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Opening Extract from...

THE WOMAN IN THE WINDOW

Written by **A. J. Finn**

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SUNDAY,
October 24

1

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 (nimbler, 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

2

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

3

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 *19*th-*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

4

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, double-bolt the lock.

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

5

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 selec-

tion, 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 Tinder a month ago "just to see," I told myself. Tinder, 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 ar-

ranged 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, yesterday 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.

FRIDAY,
October 29

6

My French *leçon* today, and *Les Diaboliques* tonight. A rat-bastard husband, his "little ruin" of a wife, a mistress, a murder, a vanished corpse. Can you beat a vanished corpse?

But first, duty calls. I swallow my pills, park at my desktop, knock the mouse to one side, enter the passcode. And log on to the Agora.

At any hour, at *all* hours, there are at least a few dozen users checked in, a constellation sprawled across the world. Some of them I know by name: Talia from the Bay Area; Phil in Boston; a lawyer from Manchester with the unlawyerly name of Mitzi; Pedro, a Bolivian whose halting English is probably no worse than my pidgin French. Others go by handles, me included—in a cute moment, I opted for Annagoraphobe, but then I outed myself to another user as a psychologist, and word swiftly spread. So now I'm thedoctorisin. She'll see you now.

Agoraphobia: in translation the fear of the marketplace, in practice the term for a range of anxiety disorders. First documented in the late 1800s, then "codified as an independent diagnostic entity" a century later, though largely comorbid with panic disorder. You can read all about it, if you like, in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition*. *DSM-5* for short. It's always amused me, that title; it sounds like a movie franchise. *Liked* Mental Disorders 4*? You'll love the sequel!*

The medical literature is uncommonly imaginative when it comes

to diagnostics. "Agoraphobic fears . . . include being outside the home alone; being in a crowd, or standing in a line; being on a bridge." What I wouldn't give to stand on a bridge. Hell, what I wouldn't give to stand in a line. I like this one, too: "Being in the center of a theater row." Center seats, no less.

Pages 113 through 133, if you're interested.

Many of us—the most severely afflicted, the ones grappling with post-traumatic stress disorder—are housebound, hidden from the messy, massy world outside. Some dread the heaving crowds; others, the storm of traffic. For me, it's the vast skies, the endless horizon, the sheer exposure, the crushing pressure of the outdoors. "Open spaces," the *DSM-5* calls it vaguely, anxious to get to its 186 footnotes.

As a doctor, I say that the sufferer seeks an environment she can control. Such is the clinical take. As a sufferer (and that *is* the word), I say that agoraphobia hasn't ravaged my life so much as become it.

THE AGORA welcome screen greets me. I scan the message boards, comb the threads. 3 MONTHS STUCK IN MY HOUSE. I hear you, Kala88; almost ten months and counting here. AGORA DEPENDENT ON MOOD? Sounds more like social phobia, EarlyRiser. Or a troubled thyroid. STILL CAN'T GET A JOB. Oh, Megan—I know, and I'm sorry. Thanks to Ed, I don't need one, but I miss my patients. I worry about my patients.

A newcomer has emailed me. I direct her to the survival manual I whipped up back in the spring: "So You Have a Panic Disorder"—I think it sounds agreeably jaunty.

Q: How do I eat?

A: Blue Apron, Plated, HelloFresh . . . there are lots of delivery options available in the US! Those abroad can likely find similar services.

Q: How do I get my medication?

A: All the major pharmacies in the US now come straight to your

door. Have your doctor speak to your local pharmacy if there's a problem.

Q: How do I keep the house clean?

A: Clean it! Hire a cleaning agency or do it yourself.

(I do neither. My place could use a wipe-down.)

Q: What about trash disposal?

A: Your cleaner can take care of this, or you can arrange for a friend to help.

Q: How do I keep from getting bored?

A: Now, *that's* the tough question . . .

Et cetera. I'm pleased with the document, on the whole. Would have loved to have had it myself.

Now a chat box appears on my screen.

Sally4th: hello doc!

