

Flies in a Window

A novel

by

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*The truth unseen lies clear for all to see,
Yet man's distracted gaze cannot perceive.
His unbelieving eyes but shadows see,
For lies eclipse the truth
Like flies in a window.*



Chapter 1

'STOP POLICE'

The dayglo letters of the sign were bright in the headlights of the big bike. The policeman stood black and bulky by the roadside. He waved the crudely-made sign at the oncoming rider, nervously, shaking it. It seemed as though the bike was about to swing past it.

Then the brake light flared red in the November mist, and the machine slowed. The rider de-clutched smoothly through the gears, gently revving the engine. He kept his visor down, waiting, hiding his face. His black leathers glistened with beads of dew.

The policeman rolled the sign into a tube and walked up to the rider. He produced a gun from his pocket. His word of command was abrupt, urgent. Seconds passed. The command came again. Spittle flew from the policeman's mouth.

Without warning the rider dropped the clutch, and raced away. The policeman fell to the ground. The note of the engine screamed across the city, rising and falling, rising again. Suddenly the bike swerved, wobbling violently as the rider fought for control. He failed. It dropped onto its side and slewed into a post. The bike burst apart like a firework, pasting the road with glass and debris. The rider flew from the seat, landing like a rag doll onto the black tarmac.

A woman screamed. An oncoming van jerked to a halt. The driver got out. People were running. Oil dripped from the wreck into the gutter.

A hundred yards back down the hill, the policeman stood to his feet, and stared at the scene. Then he turned and ran clumsily away.

Wendy slammed the front door hard behind her. It was symbolic. Its solid 'clump' telegraphed more than her departure from the house. It was an end and a beginning. Maybe that's what she wanted anyway. Maybe that's what they all wanted. She didn't care. The pain ate her insides like a leech, a living thing, parasitic, evil, digging up the words again, 'while the balance of his mind was disturbed'.

The clammy mist engulfed her, sogging her hair. She pulled her Puffa jacket tighter around her school uniform against the cold. She didn't notice the homely smell of the lavender bushes beside the narrow path or the familiar snick of the front gate. She wasn't watching the last leaves of the broad, yellow chestnuts across the road pat to the wet pavement. Automatically she turned right down the hill towards the bus stop, her head bowed. The tyres of the morning traffic kissed the puddles, their wipers slapping at the fog. Still she couldn't cry.

The bus smelt of diesel and stale chips. Most of the kids sat silent in morning thoughts, their bags on their laps. The girl beside her glanced at her once, then turned and rubbed the window with her hand. The condensation on the glass made little trickles of tears, running down onto the rubber seals, down the wall, down.

Gaunt trees flashed past like black sticks, each one turning a page.

Flash. This grey house with the blue door and brass knocker hid a family fighting to death, tearing itself apart.

Flash. Behind this pretty white gate and smart new car in the driveway was a girl having an abortion.

Flash. From a black metal lattice, the corner store news-stand advertised a murder in bold black felt-tip.

A monstrous voice echoed in her head. 'Here is the News. This court finds that Nicholas Robert Dalton of 14 Whiteknights Crescent, Reading, took his own life on the 1st day of October this year, by jumping from a fourth-floor window, while the balance of his mind was disturbed.'

Two girls were chattering happily in the seat behind her. She knew them. Felicity was the cleverest in the class. And pretty. Some people always seemed to get the lot. Mary was her best friend. Wendy couldn't see what Fliss could see in her. She was a dull lump of a girl with fat ankles and bad breath.

No one spoke to her. They all knew. Suddenly a huge, black wave swelled from nowhere, a great tide of grief surging from some abyss. It struck her with almost physical force, taking her breath away. Now the tears gushed from her eyes like fountains. She tilted her head forward, hiding them with her limp hair. A great sob erupted from her throat. She struggled for control, but it was gone. The tears ran like condensation down her straight honey-brown hair, dripping from the ends onto her grey skirt, making small black patches of wet in her lap. She cried freely, beyond care, her shoulders heaving. The bus stopped at lights with a squeak of brakes. Steam clouded past the window. At last she squeezed her eyes and hunted in her bag for a tissue.

The girl beside her touched her gently on the arm, 'You all right, Wendy?' She bit her lip and nodded.

The kind gesture was unexpected, and released another flood of tears. This time she managed to control her sobs, the water running down her cheeks like rain. The girl looked at her clearly embarrassed, unsure of what to do. She wiped her face, and smiled a tight, red smile. 'Thanks,' she whispered.

The monster had receded a little. In its place anger began to ache in her heart. The rage that smote her in the courtroom yesterday now returned with full force. What did these stupid people know? These fat pigs with their fancy clothes and impersonal, polished mahogany stares. How could they 'find' anything? They weren't there. They didn't see what happened. They didn't know him. How dare he say that Nicky was mad? How dare he?

And her parents. They sat there like stuffed dummies, taking it with a British stiff upper lip, while that madman of a coroner raged about their only son having 'the balance of his mind disturbed.' They had said nothing. They just looked at each other, emotionless, and said absolutely nothing!!

‘Let’s go home,’ her mum had said, ‘I’ll make us all some tea.’ Tea! My brother kills himself and we have a tea party.

POSH VOICE:

‘Mr and Mrs Robert Dalton kaindly request the pleasure of Lord and Lady Carruthers to a tea-parteh to celebrate the suicide of their only son. RSVP.’

‘Lord and Lady Lah-di-dah-Carruthers thank Mr & Mrs Dalton very much for the kaind invitation to a tea-parteh on 14th November and congratulate them on the death by suicide of their only son Nicholas. They should take great pleasure in accepting.’

