

THE VIEW FROM MY WINDOW

"This is the saddest story I have ever heard"

The Good Soldier (Ford Madox Ford)

The view from my window is nothing special. Directly opposite there's a grey twenty-four storey tower block just like mine and on the side of this tall concrete tower is a cylindrical, steel ventilation shaft on which some local youth has recently cheated death in order to scrawl the word 'wankers' in purple spray paint. Occasionally, in the fecund months of spring, a patch of emerald lichen might appear on the building's exterior before, I imagine, it gives up all hope on reproduction or gets rehoused by the local council. As architectural styles go, I have to confess it is far from *en vogue*. It is more in the modernist tradition – possibly even brutalist – except that my tower was not designed by some fancifully named Frenchman or that Ernő Goldfinger chap who designed the Balfron Tower. Mine was built by some other underdog. Some might even say that this is a kennel for underdogs but then what do *they* know?

Until a few months ago I never actually took much interest in the view from my window which seems quite remarkable to me given that it's become my chief distraction. Nowadays the early evening is really my favourite time of day. Around six'o'clock I'll turn all the lights out – if you're familiar with this type of thing you'll understand why it's so much better in the dark – then I'll put on a little mood music – mainly Schubert but sometimes Vivaldi – and then I'll sink into my armchair which I've positioned in such a way that I can really soak in the experience. My preference is for total tranquillity although in such living conditions, you will appreciate, this can sometimes be difficult, especially given the incessant squabbling of my foul-mouthed neighbours. But when I've settled down, when I'm comfortably ensconced, then I'll just sit very patiently, my binoculars resting in my lap and wait until the light in Helen's room on the sixteenth floor opposite is finally switched on.

Helen and I have know each other for a few months now but it already feels a lot longer. I'm not entirely sure that's her real name but, at the same time, I feel almost

certain it is and if you too were to enjoy the view from my window then I don't doubt that you'd concur on its propriety. Like me, Helen is a creature of habit although that choice of phrase seems barely appropriate for a woman of such infinite beauty. On most evenings at around half past six, she will turn her light on, walk into her room and casually shrug off her work coat to reveal a simple but tasteful outfit. (Usually a pencil-grey knee-length skirt and a simple white cotton blouse.) After a couple of minutes of procrastination and sometimes just as the first movement of Schubert's *Wanderer Fantasy* begins to fade, she will then slowly begin the glorious ritual of disrobing for me.

Firstly, her nimble fingers will gently work the buttons of her blouse before she opens it like a butterfly fully spreading its wings for the first time then, a moment later, her flaccid brassiere will be discarded on the floor and, on the most auspicious of evenings, she will treat me to the full panorama of her delicate breasts, her nipples hovering in the air like two mating honey bees just as the C[#] minor theme enters its mournful phase. Sometimes, if the gods are feeling peculiarly favourable towards me, she will really treat me and slip off her panties with a sort of modest wiggle that, believe me, delivers the most deliciously erotic *frisson*.

Now I know what you have in mind, you filthy-minded beast. You're picturing me sitting there, trousers tugged right down to my carpet slippers, underpants shackling my knees, genitals in one sweaty palm as I peer down my binoculars held in the other. And, furthermore, you're probably also suspecting that I'm the type of man whose eyes perhaps linger a little too long at the newsagent's top shelf, pretending to be looking at *What Car?* magazine while instead perusing the wealth of gentlemen's periodicals on offer. Or that I'm maybe that chap you've occasionally noticed furtively exploring the upper levels of department stores, pretending to be choosing a gift for the wife while his grubby little hands are fingering the lacy gussets in the ladies' lingerie department. But the reality, my friend, is nothing could be further from the truth. If only you really knew me like Helen does then you would appreciate what a man of complete probity I am. Furthermore, during these evenings I speak of, there's absolutely no vulgarity, no self-gratification, so to speak. No, this is a fleeting, tender moment: an interlude for delightful romance. No, there's nothing shameful or seedy about me and Helen and the

reason I'm so confident of this is because I am deeply and madly in love with her. Or should I say, *we* are in love with each other.

Before I met Helen, before we got properly acquainted, I don't mind admitting to you that I was dealing with a few rather difficult personal issues.

Around that time I was employed as data entry clerk in the offices of a local savings bank, however, the name of this institution is, for our purposes, not relevant to the story I'm about to impart. Each day at the bank I would be presented with a small box of numbered slips which had codes and amounts scribbled on them in biro. Some of the slips were lilac, others were blue and very occasionally there were orange ones too (although this was quite a rarity.) My responsibility, if you could describe it as such, was to enter the data on these slips into a central computer system via a green-screen terminal located on my desk. Needless to say, I did not find the nature of my work entirely fulfilling nor did I ever discover the precise meaning of the information on the slips; this, it was decided by the more senior managers in my department, was not my concern. Chief amongst these functionaries, *primus inter pares* if you will, was a woman by the name of Karen Douglas; a woman who I'm afraid to say was to prove my nemesis.

I had only been in the job for a few months when one morning I was summoned to Karen Douglas' office where, after shutting the door, she asked me to kindly sit down. At the time I thought this was all rather peculiar, as was her unusual politeness, and my suspicions were further aroused when I noticed she was unable to make eye contact with me as she shuffled some papers on her desk.

“Look, I'm afraid we're having to let you go,” she eventually muttered.

As you can imagine, I was quite flabbergasted by this news.

