

## Liz Filleul

*Liz Filleul was born in the English Midlands, educated on the Welsh coast, and spent several years working as a London-based journalist before setting off on a solo trip around the world. A holiday romance in Tasmania led to marriage and migration to Melbourne in 1995. Liz now lives with her husband Grant and three-year-old son Gabriel in the Dandenong Ranges, where she juggles motherhood with freelance editing. In July next year she will celebrate 10 full years as an Aussie.*

*This is the third time that Liz, a former convenor of Sisters in Crime, has been shortlisted for the Scarlet Stiletto Awards. She received special commendations in 1996 and again in 2003. She first started writing fiction in the 1980s, when she sold a number of stories to the British teenage girls' magazine, Patches. More recently she had a children's picture book, Tumbler, published in 2001. However, she wrote very little fiction in the 20 years that separated Patches and Tumbler, concentrating first on her journalistic career and later on settling into her new life in Australia.*

*Unfortunately, Liz was unable to attend this year's Awards because she was away on holiday. She is especially sorry to miss seeing Bea Smith from Prisoner in the flesh. She has many fond memories of staggering home from the pub and watching Prisoner on late-night television in Britain in the late 1980s and early 1990s.*

### Brought to Book

When Simmo told us she'd been burgled and that her precious collection of girls school stories had been stolen, my heart sank. Not entirely out of sympathy, I must confess. Of course I understood her grief – what fellow collector wouldn't? – but my first reaction was to think: “Oh, no, now I can't tell them about *my* books.”

The books I'd been so looking forward to showing off were in my bag, placed carefully beside me on Gin's battered red armchair. One was a hardback copy of *The Chalet School in Exile* by Elinor M. Brent-Dyer. It would have cost more than \$50 to purchase via Abebooks.com or eBay, but I'd found it for \$2 at a local garage sale two weeks ago. The second was a paperback by Harriet Martyn called *Jenny and the New Headmistress*, which I'd successfully bid for on eBay. The cost had been ludicrous for a 1985 paperback, but since I'd spent nearly twenty years searching for a copy, I figured it was worth it.

Up till recently, I'd believed I was the only thirtysomething woman in the world who, in times of trouble, turned to the well-thumbed pages of the Chalet School or Malory Towers the way most people flew to the bottle or the fridge. Only last winter, when I'd been made redundant from my job as a university librarian, I'd spent many a cold, dreary day curled up on the sofa in front of the wood heater, absorbed in an endless

round of difficult new girls, practical jokes, lacrosse matches and midnight feasts. And it was during that – thankfully brief – period of unemployment that I'd made two surprising discoveries courtesy of the internet.

One was that many of the books I'd been collecting since childhood were actually quite rare and valuable. I told my husband and my parents about the prices they were commanding, and suddenly they started regarding my school story collection as an acceptable investment rather than a disturbing sign of arrested development.

The second was that internet forums devoted to girls school story authors and their books were both abundant and active. For the first time, I found other fans to discuss my childhood favourites with. And it was through these online forums that I'd encountered a group of local women who met up in real life to discuss school stories and book collecting – AFOGS (standing for Adult Fans of Girls' Stories and pronounced 'Afogs'). AFOGS comprised ten women aged from twenty-five to sixty, who lived in and around Melbourne, and who met at each other's houses on Friday evenings on a bi-monthly basis. I'd been a member for just under a year.

Tonight we were meeting at Gin's chaotic flat in Prahran. Gin was 35, just three years younger than me; small and slight, with short blonde hair. Up till a couple of years ago, she had been a small-part actor; these days she translated Spanish plays into English and produced them on the Melbourne stage. As well as a talent for acting and languages, Gin had an incredible knack for finding the rarest and most valuable of children's books for next to nothing – she'd once found a pristine first edition of Elsie J. Oxenham's *Girls of the Hamlet Club* – worth more than \$1200 on eBay or Abebooks.com – for 50c in an op shop while on holiday in Queensland. Rarely a meeting went by without Gin turning up with a showbag of amazing finds. Whereas until I found *Exile* I'd netted precisely nothing at my weekly garage sale and trash and treasure hunts. Which was why I'd looked forward to showing it – and *Jenny* – off.

But now I couldn't. It simply wasn't appropriate with Simmo close to tears over the loss of her collection.

