

# Windows

## Tempered glass

Obviously I don't remember it. How could I? Lying in a metal cot with an NHS knitted cotton blanket over my small body. My face, androgynous, looking out of a baby's thermal bonnet borrowed from the hospital lost property. Small and alone, fed and heated by the state, but wanted by no-one.

They often showed me the photo over the years. I used to look at the big dark eyes in the pale baby's face and wonder about my life before the photo was taken. About the teenage street girl, the dirty bedsit, the syringes and pills, and the hours of coughing and crying lying by her corpse before the paramedics broke down the fragile front door and took me to the hospital.

Behind the cot, and the baby that was once me, you can see a window.

"We stood outside and just stared at you," my father would tell me as my mother smiled wistfully.

"We waited so long for a baby. And when you came along, we knew you were the one."

Later in life, after a few too many red wines in the aftermath of a dinner party, my mother admitted the waiting had included five years of trying and three miscarriages. It is easier to adopt a damaged teen but babies... they were in short supply.

"Then once the antibiotics kicked in - I remember it was a Thursday - the nurse saw us standing there looking through the window once again. She told us you could leave the isolation unit and go on the ward. She asked if we wanted to hold you."

"Then what happened? Then what happened?" I would shrill excitedly when the story was repeated once again.

"When I picked you up, I started crying," my mum would say. "Then your father put his hand on top of your head and said, 'Hello son.'"

I couldn't wait, quivering with excitement, for the culmination of the fable, the unbelievable ending.

"And Daddy cried too."

"Yes, my darling, and Daddy cried too."

## Dreams

I was ill once again. Coughing, sweating and wheezing. Exhausted by the walk from the bed to the bathroom. Named and unnamed allergies inflamed my lungs. On the bedside table there were medicines, pills, inhalers and a large electric nebuliser. This was not the life of a normal hot-blooded teenager.

When healthy I was the epitome of that dreaming stud. I was with my crew in the darkened corners of the teenage parties. I had the shirts, the hair, the flares and the attitude. And I knew Cathy from next door was the girl for me.

She was in the year below me at school; her womanly shape enhanced by a school uniform that looked stylish on her. We'd known each other for years but, as the cliché goes, I'd never truly noticed her before. She was a girl in the road, to be played with or mocked in equal measures. At the last Christmas party, when I'd got off with Clara Seagrove, I remembered seeing her dancing with the other girls in the school hall, glancing at us; giggling.

But then summer came. It was the hot summer of 1976. I always tanned easily, and, in my white school shirt, I knew I looked good. Outside school people wore more colour and fewer clothes. At the park, girls undid another button and distracted boys did wheelies on their bikes in frustration.

And then she walked past. Except it wasn't her. She was a gangly, spotty, stick-like figure in a badly fitting school skirt. As I sat on my bike gazing longingly at the sweating females on the park bench, my line of sight was broken by a pair of shorts that clung to contours like gloss paint.

My hormone-programmed eyes followed this vision and saw shapely brown legs, a thin, silk-like, semi-see-through shirt of flowers and colour and then... then she turned round.

"Hello there, Michael," she mouthed – and waved delicately.

From scanning her chest my eyes whipped back to her face. She knew me – this shapely vision was the girl next door. I felt my face redden as I stamped on a pedal and skidded off in the opposite direction.

From my bedroom window I saw her sometimes when she went in her garden. I moved my bed so, when doing my homework or reading, I could see her whenever she came out. In front of girls I didn't fancy I had the looks and the confidence. In front of Cathy I went red and found somewhere else I had to be.

And now the stale, dusty air of summer had done its worst. And now I hardly had the energy to sit up properly. And now the village fête was going on without me.

It happened every year. Mid-August picnic and barbeque with some pathetic rides for the kids, a daytime disco for us and outdoor seating for the oldies. I'd helped decorate the hall, making sure the windows were blacked out, so the party lights had more effect and, coincidentally, making dark corners and keeping out prying parental eyes. We swept every corner of the hall and were hanging up the bunting when the disco van arrived.