“What? I'm sorry but I don't understand. What exactly have I done?”

“It's not what you've *done*. It's what you *haven't* done. If you spent a little more time actually doing your work than staring out the window then –”

“But you sat me by the window!” I protested and yet, my protestations were to fall on deaf ears.

It was explained to me later by my benefits advisor, that one fortunate feature of the circumstances I subsequently found myself in was that my untimely departure from the savings bank was categorized as redundancy rather than dismissal, but it was still, you will understand, a highly unsatisfactory state of affairs.

Without employment, I felt rootless, moribund, a shipwrecked sailor washed up on an inhospitable shore and it is not without some degree of shame that I confess to consulting my local doctor regarding my morbid state of mind. He prescribed some antidepressant pills which did relieve my melancholy to some degree but every time I thought of Karen Douglas I became quite enraged. Even now as I say her name, I can taste a bitterness on my tongue. I picture her short, dumpy figure patrolling the office floor sniffing out inefficiencies like some pig in undergrowth rooting out truffles. Karen Douglas, you see, was nothing like Helen. She was an unattractive woman in every sense of the word. No man would ever gratify himself whilst thinking of Karen Douglas and if I ever met a man who did then I would gently put my arm around his shoulder and say to him: “My dear friend, let me help you. I have some pills which may alleviate your pain.”

It was shortly after this, with few funds to afford other means of entertaining myself, that I took to spending long days and evenings peering out of the window of my flat on the fifteen floor and it was through this activity, quite fortuitously one might say, that Helen and I came to meet. You'll appreciate I'm using “meet” in a fairly loose sense of the word but to anticipate your question: yes, of course, from time to time I've considered popping over there to introduce myself. On one occasion, in the early hours of the morning, I even opened my window and loudly proclaimed my love to her, shouting: “Helen! Helen! I adore you!” Admittedly, I had been drinking quite heavily and someone on the floor above, very soon after this, opened their window and told me in no uncertain terms to cut it out but I know she heard me. I just know she did. I have even entertained certain notions that one day she might come knocking on my door and I will open it, cocktail shaker in hand, dressed in a lounge suit and say something really smooth like “*Hey there, honey! Well you certainly took your time, didn't you?*”

But once the lights go off on the sixteenth floor then I can actually enjoy quality time with Helen because when we're alone inside my mind, I don't have to pretend at all. I can just be myself and that's why we're so perfect for each other.

And, trust me, once the lights go out things can get really quite racy. For example, last week we were together travelling late at night on the Orient Express. We were in a rather cosy little carriage but through the window we could still make out the snowy peaks of the Tyrol rattling past. And Helen – or Helga as she was calling herself – was right in front of me, bent over, back arched and practically naked except for some rather fetching black suspenders and stockings which were pulled down to her knees. She was staring back at me with this absolutely wild-eyed expression and it all felt very Roman Polanski. And meanwhile I'm behind her with my lederhosen undone, hips thrusting away like pistons and I don't mind admitting to you that I was really giving it to her. She'd probably be quite embarrassed me telling you this but she was quivering in fits of sexual ecstasy at the time and kept screaming at me “Ja! Ja voll, mein Liebling! Gib es mir!!” And then some chap in the next carriage started banging on the wall and shouting: “Kann you pleez keep zee noize down! I am trying to zleep in here!” But we didn't care. We were just at it for hours.

Other times it's a far more sedate affair like the time we were together on this candlelit dinner cruise on the Seine. I was wearing my tuxedo and we were having some aperitifs – Martinis, I think – and we're both looking out of the window and as we passed Notre Dame in the moonlight I stared into her eyes and said: “Tell me, cherie, where do you buy your underwear?” and she just replied “Bof!” and pinched my nose a little and giggled. It was kind of cheeky, I know, but, trust me, sometimes women love that sort of thing.

Later that night we also had this really intense conversation because, let's get one thing straight: it's not just a physical thing. Anyway, we ended up talking about solipsism of all things because sometimes I get quite anxious that I'm somehow cut-off from the world or that in a weird way I'm not really connecting with people. Not properly anyway. I know I haven't explained myself particularly well there but Hélène knew exactly what I was talking about and she took my hand and, gently squeezing it, whispered “Don't

worry. You'll never be alone because you'll always have me” and I just thought that was the sweetest thing anyone had ever said to me. Afterwards, we went home and that night we didn't even make love. We just lay on the bed in the hotel suite cuddling and listening to some Lionel Ritchie and not saying anything because we both knew *exactly* what the other was thinking.

Of course, now we're in a proper relationship things are a little different. You've got to be realistic about these things. Ask any man of the world: it's just bonkers to think you can keep up that kind of passion. And, of course, sometimes that leads me to worry a little. I worry I might lose her or we'll grow apart or even that she'll buy some curtains. I know *that* would really be the end of it. That would be her way of saying to me it's over but gently breaking it to me because she'd never want to hurt me. But I hope to God that day never comes and I know deep in her heart she does too. “So long as we always have each other, we'll work things out,” I keep telling her. In fact, saying that, I've just realised I don't even think about Karen Douglas any more. Even the name doesn't bother me in the slightest and Helen's really helped me with all that stuff. I don't need the pills and I've managed to put all that negativity behind me. And so you can see why I love her so much. It's because she knows just what to say and she knows just what to do. If only you could meet her then you would know it too. She knew how to win my heart when I didn't have a clue and that's why every day I tell her, “I love you.”