“You mean they took every single book?” Gin demanded. She sounded half-disbelieving, and I couldn’t blame her. Who ever heard of burglars breaking into your house and nicking books?

“Every single one,” Simmo sighed. She was an accountant, in her mid-fifties, tall and large with short, red-dyed, spiky hair and huge, red-rimmed glasses. All the AFOGS members had impressive collections of girls school stories, but Simmo’s had been far and away the best. You name the author, and she’d owned all their books, all first editions, all with immaculate dust jackets. She’d completed her collection of New Zealand writer Clare Mallory’s school stories only a week or so before the previous meeting, having forked out \$150 for *Merry Marches On* on eBay.

“Was anything else taken?” I asked.

“Of course. The DVD player, the computer, the camera, jewellery ... The usual things. Those things didn’t bother me, other than the inconvenience. Everything’s insured. But the books are impossible to replace, some of them literally impossible ...”

This was true, I thought, recalling how *Jenny and the New Headmistress* had appeared on eBay only once in the past 12 months and never on Abebooks.com in the same period of time. Simmo would struggle to replace some of the books she’d had. Then there were the memories associated with them – she’d read her first Abbey book coming out on the boat from England with her ten-pound-passage parents, a farewell gift from the grandmother she’d never seen again. How could insurance replace that? We spent the rest of the meeting disconsolately slugging dry white wine and nibbling peanuts and cheese and crackers, murmuring appropriate comments while Simmo told us that the police had barely been able to conceal their smirks when she’d informed them that her collection of school stories was among the stolen goods.

“I suppose they’ll turn up at a trash and treasure somewhere, earning somebody a quick buck,” Jude commented. She was in her late forties, with greying hair, and was almost as short and slight as Gin. We all envied Jude for being able to legitimately claim that her avid reading of school stories was ‘research’ – she was a university

lecturer in children's literature and its history, and regularly penned feminist perspectives of the girls boarding school story for academic journals.

"That's what the police said," replied Simmo. "If that's what's happened, they'll be a lucky haul for some collector at the market."

"I'll look out for them at the trash and treasures I go to," promised Gin.

We broke up shortly after that, after arranging that in two months' time we'd meet at my place. I'd show them *Exile* and *Jenny* then, I thought, grabbing my bag and saying goodbye. By then, Simmo would be over the shock and would probably have gone some way towards replacing her collection.

I hurried to the corner of Gin's ill-lit street, and stomped up and down like a stood-up teenager while I waited for my husband Peter to pick me up on his way from the football.

He finally arrived, fifteen minutes after our prearranged time. "How was the game?" I asked, as I jumped into the passenger seat and pulled on my seat-belt.

"Terrible. We were terrible," he answered. By 'we' he meant Hawthorn, his team, which, judging by his dejected expression, had lost yet again. "How was the meeting?" he asked me as he drove off.

"Terrible," I echoed. "Simona had been burgled, and all her books had been taken."

"Oh, well," Peter replied, carelessly. "That's what you get for living in Footscray."

We stopped at the supermarket on the way home, and it was well after eleven when we finally arrived back at our house miles away from the city in the Dandenong Ranges. Peter grabbed a couple of shopping bags and bounded off into the house, while I trailed slowly after him, juggling shopping and books. When I reached the top of the short flight of wooden steps that led up to our deck, Peter was standing on the doorstep, looking staggered.

“Lucy,” he said, “we’ve been burgled.”

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The widescreen TV, DVD player and stereo had gone. So too had Peter’s digital camera and some of my jewellery. And every single one of our books.

Now I knew how Simmo felt, I realised, as I wandered miserably around the house, staring at the empty bookshelves in disbelief. The big bookcase in the study that housed all my children’s books now held nothing. The two large wine-rack-cum-bookshelves in the living room were now devoid of my ‘grown-up’ fiction and Peter’s collection of sports books as well as the wine. Even our recipe books had been taken from the kitchen. The only books I now possessed were the two I’d taken to Gin’s.

The police came, looked around, took statements, examined the side window that the burglars had smashed to break in, then went off to ask our neighbours if they’d seen anything – which was unlikely given our house was shrouded by trees. We promised to compile a list of what had been stolen and take it down to the station within 24 hours. I told them about Simmo’s burglary, hoping that they’d recognise the similarities between the break-ins even though Simmo lived on the other side of the city.

