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Too Beautiful For You

To Rachel, Tyler and the Wild dog

Contents

The Window

Marian sits, hunched with loathing, over her computer terminal as the clock on the wall hits thirteen. Most of the rest of her colleagues – those working today – are out; in pubs and wine bars and dinky sandwich stations, venting grievances over glasses of New World Chardonnay and warm goat's cheese salads. Marian would very much like to be out with them; her stomach is rumbling and she has deep, festering grievances to be divulged along with the best of them. But instead, she must sit and wait for a workman to come and mend one of the large windows in the middle of the office, the ancient metal frame of which will not close properly and which has been wedged into place with a copy of the 1997 *International Who's Who*, as a makeshift, temporary measure.

This waiting is a task with no official demarcation and everybody – save for maybe one or two of the middle managers – possesses the intellectual capacity to do it. But Bavins, who on her first day here she mistook for an escaped mental patient, a deeply troubled soul who had, perhaps, wandered inside in search of refuge but who was, in fact, everybody's boss, nervily asked if Marian would mind doing it and left before she could demur.

So she sits there, her stomach grumbling with anger, the Anger of the Just, as the loudspeaker reports the

deaths of 165 people in Zurich, where a plane has just crashed into some flats. Hearing this news, and noticing the palpable excitement amongst her colleagues, she wonders when it was that the anger took hold and made the rest of the world, outside this building, seem smaller and of markedly less consequence. She hears people gibbering about Osama and al-Qaeda and she tries to think of the awful fireball approaching and the panic and the noise and the pyrolytic reek of burning aviation fuel and those microseconds of blind terror and all she can concentrate on is the window repairman with his bag of tools and triplicate dockets to sign.

When she first started work here she was eager to be a part of everything and, although people told her to watch out, it's a poisonous atmosphere, like Mercury, and full of pettiness, rancour and contumely, she dived in with delight. Now, when she arrives for work each morning and leaves the sluggish lift at the eighth floor, she sometimes loses her footing on the bile and gall which seep out from every office doorway.

Eight floors down, Dempsey hunches over his computer terminal and considers which would be the best way of killing himself. By best, he means a method which would allow at least seven people to stop him, including his girlfriend, his former girlfriend, Lucy. Last night he arrived home at, what, three, four? After being told again that it was all over between them – a long, tearful session which ended in him being sick in the driveway of his own home and later crying for long anguished hours on his wife's shoulder. So he looks pretty wrecked now and a numbness has descended and despite all those poor people killed in the Garuda jumbo, which is what really should be concerning him

– that and the fact that those nutters seem to have done it again, and what will happen *now*? – all he can think of is new and preferably decisive ways to persuade Lucy that this thing between them, whatever it is, can, you know, work.

Or at least be prolonged.

And sort of killing himself is what he comes up with, feeling as raw and woebegone and hungover and unshaven as he does at this moment and seeing pictures of charred remains being separated from blackened concrete, up there on the television monitor, that cold Swiss morning.

You think it would be a big deal, killing himself for Lucy? It would be no great sacrifice really, he thinks, full of self-disgust and self pity, tapping the keys on his computer to bring up the revised casualty figures and the latest apocalyptic speculations. He has been, for some years now, expedient in a professional sense. His job, despite the impressive (but meaningless) grade, is an island bypassed by all the currents of work – and indeed precisely designed to be such. His stock, before he started seeing Lucy, was pretty low. But Lucy acted as a sort of surrogate promotion; you could see it in the eyes of their colleagues when they were spotted out together . . . people began almost to take him seriously again. Or semi-seriously, at least. The man who's fucking Lucy Dow! But now Lucy has stopped seeing him eleven times in the last two months, each time more definitely than the time before, and Dempsey can't take it any more, he has used up every ounce of persuasiveness, every trick in the book, to keep them together and he is looking ragged and defeated and absurd. Killing himself, hell, he thinks, it would be a mercy.

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Everybody takes Marian seriously, it is part of the democratic nature of the place that secretaries must be afforded respect equal to – what are they called these days? – line managers. So when editorial decisions are taken people ask her for her opinion and everybody goes silent whilst she explains and then it's yup, thanks for your help, Marian, I think that's a valuable contribution. In a very real sense. She was surprised and thrilled by this at first. Nowadays, though, it's different. Nowadays she says uh, sorry, I'm really not up to speed on that particular issue or some other equally lame excuse because she hates the quality of the silence as they listen to her thoughts and the nodding heads and the encouraging smiles and the yup, thanks for your help, Marian.

But at first she was thrilled, she was eager to be a part of everything these people did and was astonished they opened their world so quickly for her. There was a vibrant social life to the office and Marian yearned to be a part of that, too; something all too easily accomplished, as it turned out.

Marian picks up the phone and dials Building Services. 'Hello. Yes. You're meant to be sending somebody to fix one of our windows. Room 8106. Yes, a *window*. I rang this morning. Twice.'

