

THE WOMAN IN THE WINDOW



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A. J. FINN

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WILLIAM MORROW

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for George

I have a feeling that inside you somewhere,
there's something nobody knows about.

— *Shadow of a Doubt*
(1943)

THE WOMAN IN THE WINDOW

SUNDAY,
October 24

HER HUSBAND'S ALMOST HOME. He'll catch her this time.

There isn't a scrap of curtain, not a blade of blind, in number 212—the rust-red townhome that once housed the newlywed Motts, until recently, until they un-wed. I never met either Mott, but occasionally I check in online: his LinkedIn profile, her Facebook page. Their wedding registry lives on at Macy's. I could still buy them flatware.

As I was saying: not even a window dressing. So number 212 gazes blankly across the street, ruddy and raw, and I gaze right back, watching the mistress of the manor lead her contractor into the guest bedroom. What *is* it about that house? It's where love goes to die.

She's lovely, a genuine redhead, with grass-green eyes and an archipelago of tiny moles trailing across her back. Much prettier than her husband, a Dr. John Miller, psychotherapist—yes, he offers couples counseling—and one of 436,000 John Millers online. This particular specimen works near Gramercy Park and does not accept insurance. According to the deed of sale, he paid \$3.6 million for his house. Business must be good.

I know both more and less about the wife. Not much of a homemaker, clearly; the Millers moved in eight weeks ago, yet still those windows are bare, *tsk-tsk*. She practices yoga three times a week, tripping down the steps with her magic-carpet mat rolled beneath one arm, legs shrink-wrapped in Lululemon. And she must volunteer

someplace—she leaves the house a little past eleven on Mondays and Fridays, around the time I get up, and returns between five and five thirty, just as I’m settling in for my nightly film. (This evening’s selection: *The Man Who Knew Too Much*, for the umpteenth time. I am the woman who viewed too much.)

I’ve noticed she likes a drink in the afternoon, as do I. Does she also like a drink in the morning? As do I?

But her age is a mystery, although she’s certainly younger than Dr. Miller, and younger than me (nimble, too); her name I can only guess at. I think of her as Rita, because she looks like Hayworth in *Gilda*. “I’m not in the least interested”—love that line.

I myself am very much interested. Not in her body—the pale ridge of her spine, her shoulder blades like stunted wings, the baby-blue bra clasping her breasts: whenever these loom within my lens, any of them, I look away—but in the life she leads. The lives. Two more than I’ve got.

Her husband rounded the corner a moment ago, just past noon, not long after his wife pressed the front door shut, contractor in tow. This is an aberration: On Sundays, Dr. Miller returns to the house at quarter past three, without fail.

Yet now the good doctor strides down the sidewalk, breath chugging from his mouth, briefcase swinging from one hand, wedding band winking. I zoom in on his feet: oxblood oxfords, slick with polish, collecting the autumn sunlight, kicking it off with each step.

I lift the camera to his head. My Nikon D5500 doesn’t miss much, not with that Opteka lens: unruly marled hair, glasses spindly and cheap, islets of stubble in the shallow ponds of his cheeks. He takes better care of his shoes than his face.

Back to number 212, where Rita and the contractor are speedily disrobing. I could dial directory assistance, call the house, warn her. I won’t. Watching is like nature photography: You don’t interfere with the wildlife.

Dr. Miller is maybe half a minute away from the front door. His wife's mouth glosses the contractor's neck. Off with her blouse.

Four more steps. Five, six, seven. Twenty seconds now, at most.

She seizes his tie between her teeth, grins at him. Her hands fumble with his shirt. He grazes on her ear.

Her husband hops over a buckled slab of sidewalk. Fifteen seconds.

I can almost hear the tie slithering out of his collar. She whips it across the room.

Ten seconds. I zoom in again, the snout of the camera practically twitching. His hand dives into his pocket, surfaces with a haul of keys. Seven seconds.

She unlooses her ponytail, hair swinging onto her shoulders.

Three seconds. He mounts the steps.

She folds her arms around his back, kisses him deep.

He stabs the key into the lock. Twists.

