**Tonight is my Fifth Night of Surveillance**

Stephen Coates

 I press my face deeper into the leaves as a taxi crawls along the road, the driver trying to pick out the numbers on the letterboxes. I wait for the headlights to pass. I have chosen my vantage point well, a triangle in the corner by the carport with an impenetrable conifer behind me. The pungent scent of grass clippings reminds me of fictional childhood summers. I am also helped by the rain, a knife-like drizzle that keeps people off the streets. I’m lucky like that.

No one is inside. I know that. But every night for the last five nights—or is it six?—somewhere after midnight, he has walked up the path and in through that front door. I have no reason to expect that tonight will be any different. I do not wonder where he goes. I know that too.

A lamp comes on in the neighbor’s porch, a powerful beam shining straight at me. I screw my eyes shut, think invisible thoughts. After an endless thirty seconds I am plunged into darkness once more and allow myself to breathe. Probably a cat or something triggered his security light. Or maybe he has himself a watcher too.

The house itself, an unremarkable stucco, is unchanged. A pair of sneakers lies abandoned on the veranda, hardened by the elements. I consider what can be deduced from them. That he has two feet. Yes, very droll. That he makes occasional efforts at self-improvement—in this case, jogging—but without the energy to see them through. Weak and lacking discipline, does not look after his possessions.

Certainly, when I observed him the previous night, he didn’t strike me as a man who took proper care of himself. His shoes scuffed against the concrete and his head, pushed forward by his rounded shoulders, gave him the air of a weary turtle. He moved reluctantly, as if his home was no sanctuary. On the top step he tripped and his string of swear words was as bitter as it was feeble. If it had been anyone else, I might even have felt sorry for him.

The fluorescent hands on my Mickey Mouse watch inch towards quarter past the hour. He’s late, later than he’s ever been. Perhaps someone has tipped him off. Maybe he has realized that nothing is keeping him here, will just never come home. And where will that leave me? I shove the thought aside.

A light has been left on in the bedroom. This has not happened before. The curtains aren’t completely closed, and after long hesitation I pluck up the courage to peek inside. Creep across the grass Pink Panther-style, though there is no one about to hear me. Stand on tiptoe in the garden to peer through the window.

An empty packet of salt and vinegar chips and a half-full bottle of ginger ale sit on the bedside table. The cap has rolled several feet away by the wardrobe. I shake my head in disgust. Unhealthy diet, slovenly housekeeping. The blankets are an untidy heap, boxer shorts and T-shirts are scattered on the floor. In a plastic pot the brown fronds of a maidenhair fern droop accusingly. A student flat if ever I’ve seen one, though I know for a fact that he dropped out years ago. I scurry back to my hiding place.

Twenty minutes later I can no longer feel my toes. I do not think I have learned anything useful, but that is enough for today. If I give up now, I can turn on the heater, make a cup of Milo. It would be nice to be warm, but the idea fills me with loneliness.

I pull myself upright and limp across the lawn, digging in my pocket for my keys. Another wasted evening, still no nearer to understanding. I am careful to avoid the protruding board as I climb the steps to the deck.

At the door I pause, resting my palm on the wood. The knot that has been growing in my chest bursts like a tumor. I could leave now, this very moment, and not a single person would miss me—not even myself. So what’s to stop me doing a runner?

My euphoria carries me five hundred meters, as far as the main road, my legs lighter than they have been for months. At the corner I look to the right, towards the mall. It will be all closed up at this hour, shutters over the entrance and the carpark deserted. To the left is the primary school, its playground and classrooms sinister in the darkness. I look to the right again.

A man approaches, with a corgi on a lead waddling along behind him. The owner, bundled up in a thick bomber jacket, nods at me.

“Cold enough for you?” he says.

As I mumble a reply my sense of freedom fades. Of course I have known it all along. Inside or out, it makes no difference. Huddled in front of a two-bar heater, for me that’s as good as it gets. I turn and head for home. Tomorrow I should do some washing, water that bloody plant. But I probably won’t.