I can feel a smile twitching on my lips. Sally: twenty-six, based in Perth, was attacked earlier this year, on Easter Sunday. She suffered a broken arm and severe contusions to her eyes and face; her rapist was never identified or apprehended. Sally spent four months indoors, isolated in the most isolated city in the world, but has been getting out of the house for more than ten weeks now—good on her, as she'd say. A psychologist, aversion therapy, and propranolol. Nothing like a beta-blocker.

thedoctorisin: Hello yourself! All okay?

Sally4th: all ok! picnic this morning!!

She's always been fond of exclamation marks, even in the depths of

depression.

thedoctorisin: How was it?
Sally4th: i survived!:)

She likes emoticons, too.

thedoctorisin: You are a survivor! How is the Inderal?
Sally4th: good, i'm down to 80mg
thedoctorisin: 2x a day?
Sally4th: 1x!!
thedoctorisin: Minimum dosage! Fantastic! Side effects?
Sally4th: dry eyes, that's it

That's lucky. I'm on a similar drug (among others), and from time to time the headaches nearly rupture my brain. PROPRANOLOL CAN LEAD TO MIGRAINE, HEART ARRHYTHMIA, SHORTNESS OF BREATH, DEPRESSION, HALLUCINATIONS, SEVERE SKIN REACTION, NAUSEA, DIARRHEA, DECREASED LIBIDO, INSOMNIA, AND DROWSINESS. "What that medicine needs is more side effects," Ed said to me.

"Spontaneous combustion," I suggested.

"The screaming shits."

"Slow, lingering death."

thedoctorisin: Any relapses?
Sally4th: i had a wobble last week
Sally4th: but got thru it
Sally4th: breathing exercises
thedoctorisin: The old paper bag.
Sally4th: i feel like an idiot but it works
thedoctorisin: It does indeed. Well done.
Sally4th: thanx:)

I sip my wine. Another chat box pops up: Andrew, a man I met on a site for classic-film enthusiasts.

Graham Greene series @ Angelika this w/e?

I pause. *The Fallen Idol* is a favorite—the doomed butler; the fateful paper plane—and it's been fifteen years since I watched *Ministry of Fear*. And old movies, of course, brought me and Ed together.

But I haven't explained my situation to Andrew. *Unavailable* sums it up.

I return to Sally.

thedoctorisin: Are you keeping up with your psychologist?
Sally4th: yes:) thanx. down to just 1x week. she says progress is excellent
Sally4th: meds and beds is the key
thedoctorisin: Are you sleeping well?
Sally4th: i still get bad dreams
Sally4th: u?
thedoctorisin: I'm sleeping a lot.

Too much, probably. I should mention that to Dr. Fielding. Not sure I will.

Sally4th: ur progress? u fit for fight?
thedoctorisin: I'm not as quick as you! PTSD is a beast. But I'm tough.
Sally4th: yes u r!
Sally4th: just wanted to check on my friends here—thinking about u all!!!

I bid Sally adieu just as my tutor dials in on Skype. "Bonjour,

Yves," I mutter to myself. I pause for a moment before answering; I look forward to seeing him, I realize—that inky hair, that dark bloom to his skin. Those eyebrows that bolt into each other and buckle like *l'accent circonflexe* when my accent puzzles him, which is often.

If Andrew checks in again, I'll ignore him for now. Maybe for good. Classic cinema: That's what I share with Ed. No one else.

I UPEND the hourglass on my desk, watch how the little pyramid of sand seems to pulse as the grains dimple it. So much time. Nearly a year. I haven't left the house in nearly a year.

Well, almost. Five times in eight weeks I've managed to venture outside, out back, into the garden. My "secret weapon," as Dr. Fielding calls it, is my umbrella—Ed's umbrella, really, a rickety London Fog contraption. Dr. Fielding, a rickety contraption himself, will stand like a scarecrow in the garden as I push the door open, the umbrella brandished before me. A flick of the spring and it blooms; I stare intently at the bowl of its body, at its ribs and skin. Dark tartan, four squares of black arranged across each fold of canopy, four lines of white in every warp and weft. Four squares, four lines. Four blacks, four whites. Breathe in, count to four. Breathe out, count to four. Four. The magic number.

The umbrella projects straight ahead of me, like a saber, like a shield.

And then I step outside.

Out, two, three, four.

In, two, three, four.

The nylon glows against the sun. I descend the first step (there are, naturally, four) and tilt the umbrella toward the sky, just a bit, peek at his shoes, his shins. The world teems in my peripheral vision, like water about to flood a diving bell.

