

The Visitor *by Peter Brooks*

AT the end of work one Summer's day on my way home I dropped round to my parents' house to see how they were doing.

My brother (who was still living at home) and my father were out at work and my mother was out as well – possibly shopping for the meal that evening – but I knew one of them would be home shortly so I let myself in with my back door key and sat down in the living room to wait for someone to return.

I didn't have long to wait. I heard what sounded like my brother coming in through the back door, but he seemed unusually heavy footed, as if he was deliberately stamping his feet as he walked.

I thought he was messing about and that maybe he didn't realise I was in the house. I prepared to surprise him as he walked into the living room.

On the contrary, I was the one who was surprised. Instead of my brother, a total stranger tramped into the room, looked around briefly and sat down in an armchair.

It was a moment or two before I recovered my composure.

"Can I help you?" I asked, not sure of the situation.

"Um sweets, please" said the stranger, holding up a shopping bag.

It was at that point I noticed that he appeared to have the features characteristic of someone with Down Syndrome.

"I think you may be in the wrong

place," I said, and we both stood up. He seemed a little nervous and agitated, so, keeping my voice calm and neutral, I suggested that I help him back to where I guessed he must have come from: a unit at the end of the street, called Eastfield House, and home to a number of people who suffered from various forms of mental handicap.

One or two were real characters and well known to us.

Their nicknames sometimes made me wonder, though: "Filthy Habits" isn't exactly a confidence inspiring name for anyone, especially when they wear a thick duffel coat come rain or shine...

I carefully took the visitor by the arm and guided him back along the hallway, through the kitchen and out of the back door.

I tried to make polite conversation as we walked the hundred yards or so towards Eastfield House. I asked him where he had been heading and whether he actually came from Eastfield House (I didn't want to take him somewhere even more confusing) but he didn't respond to any of my questions.

When we reached the gateway leading into the home, I made a snap decision not to take him all the way in. There was the possibility that he might get into some kind of trouble and I didn't want that to compound what for him had obviously been a slightly traumatic outing.

As I let him go and walked away back up the street I heard a loud

voice say: "*Now* where have you been?"

Clearly he'd been sent out on this particular mission more than once already.

Putting two and two together didn't take long. I already knew that residents of the home were encouraged to get used to travelling around on their own – I'd seen other residents in the shopping centre in Cowley and taking the bus – as part of a process of acclimating them to a degree of independence.

I also knew that there was a confectionery shop just past the end of our street, and my guess was that the man, who looked to be in his thirties, had been given directions to walk along the street, take the first turning left (which happened to be our driveway rather than the road running across the end of the street) and to cross the main road (which meant crossing our driveway), and the door to the confectioner's would be just in front of him (and that happened to coincide with our back door).

He obviously didn't know the difference between a shop and a private house, so he didn't realise that he was in the wrong place. I guess to his way of thinking, I was a shop assistant and all he had to do was ask me for what he wanted: some sweets.

If my Mum had been at home on her own when he stomped into the house, I don't know what her reaction would have been.

Later, when she came home, I told her about the incident. She took a little convincing that I wasn't pulling her leg.

After thinking about it a little, she was convinced that she might well have screamed, and that could have led to trauma for all concerned, so she – and the visitor – had had a narrow escape.