I zoom in on her face, the eyes sprung wide. She's heard.

I snap a photo.

And then his briefcase flops open.

A flock of papers bursts from it, scatters in the wind. I jolt the camera back to Dr. Miller, to the crisp "Shoot" his mouth shapes; he sets the briefcase on the stoop, stamps a few sheets beneath those glinting shoes, scoops others into his arms. One tearaway scrap has snagged in the fingers of a tree. He doesn't notice.

Rita again, plunging her arms into her sleeves, pushing her hair back. She speeds from the room. The contractor, marooned, hops off the bed and retrieves his tie, stuffs it into his pocket.

I exhale, air hissing out of a balloon. I hadn't realized I was holding my breath.

The front door opens: Rita surges down the steps, calling to her husband. He turns; I expect he smiles—I can't see. She stoops, peels some papers from the sidewalk.

The contractor appears at the door, one hand sunk in his pocket, the other raised in greeting. Dr. Miller waves back. He ascends to the landing, lifts his briefcase, and the two men shake. They walk inside, trailed by Rita.

Well. Maybe next time.

MONDAY,
October 25

THE CAR DRONED PAST a moment ago, slow and somber, like a hearse, taillights sparking in the dark. “New neighbors,” I tell my daughter.

“Which house?”

“Across the park. Two-oh-seven.” They’re out there now, dim as ghosts in the dusk, exhuming boxes from the trunk.

She slurps.

“What are you eating?” I ask. It’s Chinese night, of course; she’s eating lo mein.

“Lo mein.”

“Not while you’re talking to Mommy, you’re not.”

She slurps again, chews. “*Mo-om.*” This is a tug-of-war between us; she’s whittled *Mommy* down, against my wishes, to something blunt and stumpy. “Let it go,” Ed advises—but then he’s still Daddy.

“You should go say hi,” Olivia suggests.

“I’d like to, pumpkin.” I drift upstairs, to the second floor, where the view’s better. “Oh: There are pumpkins *everywhere*. All the neighbors have one. The Grays have four.” I’ve reached the landing, glass in hand, wine lapping at my lip. “I wish I could pick out a pumpkin for you. Tell Daddy to get you one.” I sip, swallow. “Tell him to get you two, one for you and one for me.”

“Okay.”

I glimpse myself in the dark mirror of the half bath. “Are you happy, sweetheart?”

“Yes.”

“Not lonely?” She never had real friends in New York; she was too shy, too small.

“Nope.”

I peer into the dark at the top of the stairs, into the gloom above. During the day, sun drops through the domed skylight overhead; at night, it’s a wide-open eye gazing into the depths of the stairwell. “Do you miss Punch?”

“Nope.” She didn’t get along with the cat, either. He scratched her one Christmas morning, flashed his claws across her wrist, two quick rakes north-south east-west; a bright grid of blood sprang to the skin, tic-tac-toe, and Ed nearly pitched him out the window. I look for him now, find him swirled on the library sofa, watching me.

“Let me talk to Daddy, pumpkin.” I mount the next flight, the runner coarse against my soles. Rattan. What were we thinking? It stains so easily.

“Hey there, slugger,” he greets me. “New neighbors?”

“Yes.”

“Didn’t you just get new neighbors?”

“That was two months ago. Two-twelve. The Millers.” I pivot, descending the stairs.

“Where are these other people?”

“Two-oh-seven. Across the park.”

“Neighborhood’s changing.”

I reach the landing, round it. “They didn’t bring much with them. Just a car.”

“Guess the movers will come later.”

“Guess so.”

Silence. I sip.

Now I’m in the living room again, by the fire, shadows steeped in the corners. “Listen . . .” Ed begins.

“They have a son.”

“What?”

“There’s a son,” I repeat, pressing my forehead against the cold glass of the window. Sodium lamps have yet to sprout in this province of Harlem, and the street is lit only by a lemon-wedge of moon, but still I can make them out in silhouette: a man, a woman, and a tall boy, ferrying boxes to the front door. “A teenager,” I add.

“Easy, cougar.”

Before I can stop myself: “I wish you were here.”