After a moment or two a woman's voice asks for a reference number. Marian finds it on her memo pad and reads it down the line trying to convey, in the simple recitation of numerals and letters, a sense of unrestrained hatred. And there is a pause again and the woman's voice says the engineer should have been with you ages ago, he was dispatched one and a half hours previously. Marian keeps her voice low and level

and with an aftertaste of prussic acid. There's nobody here, nobody to fix the window, send somebody else. Now.

Marian wonders if the engineer is lost in this city of a building, with its slums and suburbs and dark alleyways. Take a wrong turning and you find yourself adrift in one of the service or technology ghettos, a labyrinth of tiny rooms and walled-off corridors, stuffed with mysterious devices, flickering dials and vast computer terminals; or maybe you end up on a whole floor which has been gutted to create a vast open plan office and you stand there wondering if you're in the same building as the one you know. On night shifts Marian will sometimes wander off down these wide, shabby arterial corridors, with their dismal, framed photographs of celebrities grinning back from the grave. She invariably becomes lost and disoriented and absurdly anxious, agoraphobic in the huge building.

The woman tells her she will re-contact the engineer and put him right. Marian hangs up. Around her, people are jabbering excitedly about the jumbo jet and speculating about the Al-Qaeda denial and then talking about the dead, all those poor dead people, and are any of them British? – and Marian has only her window to worry about, which makes her feel petty and expendable. She did not always feel like this. Once she had harboured hopes of a promotion, of a job where her colleagues listened to her because if they didn't she'd bawl them out and make them feel terrible, not because it is a democratic office where all views count and must be heard, even those of the fucking secretary.

But promotion now is unlikely, if not untenable; partly because her drive has gone and partly because of

Julian's personal involvement with her and the consequent possibilities of conflict of interest.

She wanders over to the faulty window and looks out across the blowsy haze of west London. She sees a jet approaching Heathrow almost level, it seems, with her line of vision and she wonders if it will bank and turn and head for the building and that maybe this is the day, Osama or not, when all planes plough into crowded city centres and, really, just how bad a thing would that be? One of the young producers, a sweet girl with a semi-bob, still in a post-Benenden thrall with the world, touches her on the shoulder.

'Maid Marian . . . I'm off for lunch. Can I bring you back a sandwich or anything?'

Marian turns away from the window. 'No, thanks, Cassie. I'm going out too, as soon as this useless bastard turns up to fix the window. If there's anyone left to go out with.'

'Fuck; isn't he here yet?' She looks at the window. 'Well, I think Julian's in Needles with Chloe and some of the others,' she adds, either with grotesque naïveté or out of spite. Marian fixes her pretty levelly.

'No kidding? Well I'll do my best to avoid Needles, then,' she says, and turns away, busying herself with a work schedule document lying previously untouched in her in-tray.

Cassie half smiles and walks back to her screen, slightly affronted, and abstractedly scans the latest news wires. She thinks Marian is a difficult nut to crack and doesn't quite know how to act with the woman, whether you should mention Julian or not at all – their fling, or whatever it was, never made, you know, official.

The first thing Marian did when she arrived at the

building was look for a flat in the same part of London as everybody else, a sort of skewed triangle centred on Crouch End. But she couldn't afford it, the flats she was shown were just like that place they kept Terry Waite all those years, so she headed south and down-market and now has a one bed in Bermondsey, a good flat with views down over the Blue and the river, with the City a haze in the middle distance. The first time Julian visited her there, after a leaving party for an embittered drunk who'd finally accepted early retirement, they fucked against the sash window in her front room, illuminated by the fierce glare from the beautiful football ground four hundred yards away. She worried the window would burst and gripped hold of the curtains and wrapped her legs around Julian's waist in this wonderful drunk-fuck she has never since recaptured. People had watched them leave together that evening; there were dropped jaws and raised eyebrows. It was brazen and conspicuous and, she thought, a thrill.

He hardly ever visits Bermondsey now.

Dempsey, meanwhile, is so pissed he can hardly stand. He found half a bottle of Stolichnaya in his drawer and drank it as the casualty estimates rose and rose and then dropped and finally settled at 211. He drank so that he could face Lucy again and having drunk pushed his way into her cubicle, the tears beginning to form even before he slurred his first words.

'Talk to me, Lucy. At least talk to me . . .'

Lucy swivels around, appalled. 'For Christ's sake Martin, get *out* of here. This is so humiliating.'

And, in fact, it *is* quite humiliating. An open-plan office of perhaps one hundred and fifty people, the

reporters quartered in little lean-to cubicles with their backs to the main newsdesk. What Martin and Lucy's colleagues will see, indeed *are* seeing, is a middle-aged man on his knees, on his *knees*, behind some moppety girl tap-tap-tapping away on her computer, apparently (although clearly, in reality, not) oblivious to his presence.

'Please, Lucy,' he whines, 'let me buy you lunch. Just *lunch*. Just let me talk to you . . .'

She spins around on her chair. 'Have you *seen* what's happened?'

He looks at the monitor. Those poor Swiss people, that cold morning.

