

At the turn of the century--this one, not the nineteenth--my family occupied a townhouse in a converted and renovated mental institution near Windsor, England. The developers had managed to save many of the Gothic features of the structures while subverting their original purposes for more modern needs. The substantial brick boundary wall at one time kept in inmates and now kept out outsiders. A polite, uniformed security guard manned the single wrought-iron entrance gate. The crushed gravel drive curved around an open green made lush by English rain. The green, colorfully edged at the top with flower borders, aproned the main residence building, now pricey condominiums. Inside the imposing building the large communal dining hall had been converted to an indoor swimming pool. There residents could practice their backstroke with a view of the intricately painted and gilded rafters once gracing the ceiling above the mentally unstable inmates. In the back of the development, the quaint chapel now served as a gym, its stained glass windows protected inside by metal mesh from the threat of basketballs. Ringing the chapel, like so many Stepford wives, were twenty identically and meticulously detailed brand-new townhouse units. Children careened their bicycles around this loop, happy in the freedom that their mothers allowed them in the relative safety of the enclosed neighborhood. The only thing marring such a delightful and pristine scene, and this only on warmish days, would be the overwhelming fetid scent of the neighboring pig farm.

Expat Americans gravitated to the newness and the safety of the development, but only a handful of natives chose to live there. At the entrance of the circle, facing the chapel, lived a balding but stylish older man and his amply tressed, much younger girlfriend, a sort of Peter Sellers/Jane Seymour match. They drove around together with their two wagging Labrador retrievers in their green convertible Jaguar. On the opposite side, at one o'clock orientation, resided the former gynecologist to the queen, gray-haired Lord Stanley, and his wife, whom the American neighbors had dubbed Lady So-and-So. She passed by the chapel daily, thin and smartly dressed, her hair

a puff of white, walking her dog, another puff of white, and often smoking a cigarette trailing a puff of white. She even drove a small white convertible BMW. Unlike Mr. Jag and his girlfriend, who gave the neighbors friendly waves when passing, the lord and lady could not be induced to offer more than a nod of acknowledgement to a smiling American, "Hi." Their extroverted opposite, a plumpish, floral-skirted, cheery older owner of a sweet miniature Yorkshire terrier, could be found sitting on a bench at the green, getting acquainted with the children. The Yorkie received daily baths in the sink and warm milk out of a china tea cup at tea time, and it shivered in fear at the many hands of the eager children. Between Lady So-and-So and Mr. Jag lived a matched pair of West Highland white terriers, who terrorized passers-by, barking madly from their professionally decorated swagged and valanced windows. The windows would vibrate with the noise of their anger. The owners were decidedly unavailable. One could spot the British natives by their canine companions: most Americans had to leave their pets behind, unable to tolerate the 90 day government quarantines enforced on immigrant pets.

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