It catches me off guard. Ed too, by the sound of it. There’s a pause.

Then: “You need more time,” he says.

I stay quiet.

“The doctors say that too much contact isn’t healthy.”

“I’m the doctor who said that.”

“You’re one of them.”

A knuckle-crack behind me—a spark in the fireplace. The flames settle, muttering in the grate.

“Why don’t you invite those new people over?” he asks.

I drain my glass. “I think that’s enough for tonight.”

“Anna.”

“Ed.”

I can almost hear him breathe. “I’m sorry we’re not there with you.”

I can almost hear my heart. “I am, too.”

Punch has tracked me downstairs. I scoop him up in one arm, retreat to the kitchen. Set the phone on the counter. One more glass before bed.

Grasping the bottle by its throat, I turn to the window, toward the three ghosts haunting the sidewalk, and hoist it in a toast.

TUESDAY,
October 26

THIS TIME LAST YEAR, we'd planned to sell the house, had even engaged a broker; Olivia would enroll in a Midtown school the following September, and Ed had found us a Lenox Hill gut job. "It'll be *fun*," he promised. "I'll install a bidet, just for you." I batted him on the shoulder.

"What's a bidet?" asked Olivia.

But then he left, and she with him. So it flayed my heart all over again when, last night, I recalled the first words of our stillborn listing: LOVINGLY RESTORED LANDMARK 19TH-CENTURY HARLEM GEM! WONDERFUL FAMILY HOME! *Landmark* and *gem* up for debate, I think. *Harlem* inarguable, likewise *19th-century* (1884). *Lovingly restored*, I can attest to that, and expensively, too. *Wonderful family home*, true.

My domain and its outposts:

Basement: Or maisonette, according to our broker. Sub-street, floor-through, with its own door; kitchen, bath, bedroom, tiny office. Ed's workspace for eight years—he'd drape the table in blueprints, tack contractor briefs to the wall. Currently tenanted.

Garden: Patio, really, accessible via the first floor. A sprawl of limestone tile; a pair of disused Adirondack chairs; a young ash tree slouched in the far corner, gangling and lonely, like a friendless teenager. Every so often I long to hug it.

First floor: Ground floor, if you're British, or *premier étage*, if you're French. (I am neither, but I spent time in Oxford during my residency—

in a maisonette, as it happens—and this past July began studying *français* online.) Kitchen—open-plan and “gracious” (broker again), with a rear door leading to the garden and a side door to the park. White-birch floors, now blotched with puddles of merlot. In the hall a powder room—the red room, I call it. “Tomato Red,” per the Benjamin Moore catalogue. Living room, equipped with sofa and coffee table and paved in Persian rug, still plush underfoot.

Second floor: The library (Ed’s; shelves full, cracked spines and foxed dust jackets, all packed tight as teeth) and the study (mine; spare, airy, a desktop Mac poised on an IKEA table—my online-chess battlefield). Second half bath, this one blued in “Heavenly Rapture,” which is ambitious language for a room with a toilet. And a deep utility closet I might one day convert into a darkroom, if I ever migrate from digital to film. I think I’m losing interest.

Third floor: The master (mistress?) bedroom and bath. I’ve spent much of my time in bed this year; it’s one of those sleep-system mattresses, dually adjustable. Ed programmed his side for an almost downy softness; mine is set to firm. “You’re sleeping on a brick,” he said once, strumming his fingers on the top sheet.

“You’re sleeping on a cumulus,” I told him. Then he kissed me, long and slow.

After they left, during those black, blank months when I could scarcely prize myself from the sheets, I would roll slowly, like a curling wave, from one end to the other, spooling and unspooling the bedclothes around me.

Also the guest bedroom and en-suite.

Fourth floor: Servants’ quarters once upon a time, now Olivia’s bedroom and a second spare. Some nights I haunt her room like a ghost. Some days I stand in the doorway, watch the slow traffic of dust motes in the sun. Some weeks I don’t visit the fourth floor at all, and it starts to melt into memory, like the feel of rain on my skin.

Anyway. I’ll speak to them again tomorrow. Meanwhile, no sign of the people across the park.

