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# Too Beautiful For You

Rod Liddle

## Chapter 1

### 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.

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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?'

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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 downmarket 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.

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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

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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 realise they've started. A quick semi-professional lunch drifts on and on and before you know it you're being banged senseless and what, really, can you do except hang on for dear life? Marian likes, or liked, Chloe – a northern girl much the same as herself and not entirely at home in London or the office just yet. Julian, meanwhile, is loquacious and confiding, with an unforeseen vulnerability which he brings out like a special party trick. Oh, how she fell! It was the apotheosis of acceptance into this exciting society. He stroked her hair as she scabbled in her purse to pay for their drinks; that was the first she knew that something was about to happen, possibly.

The last time he fucked her was two weeks ago now, back at his Highgate pied à terre whilst his wife took their young daughter to see one of those Harry Potter films. The whole visit lasted no more than thirty minutes and she was packed off in a taxi no more than five minutes after he'd come inside her. It was a long, uncomfortable and damp ride home to SE16.

She rings Building Services again. The same dumb woman answers, the same conversation takes place, as if the two of them have slipped through a wormhole to a parallel universe characterised by repetition and irritation. Marian has passed hunger and there is nobody left to go for a drink with. Her hunger and her anger have merged to become a dull, nagging ache. Two hundred people dead out there, two hundred. What is wrong with me, these days, that I don't care? Things like this – tragedies, I suppose is what we've come to call them – have so little impact.

Dempsey stands like a bad comedian's impression of a mad person, waiting for the lift, trembling slightly at the prospect of what he has to do. But the lift has seen him coming and dives on down past his floor to the basement and then back up again without stopping. The other lift is broken, a sign Sellotaped to the door apologises for any inconvenience caused and quotes an extension number for people to call if they want to find out more or forward a complaint form. Colleagues of one sort or another gather around him, some of whom he knows – but he stands well away, to one side, panting and staring at the wall. After a quarter of an hour or so a sort of holiday atmosphere prevails amongst the rest of those waiting; a frowsy temp and

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two young admin clerks engaging in wearying noliiftbanter; two or three senior news executives allowing their enforced absence from meetings to loosen their tongues with each other. There is venal talk of office politics and wholly uninformed speculation about the air crash – these Far Eastern airlines, you can't trust them any more, not since their economies fucked up five or six years ago, there isn't the same level of maintenance, you can't have everything.

By the time the lift finally arrives, some people have drifted off having formed friendships which may very well endure for years. Dempsey stumbles inside and looks imploringly at his fellow travellers, hoping that they might read in his eyes that death could be but a few moments away for him, that here is a soul waiting to be saved. But the people in the lift look uneasy and move slightly away from him – maybe they know what I'm going to do, he thinks, and maybe they agree that it is entirely the right option. In reality, of course, they are edging away from a colleague who appears to be several sheets to the wind – although Dempsey himself feels oddly sober, an unusual state of mind these days.

He is alone when the lift ejects him at the top floor and he stands for a few moments, hyperventilating, trying to work out the way to the roof.

Marian rests her head on the keyboard. She's begun to get this reputation for being difficult and querulous and with each day that passes it is an impression which it gets harder for her to dispel. Querulous, difficult and – as a result of her relationship with Julian – gauche and naïve. She finds herself forever snapping at people these days, like earlier with poor Cassie, who is stupid, but means well, and she hates herself for doing it and isn't sure why it happens. Nearly three o'clock. This fuckpig roach of a workman is going to get a mouthful.

Where's the fucking roof? Where's the fucking ROOF? You'd think a roof would be easy to find, it should be right there, on top of the fucking building. Dempsey can't find it. He's wandered unhappily along countless corridors searching for that elusive stairwell, passing people at whom he gazes imploringly stop me.

Maybe I should jump from a window, he thinks, in death as in life slightly failing to fulfil his potential, lowering, metaphorically and literally, his sights. Plus, of course, it should be easier for somebody to stop him killing himself in a proper office environment.

He rejoins the main spinal corridor and, pausing briefly to gather his resolve, turns the handle on the door in front of him, the door marked 8106.

Marian has had enough. She has had enough, she is past caring; now she just wants to go home. The time at which she wants to go home gets earlier and earlier each day. She thinks when this cunt workman has come she'll wait until the job's done and then just leave, using a headache as an excuse. Or maybe she should just go home now? Why should she wait? Pinned to her desk by a faulty window; who, really, gives a shit, one way or another? Fuck Bavins. Fuck Julian. Fuck Chloe and, for that matter, fuck Cassie. Mentally she begins to prepare her exit, sickened by the



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tapping of the computers, the important work going on all around her, sickened by it all.

Then the door opens and an ill-kempt man in an open-necked shirt walks through, looking at the windows. Marian turns to look at him, her lip curled up in a sneer. Yes, yes, yes. That's the loser.

Dempsey stands just inside the door and peers around the room. He sees people with their heads down, working. He sees windows, lots of windows. He feels a slight racing inside himself, maybe his heart, he thinks, his heart preparing for the end.

It is a busy office, this one. Maybe too busy; who is going to take the time to notice? Who is going to reach out and stop him?

Oh! Look! There's my window. They've left a window open for me. Lucy, are you listening? You can't have everything. You can't have everything. The basement where the fire begins, the noose around the choking heart, the shadow drawn across the lung, the burnt rubber on the median strip, the plane that banks too soon, the rubber hose inside the car, the pills like Smarties swallowed whole, the black crab alive inside the gut, the sudden stroke, the sniper's bullet, the window for the drowning man.

He looks around once more and sees directly in front of him this girl returning his gaze. Aaah, she knows. She looks at him and he thinks surely this is the human being who might offer him a path back into existence. There is a bond between all of us, a fragile cord of humanity which we sometimes mistake for the supernatural, even for extra-sensory perception; but it is simply love, our souls reaching out for each other.

Like this girl now, someone he has never previously seen, but someone prepared to become his saviour at this last moment, her soul reaching out with love for his.

Stop me; stop me. He stares at her, his eyes wide with beseechment and gratitude.

Her own eyes narrow slightly and she stretches out her right arm and points towards the open window.

'You took your fucking time. Third one on the left, and make it snappy.'

He does as he's told.