Over the next few days we made out a list for the police, filled in the insurance forms, talked incessantly to friends and relatives about what had happened. At work, my mind constantly wandered. I wanted to do something, anything to get my books back. Whoever broke in to our house had taken the books for a reason, I surmised – presumably because they were valuable, or at least some of them were. Maybe they’d taken them to a secondhand bookshop, rather than a trash and treasure, hoping to get a good price? At lunchtime, I grabbed the *Yellow Pages* and started ringing antiquarian bookshops on my mobile, asking if anyone had come in over the weekend with boxes of books, including a hundred or so school stories ... After five futile calls, I gave up. There were too many booksellers in the *Yellow Pages* alone. And I knew from internet surfing that there were plenty more whose businesses were

solely online and not listed in the telephone directory. It would take forever to contact every bookshop in Melbourne, and I didn't have the patience.

After a couple of weeks, our insurance money came through, and we started to replace the goods we'd lost. Somehow, though, I couldn't bring myself to begin replacing my book collection – they'd taken so many years to amass, and many of them were so hard to find. I had just come offline one night, half-heartedly searching for Chalets on Abebooks.com, when the phone rang. Peter came into the study to say it was for me.

It was Gin. To tell me she'd been burgled. And that all her books had gone.

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It was Saturday evening and Simmo, Gin and I were sitting in our living-room, relishing the warmth from the wood-heater, and guzzling Pringles and a ten-year-old bottle of red.

“It must be someone who knows us,” declared Gin. “Someone who knows our movements – knows that Simmo and you and Peter go to work every day from Monday to Friday, Lucy, knows that I go out to the theatre for three hours every afternoon.”

“Someone who knows we all have books that are valuable,” added Simmo.

“I'm not convinced of that,” I objected. “Oh, I admit the target seems to have been the books. But why take every book, not just the valuable ones?”

“No time to sort them out,” Simmo responded decisively.

I refilled our glasses. “Just saying you're right, Simmo, and that whoever took our books knows us and our collections, who do you think it might be? The only people we all know are the AFOGS lot and it can't be any of them.”

“I agree there,” said Simmo. “I’ve known most of them for years. None of them are dishonest.”

“There are the forums,” Gin pointed out. “We all go to forums, and you never know who’s lurking there.”

“But we don’t use our full names on the forums, let alone give out our addresses,” I argued. “And the only list we’re all on is the Girlsown list. Other than that, we’re on different forums.”

“True enough,” sighed Gin.

“Did you lose all of your books, Gin?” Simmo asked. “Or did you have a couple tucked away somewhere, like Lucy here?”

“All of them,” Gin answered gloomily. “And to make matters worse, I’d finally completed my set of Chalets. I figured I’d had so much luck finding books for next to nothing that I could afford to fork out a few dollars for *Prefects at the Chalet School*. So I bid for it on eBay and got it. I’d only had it about a week when I was burgled.”

“You know,” said Simmo slowly, “that could be the connection.”

“What’s that?” I asked.

“eBay. When we were burgled we’d all recently bought books from eBay. The person I bought *Merry Marches On* from was in Melbourne – in Eltham. What about you two?”

“The woman I bought *Jenny* off lived in Eltham,” I confirmed. “I remember that because Peter’s parents are in Warrandyte, and I thought about asking if I could pick it up from her and combine the trip with visiting them. But then Pat and Dan announced they were heading to Queensland for the winter, so I had it posted here instead.”

“I can’t remember whether she was in Eltham, but she *was* in Melbourne, and her eBay name was Joy something. Joy with some numbers after it,” said Gin.

“That’s right – same with my seller,” Simmo said eagerly.

We trooped into the study, where Peter had tucked himself away for the evening, and interrupted his computer game to fire up the internet. We all checked our eBay accounts. Sure enough, we’d all purchased books between three and five days before our respective burglaries from an eBay seller called Joy93, who lived in Eltham. All three of us had paid by making direct deposits to her account. She had posted our books to our addresses, so she knew exactly where we lived.

“This woman would realise that people usually buy old children’s books to add to their own collections,” declared Simmo. “So if she sells to someone in Melbourne, she burgles the place, gets back the book she sold and lots of others besides – presumably to sell them all on eBay. Very neat.”