That was when I started sneezing.

We all went home to change, but by the time John and Andy called to walk up to the hall with me, Dr Jones had been round and I was in bed.

And that was the end of that.

I shut my eyes, trying not to think about it. I could imagine Cathy at the disco, attracting looks from all round the room. I thought of her dancing close to another boy and wriggled uncomfortably in my pyjamas.

With difficulty I sat up. Something had moved in the neighbour's garden. I looked over and saw her walking, dressed in a red bikini, across to the sun lounger. She had a drink in one hand and a book in the other. I gazed at her brown, slim back soft in the summer sun. She put down her things and lay back.

When she saw me she smiled, waved with her fingers and mouthed "Hello there, Michael."

I didn't look away this time.

## Looking in

It was years later and another party. Dad's promotion meant we moved to a larger house with a bigger garden. Cathy was a distant memory but my A 'level exams were too recent for comfort. Those months were filled with revising late and being tested by mum, eating meals she'd prepared with a book open beside me, and waking up in the early hours worrying – even after the last exam had been taken.

Dad's rise up the corporate ladder had coincided with longer hours and more trips away from home. He often came back late, 'It's alright love, I've eaten already', too tired for anything but cursory conversations with either of us. Mum and I coped with most of the move from our old house. When he was there, I sometimes wished his phone would run out of battery as it interrupted everything and, with another look of apology, he would leave the room to talk about work.

So, it was mid-July, weeks of relaxation with Sam and her friends in the summer sun, and Dad suddenly had the bright idea of having a garden party. No three-course dinner for family friends this year. He wanted to have a marquee, live music and outside caterers. Mum said it was too much work after the chaos of moving but he pressed home his idea, reassuring her that she would not have to do anything. I absented myself as their discussion descended into another argument. The pub was more peaceful than the big new house that summer.

The next morning, I woke to hear Dad coming into my room.

"you awake, son?"

"Err... I suppose so."

He sat silently, and I lay uncomfortably – very aware of my adult nakedness under the duvet. I didn't like to think a man-to-man talk could be in the pipeline.

"Thank you for all your help in the move," he said eventually.

"It's all right," I said, and we looked at each other.

"Are you alright to help with the setting up of the party?"

"I guess so. When are you going to have it?"

"We decided on the last week of August, if that's alright with you?"

"Err... I'm away the second week but will be home then."

"Thanks." He said, and clumsily rested his hand on my duvet covered shoulder before standing up and going to the door. "I'll book the marquee from the office."

And that was it. He left the room and I lay there wondering what had just happened. I looked at my phone and was about to phone Sam to tell her about the party but saw it was just after seven in the morning and had second thoughts. Sam was a late sleeper in the holiday and 7am almost counted as the night before.

I dressed and went downstairs.

Mum was very quiet that day, and was pretty quiet with Dad for the next week or so. He was excited about his party and it was true, what with using outside caterers and the cleaner they'd inherited with the new house, there was not much Mum had to do. I went off on my week's camping with the boys and life returned to normality.

When I came back it was full steam ahead for the party. The marquee arrived on Tuesday, with five strapping great men to put it up. I tried to help but got tired long before they did. They brought tables, chairs and a sectionalised dance floor – all setup with the greatest of efficiency.

Mum took me into town to get disposable tablecloths and plants to put around the marquee. Though still not enthusiastic about the forthcoming evening she still wanted our house to be seen in a good light. She bought us coffee in the garden centre café and asked if my girlfriend was coming to the party. She was sympathetic when she heard that Sam had found someone else while I had been away.

"These things sometimes just happen," she said sadly.

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People were starting to arrive. Mum looked amazing in a dress she'd bought earlier in the week. Dad looked stressed and was regularly called away by calls on his mobile about work.