"Remember, you've got your secret weapon," Dr. Fielding calls.

It's not a secret, I want to cry; it's a fucking umbrella, wielded in

broad daylight.

Out, two, three, four; in, two, three, four—and unexpectedly it works; I'm conducted down the steps (out, two, three, four) and across a few yards of lawn (in, two, three, four). Until the panic wells within, a rising tide that swamps my sight, drowns out Dr. Fielding's voice. And then . . . best not to think of it.

SATURDAY,
October 30

7

A STORM. THE ASH TREE cowers, the limestone glowers, dark and damp. I remember dropping a glass onto the patio once; it burst like a bubble, merlot flaring across the ground and flooding the veins of the stonework, dark and bloody, crawling toward my feet.

Sometimes, when the skies are low, I imagine myself overhead, in a plane or on a cloud, surveying the island below: the bridges spoked from its east coast; the cars sucked toward it like flies swarming a lightbulb.

It's been so long since I felt the rain. Or wind—the caress of wind, I nearly said, except that sounds like something you'd read in a supermarket romance.

It's true, though. And snow too, but snow I never want to feel again.

A PEACH was mixed in with my Granny Smiths in this morning's FreshDirect delivery. I wonder how that happened.

THE NIGHT we met, at an art-house screening of *The 39 Steps*, Ed and I compared histories. My mother, I told him, had weaned me on old thrillers and classic noir; as a teenager I preferred the company of Gene Tierney and Jimmy Stewart to that of my classmates. "Can't decide if that's sweet or sad," said Ed, who until that evening had never seen a black-and-white movie. Within two hours, his mouth was on mine.

You mean your mouth was on mine, I imagine him saying.

In the years before Olivia, we'd watch a movie at least once a week—all the vintage suspense flicks from my childhood: *Double Indemnity*, *Gaslight*, *Saboteur*, *The Big Clock* . . . We lived in monochrome those nights. For me, it was a chance to revisit old friends; for Ed, it was an opportunity to make new ones.

And we'd make lists. The *Thin Man* franchise, ranked from best (the original) to worst (*Song of the Thin Man*). Top movies from the bumper crop of 1944. Joseph Cotten's finest moments.

I can do lists on my own, of course. For instance: best Hitchcock films not made by Hitchcock. Here we go:

Le Boucher, the early Claude Chabrol that Hitch, according to lore, wished he'd directed. *Dark Passage,* with Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall—a San Francisco valentine, all velveteen with fog, and antecedent to any movie in which a character goes under the knife to disguise himself. *Niagara,* starring Marilyn Monroe; *Charade,* starring Audrey Hepburn; *Sudden Fear!,* starring Joan Crawford's eyebrows. *Wait Until Dark:* Hepburn again, a blind woman stranded in her basement apartment. I'd go berserk in a basement apartment.

Now, movies that postdate Hitch: *The Vanishing,* with its sucker-punch finale. *Frantic,* Polanski's ode to the master. *Side Effects,* which begins as a Big Pharma screed before slithering like an eel into another genre altogether.

Okay.

Popular film misquotes. "Play it again, Sam": *Casablanca,* allegedly, except neither Bogie nor Bergman ever said it. "He's alive": Frankenstein doesn't gender his monster; cruelly, it's just "It's alive." "Elementary, my dear Watson" does crop up in the first Holmes film of the talkie era, but appears nowhere in the Conan Doyle canon.

Okay.

What next?

I FLIP open my laptop, visit the Agora. A message from Mitzi in Manchester; a progress report courtesy of Dimples2016 in Arizona. Nothing of note.

IN THE front parlor of number 210, the Takeda boy draws his bow across the cello. Farther east, the four Grays flee the rain, charging up their front steps, laughing. Across the park, Alistair Russell fills a glass at the kitchen tap.

8

Late afternoon, and I'm pouring a California pinot noir into a tumbler when the doorbell chimes. I drop my glass.

It explodes, a long tongue of wine licking the white birch. "Fuck," I shout. (Something I've noticed: In the absence of others, I swear more often and more loudly. Ed would be appalled. *I'm* appalled.)