“We should tell the police this,” I said. I wondered how long Joy93 held on to the books before deeming it safe to sell on eBay. My books might still be in her house, in a box somewhere, waiting to be auctioned.

“And what use would that be?” Simmo scoffed. “It’s circumstantial evidence. They’d go round, and if she had books in her house that we said we’d lost, she’d say she’d found them at garage sales, at trash and treasures, in op shops, secondhand bookshops. We can’t *prove* the books are ours – unless one of you wrote your name in them? I certainly didn’t.”

We both shook our heads.

“So what do we do?” Gin asked. “We can’t just ignore this. The police need to know, even if they can’t prove anything. A visit from them might at least prevent her from burgling the next poor sod.”

“I’ve got an idea,” said Simmo.

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Blame it on the three bottles of wine we eventually ended up demolishing. Or on the girls' own tales of derring-do we had all spent at least three quarters of our lives devouring. Whatever the reason, the fact was that nine days later I found myself driving to my in-laws' empty house, with two sets of their house keys in my jacket pocket and a box of books on the back seat. Unknown to my in-laws, and to Peter, I was about to use their home to set up a sting.

When Simmo had first told us her idea, she'd suggested we use her family's beach house in Sorrento. But then I'd remembered Pat and Dan's house, the fact they were in Queensland until the end of August, and that it was so conveniently located in Warrandyte, a mere twenty minutes from Joy93's apparent location in Eltham. Peter, ensconced in the study, hadn't heard a word of our plans. And I'd figured it was best it stayed that way.

Our plan had gone into action within two days of its boozy hatching. Simmo had persuaded Jude to join us, and to move into my in-laws' place for a few days, posing as Pat Dixon. I'd signed Pat Dixon up on Yahoo and eBay and, under that name, had bid on Elsie J. Oxenham's *Rachel in the Abbey*, auctioned by Joy93. "Put in an \$800 bid," Simmo advised. "It won't go for anywhere near that much, and it'll mean you'll be sure of getting it. And I'll reimburse you – I need that book anyway."

Five days later, *Rachel* was ours for \$250. I emailed Joy93 from Pat Dixon's Yahoo account and asked if it was OK to send carefully concealed cash as payment. She agreed, and sent me her P.O. box address in Eltham. I posted the money and confirmed the address where the book was to be sent. That was the Friday. I alerted the other three, and we agreed that Jude should establish herself at my in-laws' place on Monday, when the book would most likely be delivered.

Pat and Dan lived in a quiet, five-house court in Warrandyte, a pretty, bush-flanked township that lay deceptively close to bustling, built-up central Melbourne. I arrived at their double-storey weatherboard at a quarter to eight, parked inside the double

garage and let myself into the house. It had been empty since Mother's Day weekend, and felt chilly and smelt musty. I switched on the heating, and opened the half-closed curtains. I was in the kitchen filling the kettle when Jude arrived, parking her car out on the drive. Then Simmo and Gin appeared at the back door, having parked up at the nearby state park car park and taken a short track to the house through the bush.

"This house is lovely on the outside," Gin commented. "But inside ... " We all followed her gaze through to the living room, taking in the shabby old sofas and table, a prehistoric-looking television and video, and off-white walls enlivened only by the occasional family wedding photograph.

"I know," I agreed. "Colourless and characterless – rather like my in-laws."

They giggled.

"No books," Jude remarked.

"They're not readers," I answered. "There aren't any bookcases here. We'll have to put the books in the display cabinet." I nodded towards the cabinet, which held more family photographs and various hideous trinkets. "I'll box all that stuff up."

Simmo wandered around the house, and returned downstairs after inspecting the master bedroom and ensuite. "They don't have much worth nicking," she declared.

"I know. That's why I thought this house would be good," I answered, passing around cups of tea. "No DVD player, no computer. Pat doesn't wear much jewellery and what she has she's taken with her to Queensland. So all the burglar will take will be the books, and Pat and Dan won't lose anything should everything not work out."

"Of course it'll work out," Simmo said. "Let's make a start on the books, shall we? Jude will need to go off to 'work' soon."