I handed out drinks to people as they arrived. I recognised some of Mum and Dad's old friends, but they were in the minority. I talked to a few people I knew. Most had trite questions about when the exam results would arrive and what I planned to do next.

I scanned the tent for some younger faces. Dad seemed to be spending his time leading Mum around by the arm introducing her to suited middle aged men and women in elegant dresses.

I picked up the wine bottle. May as well be helpful.

"Would you like me to replenish your glass?"

I'd expected her to have a middle-aged face but, as she turned round, I saw she was just a few years older than me. I gazed at her long dark hair and wonderful dark skin. She fixed her huge round eyes on my face and said, "Only if you are going to share it with me."

I laughed and said in my best impression of James Bond, "Whatever the lady requires."

I filled her glass; she drank silently then passed it to me. I emptied it in one gulp then refilled it before handing it back to her. The music started and people moved onto the dance floor. I smiled questioningly, took her hand and led her in the same direction.

"Ah, son, I'm sorry I have to but in. This is Mary from work and I just need to talk to her... about ... about something to do with work."

Before I knew what was happening they were moving away, his hand firmly on her upper arm, leading her towards the entrance to the marquee. I heard a snatch of something like, "He's my bloody son", before they were lost in the advancing dancers.

Not sure if I was more shocked or surprised, I sat down in one of the chairs vacated by the dancers. *A beautiful woman comes on to me and then my father whisks her away.* In a few moments I'd gone from proud to pathetic. Strutting to wanting to hide.

What right had he got to interrupt? I was eighteen for fuck's sake. I could get off with whoever I wanted to. I picked up an abandoned glass of wine and downed it. I was an adult now and it was nothing to do with him.

Taking one more glass from the table I moved through the partygoers, looking for Mary. Outside there were a couple of people enjoying the summer night, but she was nowhere to be seen. I walked round to the front of the house and into the road, again no one.

It was as I came back towards the house, I saw something through the frosted glass of the front door. Two people broke their passionate embrace and one, possibly male, opened it from the inside. For some reason I moved back into the hedgerow as Mary came out and looked behind her to whisper something to the man she was leaving.

I did not see my nemesis, I just heard the voice I knew so well saying,

"I'll see you at work. Don't you dare try something like this again."

## Mending.

Love is not a word that is easy to define. The word has connections to 'care for' and 'fancy', possibly even 'need to be with' and a million other clichés. But, as I lay on the sofa on my twenty-eighth birthday, love's ability to transform into something new, something bigger, something so related but oh so different amazed me.

I mean, when I met Llana at university I felt an immediate attraction. An 18-year-old being less battered by the betrayals of the previous summer would possibly have called it love at first sight. A small woman, with shoulder length hair and a rounded face. She had those wide eyes that projected interest and acceptance. Her clothes were an ease of colour and style and I was smitten.

Yes, I was smitten.

That is the word I used to my newfound uni friends. John found out her name and Richard found which hall of residence she lived in and, over the next few weeks, I snatched opportunities to talk to her. I thought she was lovely, and I knew she was out of my league.

What I didn't know was that she thought I was lovely, and she knew she was ...

And that is the way it could have stayed except for a mutual friend at one of the end of term Christmas parties. The evening was dying down and most of the remaining singletons had drunk too much. I was confiding in Sally that I fancied Llana something rotten, probably boring her to tears telling her the sorry story of passing conversations that had plagued me the whole term.

"Why don't you ask her out?" She slurred.

"She'd never fancy me, I mean..." My self-indulgent sentence faded out. I watched Sally staggering across the dance floor, apologising as she stumbled into one couple, ducking and swerving to avoid the intoxicated, amorous intentions of an over-confident Lothario.

I sat alone and stared at my half empty lager; it was not the best end to the evening. Almost time to pack up the term and go home to the parents, what was left of them. I lifted the glass, intending to down the dregs and go home. Through the bottom of the glass I saw someone standing in front of me. I put down my glass slowly, it was Sally.

"She fancies you."

"What?"

"She'd like a drink of red wine and I said you'd bring it over."