I've just seized a fistful of paper towels when the bell rings again. *Who the hell?* I think—or have I said it? David left an hour ago for a job in East Harlem—I watched him from Ed's library—and I'm not expecting any deliveries. I stoop, cram the towels against the mess, then march to the door.

Framed within the intercom screen is a tall kid in a slim jacket, hands clasping a small white box. It's the Russell boy.

I press the talk button. "Yes?" I call. Less inviting than *Hello*, more gracious than *Who the hell?*

"I live across the park," he says, almost shouting, his voice improbably sweet. "My mom asked me to give you this." I watch him thrust the box toward the speaker; then, unsure where the camera might be, he slowly pivots, arms orbiting overhead.

"You can just . . ." I begin. Should I ask him to deposit it in the hall? Not very neighborly, I suppose, but I haven't bathed in two days, and the cat might nip at him.

He's still on the stoop, box held aloft.

". . . come in," I finish, and I tap the buzzer.

I hear the lock unbuckle and move to the door, cautiously, the way Punch approaches unfamiliar people—or used to, back when unfamiliar people visited the house.

A shadow piles up against the frosted glass, dim and slim, like a sapling. I shoot the bolts, turn the knob.

He's tall indeed, baby-faced and blue-eyed, with a flap of sandy hair and a faint scar notching one eyebrow, trailing up his forehead. Maybe fifteen years old. He looks like a boy I once knew, once kissed—summer camp in Maine, a quarter century ago. I like him.

"I'm Ethan," he says.

"Come in," I repeat.

He enters. "It's dark in here."

I flick the switch on the wall.

As I examine him, he examines the room: the paintings, the cat spread along the chaise, the mound of sodden towels melting on the kitchen floor. "What happened?"

"I had an accident," I say. "I'm Anna. Fox," I add, in case he goes in for formalities; I'm old enough to be his (young) mother.

We shake hands, then he offers me the box, bright and tight and lashed with ribbon. "For you," he says shyly.

"Just set that down over there. Can I get you something to drink?"

He moves to the sofa. "Could I have some water?"

"Sure." I return to the kitchen, clear up the wreckage. "Ice?"

"No, thanks." I fill a glass, then another, ignoring the bottle of pinot noir on the counter.

The box squats on the coffee table, next to my laptop. I'm still logged into the Agora, having talked DiscoMickey through an incipient panic attack a little while ago; his thank-you note is writ large across the screen. "Right," I say, sitting beside Ethan, setting his glass in front of him. I snap the computer shut and reach for the gift. "Let's see what we've got here."

I tug the ribbon, lift the flap, and from a nest of tissue remove a candle—the kind with blooms and stalks trapped inside like insects in amber. I bring it to my face, making a show of it.

"Lavender," Ethan volunteers.

"I thought so." I inhale. "I lav lovender." Try again. "I love lavender."

He smiles a bit, one corner of his mouth tipping upward, as though tugged by a string. He's going to be a handsome man, I realize, in just a few years. That scar—women will love it. Girls might love it already. Or boys.

"My mom asked me to give this to you. Like, days ago."

"That's very thoughtful. New neighbors are supposed to give *you* gifts."

"One lady came by already," he says. "She told us that we didn't need such a big house if we're such a small family."

"I bet that was Mrs. Wasserman."

"Yes."

"Ignore her."

"We did."

Punch has dropped from the chaise onto the floor and approaches us gingerly. Ethan leans forward, lays his hand on the rug, palm upward. The cat pauses, then slithers toward us, sniffing at Ethan's fingers, licking them. Ethan giggles.

"I love cats' tongues," he says, as though confessing.

"So do I." I sip my water. "They're covered in little barbs—little needles," I say, in case he doesn't know the word *barb*. I realize I'm not certain how to speak to a teenager; my oldest patients were twelve. "Shall I light the candle?"

Ethan shrugs, smiles. "Sure."

I find a matchbox in the desk, cherry red, the words THE RED CAT marching across it; I remember dining there with Ed, more than two years ago now. Or three. Chicken tagine, I think, and as I recall, he

praised the wine. I wasn't drinking as much then.

I strike a match, light the wick. "Look at that," I say as a little claw of flame scratches at the air; the glow blossoms, the blossoms glow. "How lovely."