We'd deliberately chosen the university holidays to bid on Joy93's auction, so that Jude could join us. Simmo and I had both taken leave from work, and Gin planned to

join us during the mornings only, and head off to the theatre as normal in the afternoon. Our plan was for Jude to leave the house for three hours every morning, so that any watching burglar would think she had a part-time job, and use that timeframe to break in. In reality, she would head for one of the cafés in Warrandyte's main street, where she planned to catch up on some essay-marking. Since we needed to operate in pairs, Gin would join Jude separately in the café every morning. Simmo and I would watch for the arrival of anyone suspicious from Dan and Pat's bedroom.

So now, we set to work on the books. We had all spent the past couple of weekends hitting garage sales and trash and treasures with a vengeance, and had accumulated as many worthless hardbacks as we could find. Between them, Jude and Simmo had photocopied mountains of dust jackets of valuable children's books. This morning we covered all the worthless books with the spurious dust jackets, and opened every book at page 93 – in honour of Joy herself – and pencilled the name P. Dixon somewhere on the page. Then we arranged the books in the display case.

"They look rather nice," Jude remarked admiringly.

"Shame they're not real, otherwise Pat and Dan would be in-laws worth having," I joked.

At 9.30 Jude headed off to the café. Ten minutes later, Gin headed off via the bush track to join her. Simmo and I settled down upstairs, taking it in turns to watch from the window. At 11.30 the post arrived. Jude brought it in when she got back at 12.30. We cooed over *Rachel in the Abbey*, then I tucked it into my bag ready to take home that night. Simmo was going to stay overnight at my in-laws' with Jude. We didn't expect the burglar to strike then – so far they had come during the day, when they knew the house was empty – but it was better to take precautions, just in case.

The following morning, Simmo and I saw a man in his early 20s, sporting a pony-tail, jeans and a black T-shirt, saunter down the drive. He knocked at the door a couple of times, wandered around the house, then headed back up into the court.

"That'll be him," Simmo said.

“He doesn’t look the book type to me,” I responded. “More like your average burglar.”

“You mean like the ones in *The Bill*?” Simmo scoffed.

Now that someone had checked out the house, we all started to feel more apprehensive. I worried that the burglar would be frustrated by the lack of nickable goods at Dan and Pat’s, and maybe damage the house in some way. When no-one showed up the following morning, I felt relieved – maybe the man had seen there was nothing worth stealing when he walked around the house, and wouldn’t come back.

But the following morning, at around 10.30, a white van turned into the drive. The pony-tailed man we’d seen previously jumped out of the driver’s side; his companion was also young and male, but with short dark hair. As they knocked on the door, then wandered around the side of the house, Simmo quickly texted Jude, giving her the cue to park at the end of the court. She’d just about finished when we heard the shattering of glass.

Simmo scurried behind the en-suite shower screen, while I slipped into the built-in wardrobe. We had already replaced the light-globe with a dud, to ensure it was so dark no-one could be seen. From my hiding place, I could hear muffled thumping sounds from downstairs and prayed that nothing was being damaged. Then I heard footsteps on the stairs. Someone came into the bedroom, poked in a couple of drawers. The wardrobe door opened.

I stiffened. I could feel my heart thudding and hoped the burglar wouldn’t hear it.

A hand flicked at the light switch, two, three times.

The burglar swore, turned away and clattered back downstairs. *Phew*. I breathed out.

“Nothing up here either, mate,” I heard him call out. “All we’ll get out of this job is whatever she gives us for taking the books.”

'She' presumably being Joy93, I thought.

"Let's get going then," said the other burglar.

I crept out of the wardrobe. Simmo was already standing beside the window, her hand on her mobile. "Just texting Jude with the rego," she murmured. "They're loading a couple of boxes into the van."

As the van veered out of the drive, we ran downstairs and I unlocked the internal door to the garage. As I drove out, Simmo's mobile beeped. It was a text message from Gin.

"Research-Warrandyte Road," Simmo read.

Then we were indeed heading to Eltham, I thought. As I drove through the house-dotted, drought-browned bush, I remembered the smashed window at the side of Dan and Pat's house. I'd go back later, I thought, organise a glazier. Eltham wasn't far, we wouldn't be away long. A text message from Gin told us to head for Eltham at the end of Research-Warrandyte Road; another one a few minutes later said the van had parked opposite Eltham's train station, outside an antique store called Olden Days.