"But..."

Sally put the glass of wine she was holding into my hands and I went off to find Llana as instructed. Two days later we made love. Two weeks later she told me she loved me.

But that was a fraction of what I felt as I watched her playing with the kids in the garden. Marriage and childbearing makes you or breaks you. My love for Llana grew but my love for the kids arrived in an explosion that just went on expanding. Tom was eight, football mad. Tilly was nearly three months and was already learning how to manipulate her father's heart. There are facets to love that I had not considered when I was a student. I was immersed.

I picked the magazine up off my chest and continued reading about the shenanigans of the football league. I heard Llana come in and my eyes flicked off the page for a moment as I said, "All okay?"

"Yes, Tilly needs feeding, and Tom is playing football on his own. You should go out," she said sitting down in one of the armchairs and lifting her shirt to the noise of our daughter's supping lips.

"I'll just finish this." I said, returning to my magazine.

The three noises were almost simultaneous.

The crash of the ball hitting the window, the shrieks of my wife as she swept our daughter away from the shower of glass and my instantaneous expletive as I stood between them and the broken window.

Outside the face of my son changed from triumph of a shot that any eight-year-old should be proud of to the disaster of knowing this was only the beginning of his mountain of trouble.

“What the heck do you think you are doing?” I yelled at him through the hole in the window. “I have told you to always shoot away from the house.”

“I did,” he shouted, his face dissolving into tears, “But it went wrong.”

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Single glazed windowpanes are easy to replace. Especially when you have an attentive son to help hold the hammer and knead the putty. My anger was soon replaced by two things. There was a happy feeling of doing a job with my son in the late afternoon sun. I also acknowledged that I could, and perhaps should, have been out there doing things that mattered rather than lying on the sofa reading a trashy magazine.

## Looking out on an English country garden

That day it was sunny. But the clear blue sky had wisps of cloud that tried to warn us of the evil storm brewing. I had just come back from a supermarket shopping trip as Llana was not feeling too well.

She had days like this, days when she was down, tired, not herself. I encouraged her to go and see the doctor, but she usually found some reason why she couldn't go, so I took over the running of the house and the organising of the kids so they went to school and were picked up reliably. Then, just as my cooking was improving (through necessity), she would wake up and open the curtains to the optimism of a new day.

But she was low that week, very low. She was often still in her pyjamas when I returned from work. On days like these I would run her a bath and help her wash her hair. When she got like that she wasn't interested in the mundanity of life. On that Saturday morning she sat silently as the children ate breakfast only to then announce we needed more bacon.

"I'll get some later today, you can make me a shopping list if you like."

"We need some bacon now," she said in that dull monotone that reverberated round dark days like this.

She stood up and went outside. The back door was left open for a few moments before I realised what was going on. I glanced at the kids to make sure they would be OK and took a fast walk after her.

"It's alright, darling. I'll nip down to the corner shop," I said when I caught up with her barefooted, wearing a thin night dress, wandering out of the drive into the road.

I led the way to the living room and sat her in her favourite big chair. I made a mug of warm chocolate and she drank it with one of the pills prescribed for the rare times things got to this level. Tom turned on the television and moved through the channels, glancing at his mother to see which one got her approval. The empathy and understanding that came from the child moved me close to tears. Tilly came in and they sat on the floor in front of their mother to watch the daytime drivel. I went through to the kitchen, leaving the doors open.

My children were well trained, but that spark of conscience only lasted about 20 minutes. I was just finishing the drying up and was turning round to put some dinner plates in the cupboard when I saw the nervous pair standing behind me holding hands.

"I needed the toilet," squeaked Tilly.

"So, we stopped watching telly with mum," said her big brother. "Can we go outside and play in the sun?"

"Certainly," I said squatting down beside them, big secure daddy, close to his children. "Mummy will be feeling better soon, and we can go to the supermarket and have lunch out. Would that be nice?"