WEDNESDAY,
October 27

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A RANGY TEENAGER BURSTS from the front door of number 207, like a horse from the starting gate, and gallops east down the street, past my front windows. I don't get a good look—I've awoken early, after a late night with *Out of the Past*, and am trying to decide if a swallow of merlot might be wise; but I catch a bolt of blond, a backpack slung from one shoulder. Then he's gone.

I slug a glass, float upstairs, settle myself at my desk. Reach for my Nikon.

In the kitchen of 207 I can see the father, big and broad, backlit by a television screen. I press the camera to my eye and zoom in: the *Today* show. I might head down and switch on my own TV, I muse, watch alongside my neighbor. Or I might view it right here, on his set, through the lens.

I decide to do that.

IT'S BEEN a while since I took in the facade, but Google furnishes a street view: whitewashed stone, faintly Beaux-Arts, capped with a widow's walk. From here, of course, I can set my sights only on the side of the house; through its east windows, I've a clear shot into the kitchen, a second-floor parlor, and a bedroom above.

Yesterday a platoon of movers arrived, hauling sofas and television sets and an ancient armoire. The husband has been directing traffic. I

haven't seen the wife since the night they moved in. I wonder what she looks like.

I'M ABOUT to checkmate Rook&Roll this afternoon when I hear the bell. I shuffle downstairs, slap the buzzer, unlock the hall door, and find my tenant looming there, looking, as they say, rough and ready. He *is* handsome, with his long jaw, his eyes like trapdoors, dark and deep. Gregory Peck after a late evening. (I'm not the only one who thinks so. David likes to entertain the occasional lady friend, I've noticed. Heard, really.)

"I'm heading to Brooklyn tonight," he reports.

I drag a hand through my hair. "Okay."

"You need me to take care of anything before I go?" It sounds like a proposition, like a line from a noir. *You just put your lips together and blow.*

"Thanks. I'm fine."

He gazes past me, squints. "Bulbs need changing? It's dark in here."

"I like it dim," I say. *Like my men*, I want to add. Is that the joke from *Airplane*? "Have . . ." Fun? A good time? Sex? ". . . a good time."

He turns to go.

"You know you can just come on in through the basement door," I tell him, trying for playful. "Chances are I'll be home." I hope he'll smile. He's been here two months, and I haven't once seen him grin.

He nods. He leaves.

I close the door.

I STUDY myself in the mirror. Wrinkles like spokes around my eyes. A slur of dark hair, tigered here and there with gray, loose about my shoulders; stubble in the scoop of my armpit. My belly has gone slack. Dimples stipple my thighs. Skin almost luridly pale, veins flowing violet within my arms and legs.

Dimples, stipples, stubble, wrinkles: I need work. I had a down-home appeal once, according to some, according to Ed. “I thought of you as the girl next door,” he said sadly, toward the end.

I look down at my toes rippling against the tile—long and fine, one (or ten) of my better features, but a bit small-predator right now. I rummage through my medicine cabinet, pill bottles stacked atop one another like totem poles, and excavate a nail clipper. At last, a problem I can fix.

THURSDAY,
October 28

THE DEED OF SALE POSTED YESTERDAY. My new neighbors are Alistair and Jane Russell; they paid \$3.45 million for their humble abode. Google tells me that he's a partner at a midsize consultancy, previously based in Boston. She's untraceable—you try plugging *Jane Russell* into a search engine.

It's a lively neighborhood they've chosen.

The Miller home across the street—abandon all hope, ye who enter here—is one of five townhouses that I can survey from the south-facing windows of my own. To the east stand the identical-twin Gray Sisters: same box cornices crowning the windows, same bottle-green front doors. In the right—the slightly Grayer Sister, I think—live Henry and Lisa Wasserman, longtime residents; “Four decades and counting,” bragged Mrs. Wasserman when we moved in. She'd dropped by to tell us (“to your faces”) how much she (“and my Henry”) resented the arrival of “another yuppie clan” in what “used to be a real neighborhood.”

Ed fumed. Olivia named her stuffed rabbit Yuppie.

