getting divorced. That’s why I bought the flat.”

“Yes, there’s a lot of divorce about these days.” Bain spoke as if it was a type of disease. “Mrs Bain and I have been married for 15 years.”

“Very nice. I think I should —”

“Yes, as I said, this is a family building. We’ve lived here since we got married. I came from Paisley originally.”

“Is that so?”

“Yes.” Bain chuckled, as if he had admitted to a rakish past. He wasn’t just a bald, middle-aged bore, he had once lived in Paisley! “Do you mind if I ask you a personal question?”

“What?” What was Bain going to ask him about? His sex life? That could be answered very quickly.

“How much did you pay for your flat?”

*None of your bloody business*, Gus thought. But to say so would not be a good start to neighbourly relations. Anyway, it was a matter of public record for anyone who took the trouble to look it up. “Fifteen thousand pounds,” he said.

Bain looked delighted. “Fifteen thousand pounds! Is that so?”

“That was the price.”

“So my house must be worth at least the same. It’s identical to yours, you see.”

“Is it really?”

“Exactly the same. Do you know what mine cost? Have a guess.”

“I’ve no idea.”

“Go on, have a try.”

Gus’s thirst was now intense and this was not helping his mood. “Twenty-four pounds seven shillings and sixpence,” he said.

Bain seemed uncertain how to react, though he was obviously irked at having his surprise spoiled. “No, it wasn’t *that* cheap,” he said. “I paid two thousand pounds. What do you think of that? Two thousand to fifteen thousand in 15 years. Not a bad investment, eh?”

“Great,” said Gus. “Look, I don’t want to be rude, but I really have to go.”

“All right,” said Bain. “When are you moving in?”

“I’m not sure. A week, ten days maybe.” That, at least, was when he had to be out of his present flat. Would he be ready to move in upstairs by then? Maybe if he bought an airbed and a paraffin stove...

“I’ll need to let you know about your turn of the stairs. About cutting the grass and all that. I’ll leave you a note.”

“Fine,” said Gus. Never mind about sleeping on bare floorboards, as long as the stairs were clean. Unbelievably, Bain was actually going back into his house and closing the door. “Bye,” said Gus.

Then, as Bain’s door closed he heard one open downstairs. It was like a domino effect, running down one side of the building. Thank God there was a shop on the ground floor.

A woman was waiting for him on the next landing, in the doorway of the house below Bain. She regarded Gus anxiously as he came downstairs. He discovered later that this was her permanent expression: the source of her anxiety was existence itself, not any specific aspect of it. She was thin, of medium height and, like Bain, her age was difficult to guess. She was at least in her forties, Gus estimated. She wore a long, old-fashioned skirt and high-necked blouse and her greying hair was tied in a bun.

“Good evening,” he said. “I’m Gus Mackinnon. I’ve just bought the flat on the top floor.”

She lightly grasped his extended hand, letting it go again immediately, as if it had given her an electric shock. “Thank God!” she said. “I’ve been praying for a miracle!”

“Sorry?”

Something seemed to occur to her and the worried expression was replaced by one of horror. “Oh!” she said. “I didn’t... I mean...”

“What’s the matter?”

“I should have asked you... Did you know Mr Welsh before you bought the flat?”

“No, I answered an advert in the paper.”

“He isn’t a friend of yours? I thought I saw you and him go down the road together.”

“We’ve got friends in common. He’s *definitely* not a friend of mine.”

He had said this with enough sincerity to convince her. “Thank God!” she said again. She fidgeted continually as she spoke, shifting her weight from one foot to the other, extending her arms alternately back and forward, as if she was dancing to an inaudible rock band or badly needed to go to the toilet. “I can’t believe he’s gone at last. That man is *evil*.”

This seemed like an exaggeration, though Gus was generally receptive to the proposition. “Really?”

“The *people* he took up there! The *women*! The *orgies*!”

“Orgies?”

“You wouldn’t believe it, Mr Mackinnon. Do you know what I think?” She lowered her voice to a whisper. “I think he was running a – a *brothel*.” The last word was almost inaudible.

“Is that so?” Gus laughed. “I seem to arrive everywhere too late.” She looked startled and became suspicious again. “I’m only joking.”