As I drove into Eltham's busy main shopping strip, Simmo kept a look out for Olden Days. "There it is!" she shouted, pointing to a large, yellow-painted, weatherboard shop with a notice advertising 'Fine Antiques' on one window, 'Old Books' on the other. I snagged a parking space just up the road. Gin was already walking towards us.

"OK," Simmo said, "you and Gin go in. Text me if you think I can call the police."

I jumped out of the car and joined Gin.

"Good chase?" I queried.

“Easy,” answered Gin. “Jude always drives like a maniac anyway, so trying to keep up with those two cowboys wasn’t a problem for her.”

As I opened the door to Olden Days, a bell clanged notice of our arrival. Gin and I entered a large, rectangular room crammed with furniture – ornate tables, grand writing desks, enormous bookcases. To the right of the doorway was a desk. Our burglars stood in front of it, our boxes of books at their feet. Behind the desk was a woman who appeared to be in her early 60s, with short grey hair. Above the desk was a sign bearing the proprietor’s name: Mrs Joan Adamson. On the far wall to the right of the desk were two imposing bookcases. A sign above them said “Old Books”.

While Gin feigned interest in a davenport near Joan Adamson’s desk, I sauntered over to the books. I found the children’s shelves quickly: the bookcase contained Chalets, Abbeys, Dimsies, Biggles – you name the rare children’s book, she’d got it.

I rejoined Gin in time to see Joan Adamson hand the pony-tailed man a wad of notes.

“Thanks very much,” she said. “I’ll be in touch.”

The two men nodded at her, and left the shop. I texted Simmo to let her know that our fake rare books were safely inside the shop, so there was no need to follow the van. Then I wandered over to the desk, smiled at Joan Adamson, and bent down over the two cardboard boxes.

“There are some great titles here!” I exclaimed. “Look, Gin! Abbeys, Chalets, Antonia Forest ... ”

“I haven’t priced all these yet,” Joan Adamson told me. “They’ve only just come in. A couple of lads brought them in – their grandmother had died, they found the books in her attic ... ”

“If only I had a grandmother who left things like that in her attic,” Gin said. She picked up a couple of the books. “Oh, look, Lucy! This looks like a first edition Chalet. And here’s a Clare Mallory – they’re so hard to find ... ” She put them back

in the box and picked up a couple more. “Oh, goodness!” she exclaimed, browsing through it. “This isn’t a Chalet at all – look!” She held the book out to the bookshop owner.

Joan Adamson took the book from her, opened it and frowned. She came around to our side of the desk and started hunting through the boxes, picking up each book, checking its contents, then dropping it onto the floor.

“Looks like you’ve been conned,” Gin commented.

“Those bloody stupid – ” Joan Adamson began.

The door clanged open. Two uniformed police officers entered the store.

“Mrs Joan Adamson?” asked one officer. “We’ve had a complaint from a Mrs Judith Larcombe. She says you’ve taken a box of books from a house where she’s been staying. Apparently they’re easily identifiable.” He picked up one of the books from the boxes, and opened it. “She says they all have the name P. Dixon written in pencil on page 93.”

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When Jude spoke to the police a couple of days later, they told her that they’d managed to trace the van and that the two men had admitted breaking into houses to steal books for Joan Adamson, plus anything else they wanted to dispose of for themselves. Once she’d been dobbed in, Joan Adamson admitted organising the burglaries. When books had been brought to her, she’d dumped anything of no value, and had sold the rarer and collectable ones in the store and online. And of course she sold some of them on eBay, often being lucky enough to have the winning bidder live within burgling distance of Eltham. The police also told Jude that arrangements would be made with burglary victims to see if they could prove that any of her current stock belonged to them.

That news came later, though. In the wake of her arrest, Simmo, Jude, Gin and I headed triumphantly back to Warrandyte, where we went to the pub in the main street and ordered a bottle of champagne.

We were well into our second glass and Simmo was describing how she'd spotted the police passing by just after I'd texted her, when my mobile rang.

It was Peter. He sounded panicky.

"Lucy," he said. "I'm at mum and dad's place, waiting for the police. I was driving past for work, and thought I'd go round to the house to check it was OK. And the side window had been broken. It looks like they've been burgled."