"McDonalds?" asked Tom, tentatively.

"Don't push your luck, son," I said smiling and opened the back door for them. "Play round the front where we can see you."

They ran out, free of Mummy-minding duties. I went back to the living room and Llana looked round as I came in. The lines of fierce concentration were already softening. The pills were working. I stood behind her and rested my hand on her shoulder. She put her hand on mine and we watched our children appear round the side of the house and go to the shed, the receptacle of garden toys.

I went to the door.

"I've just got some stuff to do on the computer. I'll leave the door open. Shout if you need me."

"Ok, darling."

Having logged on, I added bacon to our supermarket order and opened our accounts file. I heard the backdoor open and close, then the toilet door outside my office. That was when I became aware of irregular tapping on a window.

With a sigh I saved the spreadsheet and closed my laptop. As I came out of my office Tom came out of the loo.

"Did you wash your hands?" My mother's voice rang in my ears.

He went into the bathroom and I carried on to the living room.

Llana was standing, staring out into the garden. I stopped for a moment and she banged three times on the window.

"What's going on?" I asked from the door.

"There was a man," came the voice of monotone.

"Ah," I said, "A man went past our gate?" I came in and picked up her empty mug.

There was a pause, another three bangs on the window, then, "He came in the garden."

I went to her, still not realising, still placating the illogical voice of dread.

"Was it the postman?"

And the history becomes a living repeated nightmare. Alone in our bed, years later, I see it all happening as I suffocate in the depth of sleep, my eyes looking in every direction for some escape.

Three more thumps on the window. I move to her side.

"He held Tilly's hand. He mustn't take Tilly to the road."

I look out of the window. Our gate is open. A door slams just beyond it. A blue estate car moves out into the road as the spell is broken and I run into the hall. I fumble with the lock of the front door, aware of Tom's voice behind me asking what is wrong. I burst out into the garden, run up the path and see normality in the road. No child looking out of a back window. No car speeding round the corner. No number plate clear at twenty metres.

I run back into the house, slamming the front gate as I go through. I hear three sharp bangs on the window of the front room. "What's happening Dad?" Tom's frightened voice cuts through my panic.

"Check the garden," I say, trying to sound calm. "See if you can find Tilly."

Living room, phone, 999, "Police please." My hand is shaking. Llana is still banging on the window. Three sharp thumps... then silence as she gazes unseeing of the present, though the past is imprinted on our souls.

The calm voice on the phone takes in the 'He's taken our daughter', notes the address and sounds reassuring. She tells me to check the nearby road, Tom appears saying "I can't find Tilly."

In between the regular three thumps on the windows I hear a siren in the distance. I put down the phone and run out of the house. Shaking legs take me quickly up and down the road and back in the house where I embrace my shaking wife. Tom is crying. Llana sits down and starts repeating, "He held Tilly's hand. He held Tilly's hand. He held ..."

Finally, I see a large policeman appear at our gate and I wake up, my body covered in sweat, my wife sectioned under the mental health act and the knowledge that it is no irrational nightmare.

Beside my bed is the ever-present phone – waiting for the news that never comes.



## Aftermath.

How do you recover?

How do you find the strength to search? To support? To function? To breath?

Llana let go, and I couldn't blame her. She was unwell before it happened. The little she understood of that day pushed her from depression to mania. When the police arrived, the large policeman took me aside to take details. A policewoman sat beside Llana and tried to do the same with her. Her words turned to mumbling. "He held Tilly's hand. He held Tilly's hand." I was distracted with care from what the policeman was saying so he suggested moving out into the hall.

"Llana..." I said as she continued mumbling. "I'm going into the hall with this policeman." She gave no response, but the policewoman took her hand and nodded permission for me to leave. More questions in the hall, talking on the radio, then more questions. The front door was open, and I could see other uniforms in the garden – calling Tilly's name and looking in the undergrowth.

Suddenly the mumble turned to shouting and banging. I ran back into the room and saw Llana really hitting the window with her fists now, one pane had cracked, and the policewoman was struggling to restrain her with little effect.