'Have you seen?' she repeats. Her long blonde hair swings across her face when she gets angry, those big fuck-off grey eyes wide and deep and cold. She is too beautiful for him, he wonders how it ever could have happened between them. No matter how profound we believe our relationships to be, he thinks, the balance of power will always reside with the truly beautiful.

She is looking at him now.

'I'm trying to work. People are laughing at us, Martin; they are laughing. It has become ludicrous. Let me work, please. Go back to your wife.'

Oh dear, and he starts crying properly now and she's hot with shame and embarrassment. What on earth possessed me, she thinks, please let this stop now.

There has been an audible lessening of computer activity in the surrounding area as Martin and Lucy's colleagues strain to hear this compelling conversation a little better.

She stares fixedly at the screen and wonders if maybe she should go for lunch with him just to stop this appalling scene, but then she sees the same thing

happening again and she cannot bear the thought. She closes her eyes and looks down at the worn grey corporate carpet. Her voice, when she speaks, is in glorious on-screen mode, an icy RP garnished with extract of Surrey. 'It's not going to happen, Martin, just face it. You've had your fun: now fuck off.'

And this does the trick, sort of. He rises noiselessly, wiping his face with the back of his hand, turns and leaves the cubicle. Lucy swivels back to her screen and tries to concentrate on the dead Swiss people and the burning buildings, but an all-too familiar voice sounds from behind her.

'I've had it, Lucy. I can't live. I will be dead the next time you see me.'

The melodrama, the selfishness, sickens her. She's watching, on the TV, a mini-story about this family of five, four of them killed on the plane, the only survivor a boy of seven waiting at the airport. She sees the incomprehension on his face, the gulf between understanding what has happened and an appreciation of how things will be for him from now on; she sees the scared uncle and aunt huddle around him and already the terrifying grief counsellors making their ominous, emollient approach.

Without turning this time, Lucy replies: 'Well, Martin. That would be a tremendous loss to the world.'

He has had his fun, she's dead right about that. As he staggers back to his larger, but not much larger, office, he remembers all those nights of returning to his wife at four in the morning, undressing silently in the corner from boxer shorts and sometimes trousers still damp with semen (Lucy prohibited full penetrative sexual intercourse; it was a sort of unspoken promise for when he finally left his wife), the smell and taste of her still on

his fingers and clambering into bed almost bent double with guilt and excitement. And lying there, unable to sleep as his wife rolled over and held on to him, making him feel despicable and desperately wanted. All that stuff was certainly fun and he wants it back, he can't face the rest of his life without the vividness of those emotions.

Just outside his door he collides with a producer tearing back frantically to the newsroom. He's young, with carefully trimmed short brown hair, spectacles setting off his light-grey suit. His skin is flawless. In his rush he doesn't, at first, notice Dempsey's dishevelled, tear-stained demeanour.

'It's not Osama! Pilot error, they're saying, it's just come through . . .'

Dempsey looks at him as though he were mad. 'What's pilot error?'

The young man's face suddenly transforms into a glistening sneer and, patting Dempsey on the arm, he says: 'Nothing, Martin, don't worry about it,' and runs off towards one of the studios.

Dempsey collapses through his door and reaches for the Stolichnaya; it's empty. He sits down behind the computer screen and wonders when the derision began, when it first became known that Dempsey was to be treated with amused contempt, and who was it gave the order. The things Lucy liked about him at first – his age, his wife and children, his initial insouciance – now all count against him in this crumbling building full of eager young things.

He remembers the plane. Aaah, yes. Pilot error.

But, pilot error; really?

The flight, bound for Denpasar, couldn't even clear Zurich. Designed for petite, wiry Indonesians, the poor

plane instead found itself stuffed full of well-fed, complacent Swiss holidaymakers. In the scorching heat of Nusa Dua or Sanur they could gorge themselves on Wiener Schnitzel in wooden restaurants sprayed white with fake snow, whilst tiny Balinese waiters clad in absurd lederhosen plied them all with Gewürztraminer and Riesling. Pilot error; really? The plane, he can hear it now, groaning with the weight as it careered down the runway, gasping for breath as it lurched upwards and then, looking back at its passengers already clamouring for drinks and snacks, suffering two embolisms. The first causing the Swiss holidaymakers to become strangely silent and flecked with sweat, but not yet understanding; the second massive and fatal, sending the Boeing 747 careening into three blocks of exquisitely manicured, rent-controlled flats. *You can't have everything.*

He thinks about the plane and then he thinks about throwing himself from the roof. What's wrong with that? Four seconds of soaring terror, his arms outstretched like Superman, or Christ, and then perhaps a microsecond of unimaginable pain. A microsecond, that's all. Surely he can live with that? And then, after that, nothing; absolutely nothing. We all go into the dark, eventually, don't we?

He taps a short message to Lucy via e-mail – the very medium which, as it happened, fomented their relationship. He taps, 'I loved you' – and then logs out of the system. Best use he's made of the past tense for years.

It's two-thirty and most of the office is back from lunch now except, Marian notes, Julian and Chloe, who are presumably still ensconced in the corner booth of Needles wine bar. This is how affairs begin, Marian remembers, usually before the people having them