There's a soft silence. Punch figure-eights around Ethan's legs, then vaults to his lap. Ethan laughs, a bright bark.

"I think he likes you."

"I guess so," he says, crooking a finger behind the cat's ear and gently niggling it.

"He doesn't like most people. Bad temper."

A low growl, like a quiet motor. Punch is actually purring.

Ethan grins. "Is he an indoor-only cat?"

"He has a cat flap in the kitchen door." I point to it. "But mostly he stays inside."

"Good boy," Ethan murmurs as Punch burrows into his armpit.

"How are you liking your new house?" I ask.

He pauses, kneading the cat's skull with his knuckles. "I miss the old one," he says after a moment.

"I bet. Where did you live before?" I already know the answer, of course.

"Boston."

"What brought you to New York?" I know this one, too.

"My dad got a new job." A transfer, technically, but I'm hardly going to argue. "My room's bigger here," he says, as though the thought has just occurred to him.

"The people who lived there before you did a big renovation."

"My mom says it was a gut job."

"Exactly. A gut job. And they combined some of the rooms upstairs."

"Have you been to my house?" he asks.

"I've been a few times. I didn't know them very well—the Lords. But they had a holiday party every year, so that's when I'd come over."

It was nearly a year ago, in fact, that I last visited. Ed was there with me. He left two weeks later.

I've started to relax. For a moment I think it's Ethan's company—he's soft-spoken and easy; even the cat approves—but then I realize that I'm reverting to analyst mode, to the seesaw give-and-take of Q&A. Curiosity and compassion: the tools of my trade.

And in an instant, for a moment, I'm back there, in my office on East Eighty-Eighth, the small hushed room sunk in dim light, two deep chairs opposite each other, a pond of blue rug between them. The radiator hisses.

The door drifts open, and there in the waiting area is the sofa, the wooden table; the slithering stacks of *Highlights* and *Ranger Rick;* the bin brimming with chunks of Lego; the white-noise machine purring in the corner.

And Wesley's door. Wesley, my business partner, my grad-school mentor, the man who recruited me into private practice. Wesley Brill—Wesley Brilliant, we called him, he of the sloppy hair and mismatched socks, the lightning brain and thunder voice. I see him in his office, slouched in his Eames lounger, long legs arrowed toward the center of the room, a book propped in his lap. The window is open, gasping in the winter air. He's been smoking. He looks up.

"Hello, Fox," he says.

"My room is bigger than my old room," Ethan repeats.

I settle back, fold one leg over the other. It feels almost absurdly posed. I wonder when I last crossed my legs. "Where are you going to school?"

"Home school," he says. "My mom teaches me." Before I can respond, he nods at a picture on a side table. "Is that your family?"

"Yes. That's my husband and my daughter. He's Ed and she's Olivia."

"Are they home?"

"No, they don't live here. We're separated."

"Oh." He strokes Punch's back. "How old is she?"

"She's eight. How old are you?"

"Sixteen. Seventeen in February."

It's the sort of thing Olivia would say. He's older than he looks.

"My daughter was born in February. Valentine's Day."

"I'm the twenty-eighth."

"So close to leap year," I say.

He nods. "What do you do?"

"I'm a psychologist. I work with children."

He wrinkles his nose. "Why would children need a psychologist?"

"All sorts of reasons. Some of them have trouble in school, some of them have difficulty at home. Some of them have a tough time moving to a new place."

He says nothing.

"So I suppose that if you're homeschooled, you have to meet friends outside of class."

He sighs. "My dad found a swim league for me to join."

"How long have you swum?"

"Since I was five."

"You must be good."

"I'm okay. My dad says I'm capable."

I nod.

"I'm pretty good," he admits modestly. "I teach it."

"You teach swimming?"

"To people with disabilities. Not, like, physical disabilities," he adds.

"Developmental disabilities."

"Yeah. I did that a lot in Boston. I want to do it here, too."

"How did you start doing that?"

"My friend's sister has Down syndrome, and she saw the Olympics a couple years ago and wanted to learn to swim. So I taught her and then some other kids from her school. And then I got into that

whole . . .”—he fumbles for the word—“scene, I guess.”

“That’s great.”

“I’m not into parties or anything like that.”

“Not your scene.”

“No.” Then he smiles. “Not at all.”