The Wassermen, as we dubbed them, haven't spoken to me since, even though I'm on my own now, a clan unto myself. They don't seem much friendlier toward the residents of the other Gray Sister, a family called, fittingly, Gray. Twin teenage girls, father a partner at a boutique M&A firm, mother an eager book-club hostess. This month's

selection, advertised on their Meetup page and under review right now, in the Grays' front room, by eight middle-aged women: *Jude the Obscure*.

I read it too, imagined I was one of the group, munching coffee cake (none handy) and sipping wine (this I managed). "What did you think of *Jude*, Anna?" Christine Gray would ask me, and I'd say I found it rather obscure. We'd laugh. They're laughing now, in fact. I try laughing with them. I take a sip.

West of the Millers are the Takedas. The husband is Japanese, the mother white, their son unearthly beautiful. He's a cellist; in the warm months, he rehearses with the parlor windows thrown open, so Ed used to hoist ours in turn. We danced one night in some long-gone June, Ed and I, to the strains of a Bach suite: swaying in the kitchen, my head on his shoulder, his fingers knotted behind me, as the boy across the street played on.

This past summer, his music wandered toward the house, approached my living room, knocked politely on the glass: *Let me in*. I didn't, couldn't—I never open the windows, never—but still I could hear it murmuring, pleading: *Let me in. Let me in!*

Number 206–208, a vacant double-wide brownstone, flanks the Takedas' house. An LLC bought it two Novembers ago, but no one moved in. A puzzle. For nearly a year, scaffolding clung to its facade like hanging gardens; it disappeared overnight—this was a few months before Ed and Olivia left—and since then, nothing.

Behold my southern empire and its subjects. None of these people were my friends; most of them I'd not met more than once or twice. Urban life, I suppose. Maybe the Wassermen were onto something. I wonder if they know what's become of me.

A DERELICT Catholic school abuts my house to the east, practically leans against it: St. Dymphna's, shuttered since we moved in. We'd threaten to send Olivia there when she misbehaved. Pitted brown

stone, windows dark with grime. Or at least that's what I remember; it's been a while since I laid eyes on it.

And directly west is the park—tiny, two lots across and two deep, with a narrow brick path connecting our street to the one directly north. A sycamore stands sentry at either end, leaves flaming; an iron fence, low to the ground, hems in both sides. It is, as that quotable broker said, very quaint.

Then there's the house beyond the park: number 207. The Lords sold it two months ago and promptly cleared out, flying south to their retirement villa in Vero Beach. Enter Alistair and Jane Russell.

Jane Russell! My physical therapist had never heard of her. "*Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*," I said.

"Not in my experience," she replied. Bina's younger; perhaps that's it.

All this was earlier today; before I could argue with her, she laced one of my legs over the other, capsized me onto my right side. The pain left me breathless. "Your hamstrings need this," she assured me.

"You bitch," I gasped.

She pressed my knee to the floor. "You're not paying me to go easy on you."

I winced. "Can I pay you to leave?"

Bina visits once a week to help me hate life, as I like to say, and to provide updates on her sexual adventures, which are about as exciting as my own. Only in Bina's case it's because she's picky. "Half the guys on these apps are using five-year-old photos," she'll complain, her waterfall of hair poured over one shoulder, "and the other half are married. And the *other* half are single for a reason."

That's three halves, but you don't debate math with someone who's rotating your spine.

I joined Happn a month ago "just to see," I told myself. Happn, Bina had explained to me, matchmakes you with people whose paths you've crossed. But what if you haven't crossed paths with anyone?

What if you forever navigate the same four thousand vertically arranged square feet, and nothing beyond them?

I don't know. The first profile I spotted was David's. I instantly deleted my account.

IT'S BEEN four days since I glimpsed Jane Russell. She certainly wasn't proportioned like the original, with her torpedo breasts, her wasp waist, but then neither am I. The son I've seen only that once, yes- terday morning. The husband, however—wide shoulders, streaky brows, a blade of a nose—is on permanent display in his house: whisking eggs in the kitchen, reading in the parlor, occasionally glancing into the bedroom, as though in search of someone.