I stood between my wife and the window, my tear stained face inches from hers. Tom was screaming in the background. Another siren, more uniforms entered our home womb. The paramedics had more success holding Llana, an injection and ... she relaxed.

They asked me questions. I acquiesced. Llana was led from the room with me following her pathetically to the ambulance.

Time passed.

I went and sat, exhausted, in Llana's big armchair in the living room. Tom came and sat in my lap, a little boy again. The big policeman, 'Call me Bob.', reported back to me regularly, usually with little progress, occasionally with snippets that his voice suggested were positive like, "A pedestrian saw a blue car with a child looking out of the back window."

But no-one saw a number plate. No-one saw a make or a route or a destination or my child.

Food was put in front of us. Tom sat on the floor and watched TV, so I rang my hysterical parents. Most uniforms left, then Bob was replaced by Helen who put Tom to bed and poured me a drink. More snippets, some viewed as positive, some closing off possible routes of enquiry – "The blue Micra has been found and it was a man and his daughter."

From being presented with food I made a sandwich in the kitchen. From sleeping in the armchair, I went to the spare room. Gradually the uniform presence decreased and Tom and I formed a bond of resistance to the outside world. Officially off sick from work I concentrated on our survival. Sandwiches turned to meals, isolation turned to trips for us both to Tom's school and a troubling visit to Llana's hospital.

My oblivion was nothing compared to hers. It was quiet, light and peaceful. In the communal room there were five people of various ages in armchairs. No uniformed staff, just name badges, movement and bright eyes identified them. Other residents responded to my arrival, a smile or a "Good morning", but for each there was nothing behind the eyes. Like amateur actors they knew the lines but not the feelings.

Llana didn't respond at first. She sat staring out of the window until I moved into her line of sight. Her eyes flicked to me and then back to the world beyond the glass. I sat and tried to talk to her, support her. I talked about the family, Tom visiting school, the garden. I took her hand and talked about the weather.

I talked about the fucking weather to my lover.

She whispered something.

"What's that my darling, I didn't quite hear?"

She repeated it and a tear moved slowly down her right cheek.

I frowned questioningly and stood so I could move closer to her.

She looked at me. I looked into her eyes of no depth.

“Once more my love,” I whispered.

“He held Tilly’s hand.”

## Closure

Years pass.

A new normality impregnates our life. Having gone back to school part time, Tom goes for a full day, then a full week. It is six months before I realise that the day he is having off sick is because he has a bad cold rather than he is upset. I return to work. I leave work because I cannot cope with supporting Tom, visiting Llana and a full-time stressful job. I start another job. I leave. I start a part-time job. I visit her, and she mumbles her mantra. I ring the police for no news.

Years pass.

Grey hairs appear. Back aches, teeth decay as my hairline recedes. Tom passes exams, gets a girlfriend, breaks up and gets another. I watch him, waiting for the police to have some news. No longer waiting for Llana to get better. Her sedentary body is following her brain into oblivion. I don't tell Tom, but it tears me apart.

More years pass.

Tom is married and professional when the police come to the house again. Same house, same chair, same garden gate, same window. But now bills are unpaid, I am cold with no phone. Years have passed.

Same window.

I am sitting remembering, as I so often do, in the silence of fearful memories. A blue car door is blocking the garden gate. I did not notice it arrive and I stir before I notice the light on its roof. I relax back into my chair and the gate is opened by a younger looking policeman. I remember Bob retired a decade ago. I wonder if I am asleep. I wait for Llana's low pitched mantra.

The policeman stands at the open gate for a moment, not sure of his way through the overgrown garden. He takes out his phone and checks something as his colleague joins him. He is buoyed up by her presence and they move slowly down towards the front door.

I am too tired to wonder or be surprised. Tom? Llana? Tilly? Something has happened and they have news for me.

As the doorbell rings, I close my eyes.