

The opening pages of

When That Time Comes

by David Pennant

Chapter One

I suppose it's easy to say it now with hindsight, but I did actually know there was something wrong when I woke on that fateful Tuesday morning.

It was not so much the power cut – the display on our digital clock on my side of the bed was blank, but the sound of the world that was wrong. I could hear the birds in the garden distinctly. They should have been drowned out by the passing traffic. Why wasn't there any?

It was ridiculous of people to say that the birds were dying out. If you were awake at dawn, which I had been quite often in the months after Sonia died, they were very much in evidence. The early morning concerto rivalled anything by Handel or Bach.

I had overslept a little, which was unlike me. Normally I wake a few minutes before the alarm goes off. I would need to be prompt if I was going to catch my usual train into London.

I crossed the landing to the bathroom, pausing to greet Timber our Golden Retriever lying on her bean bag as I passed. She was barely awake and did not even lift her head.

The water pressure was low when I brushed my teeth, which was odd.

I dressed quickly. It still felt strange not having Sonia. However long would it take before it felt normal being single again, I wondered for the fifteenth time.

I gave Timber her breakfast and had my usual bowl of cereal and milk. I was careful to close the door of the fridge quickly to conserve the cold. I somehow sensed that this power cut was likely to last a while even then.

I needed information. We had a portable radio somewhere, and there might be the correct batteries in the batteries box, I reflected. I soon located the radio, but it needed six batteries and the old shoe box we used to store odd batteries only had two, left over from the multiple packs that you seemed to have to buy these days when you simply wanted one battery. I doubted whether I could scrounge enough batteries by robbing other appliances round the house to make up the number. How tiresome. Never mind.

Soon I was ready to leave for work. I had lost all interest in my high-powered job in the city when Sonia died, ringing New York and Tokyo three or four times a morning, but I needed to keep at it to pay the bills and get Mark and Fliss through university. It was rather embarrassing having everybody tell me how good at it I was. I could have done it standing on my head if the truth was told. My policy with remarks of that kind was simply to smile sweetly and carry on. But surely there must be more to life than this?

I settled Timber with a chocolate drop, grasped my briefcase and opened the front door. The road was deserted. There wasn't a single car, and even more surprising, no pedestrians either. I stood still and stared. Also, where were the trains? The railway line to London was two hundred yards beyond the far side of the road, but as it was raised up on an embankment the noise of trains tended to carry in our direction with the prevailing wind. You could also see the frequent trains in gaps between the houses. It should have been busy at this time, but today the track was standing eerily idle.

This might be Tuesday, but it felt like Sunday.

I think it was then that I first started to feel scared. What would Sonia do? She would know...

I looked next door. We were on good terms with Phil and Kath our next door neighbours. They left for work about now in the normal way, but both cars were still on the forecourt. The doorbell was a battery-powered one, and gave a friendly chime. Phil and Kath both came to the door.

"What's going on?" I asked.

“We haven’t a clue,” said Kath. They were younger than us, not yet ready to think about retirement.

“There are no trains and no cars,” I said.

“And no planes,” Phil added. “Haven’t you noticed?”

“No.” The airport was about twenty miles away, and although the planes often came over us, they were too high to hear. The sky had none of the usual tell-tale exhaust plumes. I had no doubt Phil was right.

“Have you heard anything on the radio?” I enquired. “I don’t have the right batteries.”

“We haven’t tried. My laptop is down,” Kath declared. “Or rather, all I get from it is a flashing cursor.”

It is strange how slow I am to catch onto the new technology, really. Although I use the internet all day at work, my mind still does not jump to it as a source of news.

“Also, our phone line is dead and my mobile is not working,” Phil added. “It’s very unusual for a power cut to affect the phone.”

“I’ve got a bad feeling about this,” I said. “It’s clear there’s no getting to work today. I would like to call a Neighbourhood Watch meeting to compare notes and make a plan. Shall we say at 1030?”

“Well, alright.” Kath seemed somewhat taken aback. “We are working at home today in any case. Do you think it’s serious?”

“Yes, I think it’s serious. Look, can you tell the houses this way,” I pointed away from the town centre on our side of the road, “and I’ll do the ones the other way and on the other side. We are all going to need each other, I reckon.”

They agreed. “Right. See you later.”

I made my way up and down the road knocking on doors. Everybody was in and just as mystified as I was. None of them had been able to contact the outside world. They seemed relieved that somebody was doing something and agreed to come to the meeting. It was a good thing we had a large conservatory joined on to our kitchen, I reflected, although it was still going to be a squeeze.

Sonia would not have enjoyed the invasion, I reflected. That was partly why I had never convened a Neighbourhood Watch meeting until now. She liked to keep the home to ourselves as a refuge from the world. Although I always maintained that I would have liked to keep an open house, the reality was that although I was now free to invite others in at all hours, I still carried on in the same manner of life as when Sonia was here. It was as if I had lost the will. There were some days when I wondered if I was suffering from depression, but the thing to do was to shrug it off and to carry on.

Then there was also Pamela...