“I thought Mr Bain would never be able to get rid of him. He kept phoning the police. He was always getting me to phone as well. The trouble was, he phoned too often and the police stopped taking any notice. When they called, that man Welsh would just ask them in for a drink. It became a regular stop for them. That’s the police for you. Nothing but bribery and corruption.”

An interesting image was forming in Gus’s mind. The local constables, weary from treading the west end streets at night, nipping up to Oldberry Road for a drink and a bit of nookie. He hoped they wouldn’t want to continue the tradition. “You don’t need to tell me about the police. I’m a lawyer.”

“Is that so? Are you really? I used to be a history teacher, but I’ve retired now.”

She didn’t seem quite old enough for retirement, but Gus tactfully made no comment. As they continued to chat he thought he was going to be invited into her house, but like Bain she seemed to prefer to conduct her conversations on the landing. Perhaps she had still to be finally convinced that he was not an agent of his evil predecessor.

He finally managed to break away without being impolite. He went straight to The Centurion.

The brothel-keeping incarnation of evil was drinking with a group of people at one of the tables. Gus went over to him. “Can I have a word?”

“Hullo there, man. Sure, have a seat.”

“Can I speak to you in private?”

Welsh followed him over to the counter, looking sincerely puzzled. “What’s the matter, man?”

“I got the keys of the flat today.”

“Great. Does that mean I’ll get my money soon?”

“I don’t know. Probably.”

“Magic.” He laughed. “Is that the big key in your pocket or are you just pleased to see me?”

“Very funny,” said Gus. “What the hell do you think you’re playing at? You’ve taken everything away. The cooker, the fires, the carpets, the curtains. You agreed to leave them.”

“Did I? I can’t remember.”

“It’s part of the contract.”

“I don’t know anything about that. You’ll have to ask my lawyer. He said it was all right to take that stuff.”

“Did he?”

“Sure. I mean I needed the bread, I had to sell what I could. I was hoping to get a higher price for the pad, you know. Calm down, man. Do you want a pint?”

How many second-hand light bulbs equalled the price of a pint? “No thanks,” said Gus. “You say Bob Waddell told you it was all right to take the stuff?”

“That’s right. You can ask him yourself. I saw him in The Aragon about twenty minutes ago.”

“I’ll do just that,” said Gus. He left the pub and crossed over to The Aragon.

Bob Waddell was still there, drinking with an old man whose face looked vaguely familiar to Gus. Bob was probably trying to talk him into making a will, or into replacing a valid existing one with an ambiguous substitute. He excused himself and joined Gus at the counter, with the ease of one who regularly has to keep new clients at arms length from irascible former ones.

“What’s the problem?” he asked, as soon as several drunks and the high level of background noise had insulated them from the old man.

Gus told him. “He claims you said it was all right to remove the stuff.”

“No I didn’t.”

“He says otherwise.”

“He’s a lying little shite. Anyway, what’s the problem? None of these things were fixtures.”

“Yes they were. The fires were, anyway. That’s not the point. My offer included them and you accepted it. Without reading it, obviously.”

“Calm down, Gus. Don’t get your knickers in a twist. Do you want a pint?”

“No,” said Gus, though he did want one.

“Why worry about it? There’s nothing you can do. He’ll have sold the stuff by now.”

“You could give me a refund. A couple of hundred pounds, say.”

“Fuck off. The transaction’s settled.”

“I could sue him.”

“So sue him. I’ll represent him. I’ll get a fee whether he wins or loses. Come on Gus, why bother? Have a pint.”

“Fuck off,” said Gus, and went back to The Centurion.

He separated Toby Welsh from his friends again. “I saw Bob Waddell. He denies saying you could take the stuff.”

“What? He’s lying, man. That’s what he told me. I’m sorry, Gus. This is a bad scene. I don’t want any aggro.”

“Neither do I.” One of them was certainly lying, but Gus wasn’t sure which. “Would you be willing to take a couple of hundred off the price?”

“Can’t do it. I’ve got debts. Be reasonable, you got the place cheap.”

Gus thought about it. He *had* bought the place at a good price, and in his own way had employed a certain amount of cunning in order to achieve it. He too had benefited from the incompetence of Toby’s lawyer. And the stuff was all rubbish, which he would have replaced as soon as he could. And he was tired, and he was thirsty, and there was only an hour left until closing time.

“Come on, man,” said Toby. “Be cool. Do you want a pint?”

“Why not?” said Gus.