Wendy’s teeth were clenched so tight her jaw ached. Her mouth worked grimaces around her face. She wanted to break something, to hurl something. Unconsciously, she looked around for ammunition.

The class was staring at her.

The teacher looked at her with raised eyebrows, ‘Did you hear what I said, Wendy?’

Miss Rabot wore a bun and two purple cardigans, one over the other. She had deep grooves each side of her long, brown nose. Her mother lived in Paris and was dying of multiple sclerosis. She never talked about it, but everybody knew.

‘No, Miss Rabot, I’m sorry.’ She lowered her eyes, the rage dissolving like a valley mist beneath the morning sunshine —chill wisps of white wreathed above the riverbeds, licked up by the warmth of the sun. *Though I pass through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil.* The quotation from somewhere or other sprang unbidden into her head. ‘I’m sorry, I didn’t hear you.’

‘You mean, you weren’t listening. Come up here.’ Miss Rabot tried to be severe, peering over spectacles.

Wendy rose from her desk and walked to the front, the eyes of the class drilling holes in her back.

‘So. What’s the matter?’ The slight French accent stressed the last syllable so that it sounded more like ‘mattaire,’ drawing the teeth of the question, softening it.

Wendy struggled to find words, but nothing came except the weight in her stomach. The blackness returned once more. This time it seemed

to have shape, as though there was something she needed to do; something she had to do. It was as if someone was asking her to do something and she wasn't sure what it was. How could she change anything? How could she find any answers? She stood dumb. She noticed her shoes needed cleaning. Her mum hated dirty shoes. Clean shoes, clean heart, that's what I always say. She was right. That's what she always did say.

'Well?'

'Excuse me, Miss Rabot, but I think she is upset about...'. It was Chris, the girl who had sat next to Wendy on the bus. She broke off uncertainly. The class looked at her. 'About, er, yesterday,' she finished lamely.

'What happened yesterday? But yes, it was the court hearing wasn't it?' She removed her spectacles. Sympathy melted her voice. 'Of course, you must be so upset. What a terrible thing, no? Perhaps it would be better if you went home today.'

Wendy found her voice, 'No, that's all right,' but the tears began again, welling into her eyes, and patting onto the wooden floor like autumn leaves.

'I'll speak to Mrs Benson,' replied Miss Rabot, 'and get you leave.'

Wendy had never bunked off school, and was rarely sick, so a free day was new to her. She knew she couldn't go home and face the questions and the morbid silences. She turned out of the school gate and walked down towards the city centre. Wild fantasies surged through her mind. She had a little money in her bag. She could go to London and never come back. She could go abroad and begin a new life. But the blackness clouded her thoughts again, and once more brought the sense that she needed to do something. Something about what had happened. However much she felt like screaming, like escaping, she couldn't simply run away. That would solve nothing. She knew that the blackness inside would follow her, making it worse. Somehow she had to face it, to drive it away. She needed to think. If only her mind was clearer. If only she had any sense of purpose, of what she could do to fight the despair.

A whistle filtered into her thoughts, and she looked up. A builder grinned down at her from a scaffolding. 'Morning, luv. Skipping

school, are we?’ he laughed. His mates jeered at him for cradle snatching.

Suddenly Wendy felt humiliated and dirty. She longed to change out of her uniform, but that would mean going home. On an impulse, she made a decision and turned into a charity shop. She would have been mortified if anyone had seen her, but they were all in school. She took the risk.

When she emerged fifteen minutes later, a different girl faced the world. Wendy was tall and slim, and carried herself well, moving like the athlete she was. At five feet ten, she was the envy of many at school, who said she should go into modelling. Her high cheekbones and pointed chin, too long to allow her to be called beautiful, gave a slightly Eastern European tilt to her face. Clear blue, intelligent eyes and a firm mouth suggested a person of determination, if not of self-will.

For Wendy, her letdown was her hair. It was dead straight, and mousy-brown. Never mind that others told her it was a cascade of honey, she hated it. She wore it in a bob because, she said, long hair was impractical for running. Oddly enough, when she had turned sixteen, her mother had given her a complete make-up set, but still refused to let her colour her awful hair. ‘You’ll ruin it, or look like those punks,’ she had cried.

In the charity shop she had found some black jeans and a navy sweatshirt for three pounds. She had bundled her school greys into her bag, and wore her jersey under the sweatshirt to keep warm. She had changed, washed her face, and fixed her makeup in the loo. Her mood had changed with her clothes. The despair had dissolved into a gentle sadness. Again she wanted to shout to the world the question, ‘Why?’ which had been on her lips since she had first heard the news six weeks earlier. But now the question was not so much threatening as challenging—not so much a cry for help as a cry for action. She must do something about it, if only for Nicky’s sake. Was he calling to her from the grave? Could such a thing happen? She wished she knew. She’d heard about mediums and people contacting the dead. Perhaps

she should try to. But the thought brought a wave of blackness back and she pushed it away. No. Too soon, she thought. She would wait.

The pavements were crowded and the mist had congealed into cold, autumn rain. Drips plunged from the street signs onto the reflections at her feet. 'Ye Olde Coffee Shoppe' wept its rain past small-paned windows. Seeking warmth, she turned in.

A bell attached to the door tinkled pointlessly. Inside, it was a babble of noise, smoke, old wooden furniture and university students. All the tables seemed full. She hesitated. It wasn't what she was expecting. The group at the nearest table broke off their lively discussion and looked at her. There was a pause. It was one of those pauses that last a second but change a lifetime. It was as if the whole world was hanging on what she chose next. In that instant she felt like a child at a birthday party, with her little, pudgy hand poised over her first box of chocolates. Everyone waited until the birthday girl chose. She could easily have turned and left. Then it would all have been so very different.