He twists his head, looks at the kitchen. “I can see your house from my room,” he says. “It’s up there.”

I turn. If he can see the house, that means he’s got an easterly view, facing my bedroom. The thought is briefly bothersome—he’s a teenage boy, after all. For the second time I wonder if he might be gay.

And then I see that his eyes have gone glassy.

“Oh . . .” I look to my right, where the tissues should be, where they used to be in my office. Instead there’s a picture frame, Olivia beaming at me, gap-toothed.

“Sorry,” Ethan says.

“No, don’t be sorry,” I tell him. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.” He scrubs his eyes.

I wait a moment. He’s a child, I remind myself—tall and broken-voiced, but a child.

“I miss my friends,” he says.

“I bet. Of course.”

“I don’t *know* anyone here.” A tear tumbles down one cheek. He swipes at it with the heel of his hand.

“Moving is tough. It took me a little while to meet people when I moved here.”

He sniffles loudly. “When did you move?”

“Eight years ago. Or actually nine, now. From Connecticut.”

He sniffles again, brushes his nose with a finger. “That’s not as far away as Boston.”

“No. But moving from anywhere is tough.” I’d like to hug him. I won’t. LOCAL RECLUSE FONDLES NEIGHBOR CHILD.

We sit for a moment in silence.

"Can I have some more water?" he asks.

"I'll get it for you."

"No, it's fine." He begins to stand; Punch pours himself down his leg, pooling beneath the coffee table.

Ethan walks to the kitchen sink. As the faucet runs, I get up and approach the television, haul open the drawer beneath the set.

"Do you like movies?" I call. No answer; I turn to see him standing at the kitchen door, gazing at the park. Beside him, the bottles in the recycling bin glow fluorescent.

After a moment, he faces me. "What?"

"Do you like movies?" I repeat. He nods. "Come take a look. I've got a big DVD library. Very big. Too big, my husband says."

"I thought you were separated," Ethan mumbles, crossing toward me.

"Well, he's still my husband." I inspect the ring on my left hand, twist it. "But you're right." I gesture at the open drawer. "If you'd like to borrow anything, you're welcome to it. Do you have a DVD player?"

"My dad's got an attachment for his laptop."

"That'll work."

"He might let me borrow it."

"Let's hope so." I'm starting to get a sense of Alistair Russell.

"What sort of movies?" he asks.

"Mostly old ones."

"Like, black-and-white?"

"Mostly black-and-white."

"I've never seen a black-and-white movie."

I make full moons of my eyes. "You're in for a treat. All the best movies are black-and-white."

He looks doubtful but peers into the drawer. Nearly two hundred slipcases, Criterion and Kino, Universal's Hitchcock boxed set, assorted film noir collections, *Star Wars* (I'm only human). I inspect the

spines: *Night and the City*. *Whirlpool*. *Murder, My Sweet*. "Here," I announce, prying loose a case and handing it to Ethan.

"*Night Must Fall*," he reads.

"It's a good one to start with. Suspenseful but not scary."

"Thanks." He clears his throat, coughs. "Sorry," he says, sipping his water. "I'm allergic to cats."

I stare at him. "Why didn't you say so?" I glare at the cat.

"He's so friendly. I didn't want to offend him."

"That's ridiculous," I tell him. "In a nice way."

He smiles. "I'd better go," he says. He returns to the coffee table, sets his glass on it, bends to address Punch through the glass. "Not because of you, buddy. Good boy." He straightens up, shakes his hands over his thighs.

"Do you want a lint roller? For the dander?" I'm not even sure I've still got one.

"I'm okay." He looks around. "Can I use your bathroom?"

I point to the red room. "All yours."

While he's in there, I check the sideboard mirror. A shower tonight, for sure. Tomorrow at latest.

I return to the sofa and open my laptop. Thanks for your help, DiscoMickey has written. You're my hero.

I rattle off a quick reply as the toilet flushes. Ethan emerges from the bathroom a moment later, rubbing his palms on his jeans. "All set," he informs me. He treads to the door, hands stuffed in pockets, a schoolboy shuffle.

I follow him. "Thanks so much for coming by."

"See you around," he says, pulling the door open.

No, you won't, I think. "I'm sure you will," I say.