

Nearly nothing

“Costs me next to nothing”, Vince said as we sat in his kitchen on a biting-cold, February day.

“See – salvaged from other people’s houses!” He bent down, reached under the table, and threw me a fist-sized chunk of wood. “That’s off an elmwood door they’d chucked out. Eighty years old. Said it wasn’t right for their new security fittings.”

The block was well-grained, varnished, and roughly hacked into firewood. I thought of the sturdy entrance-way it once made, through blizzard and heatwave; how many occupants it had seen come and go, like cuckoo-clock figurines; the thin postcards and fat Sunday papers it had allowed into an interior guarded closer than a hup! hup! sentry ever could.

Then I knew it must have been right here where this very tree flourished; a living arch over the centuries when these busy streets were heath and farmland. It would have lent shelter to cattle, villagers, lovers and - why not? – an exhausted soldier.

I saw how its knots mocked the beady eye of the steward who was busy remeasuring its girth. Puffing importantly, he’d haul himself back to the manor house to copperplate the increased estimate into the squire’s accounts. Heart failure felled them both long, long before the storm that took down the elm.

The woodstove door clanged open. The fierce flames had dwindled away. The pile of ashes had increased by not very much. “Let’s have that bit back and I’ll get it burning up again”, said Vince.