

At Number Twenty Two

By Amanda Sington-Williams

No one in our street knew who she was until the end of that long hot summer. Even after all this time, her small frightened face sometimes breaks into my dreams. I don't know where she is now. I don't suppose any of us know her whereabouts.

Our street was part of a town in the Midlands, a faceless town with an indistinct centre but our crescent was in the better part. There was a row of shops at the end and a pub, our local. Many of us ran two cars and were proud of our climb from the poorer backgrounds of our origins. Thinking back, there were probably only about forty houses. Victorian except for two, the woman at number twenty two, as she came to be known, lived in a 1930s house. One of two built, so it was said to fill in the gap left by three original houses that had collapsed through disrepair. I guess living in a different kind of house lent itself to being distinct from the rest of us for a start. The other 1930s house was never occupied. Perhaps if it had been, she wouldn't have been so isolated, would have had the opportunity to form an ally with the neighbour. Maybe then, there would have been no story to tell.

Greg and I were her closest neighbours. We were next door to the empty house and being the nearest, I still occasionally feel remorse for the things that happened, though sometimes I really feel that Jim who lived opposite got off lightly. Though, I don't believe emotions ever were his thing.

Her house had walls of stucco and as it faced south, sometimes the sun caused a glitter effect. There was a porch where she would perch herself on a ledge and look out. The other houses in the crescent were redbrick with original features and tarmacked fronts where we parked our cars.. Everyone in the crescent drew back their curtains in the morning and it was generally assumed that someone was ill if their curtains remained closed. None of us actually said as much, but permanently drawn curtains implied laziness. And she, who lived at number twenty two never drew her curtains.

It was strange seeing her in the porch staring out with that slightly unworldly look on her face as if she didn't know where she was, or, like Jim said, she was hiding something. Jim had a loud booming voice developed from his days as a factory manager. When he suggested this we went quiet for a second while our imaginations played all kinds of games. We were sitting in the local and as the beer took effect and the pub got noisier and more riotous, so did our talk and arguments about our new neighbour. None of us knew for certain whether or not the woman at number twenty two had any children. It was after all a large family house in which she lived, and someone, I forget who, had seen a cot being moved in with the

furniture. There'd been a case in the paper recently of a woman who'd been arrested for child abuse. A woman that no one suspected would ever do such a thing. Someone on our table reckoned she might be a child abuser too. Though not me, you understand. I never agreed on that point. But by the end of the evening, that was it. Established. She was in some people's eyes already guilty. Why else would she hide behind tightly drawn heavy curtains? Though I never stuck my neck out to disagree, I don't think I was really happy with this explanation. But I guess by saying little I was as compliant as the rest of them. And as I think back to that evening, I can't be sure whether I told the rest of them that they couldn't be sure or merely thought it to myself. By this time we were all quite drunk. There was a vote on who would contact the welfare people with our concerns. The idea wasn't put to test because everyone realised in the brightness of a sober day that the idea was preposterous and ill founded. But still, like a cloudy day, this explanation for her behaviour hung around and was brought up from time to time during the following weeks.

I tried to speak to her on one occasion a couple of days after she'd been marked as an abuser, and afterwards, though I never actually engaged her in a conversation, I felt that at least I'd made an effort and that was more than anyone else had done. She was always in the porch looking out when I got home from work. And always wearing black clothes, either a sweater or a dress. Even in the especially hot weather of that summer she didn't wear colour. It was a warm May day when I finally spoke to her and I'd just taken a jog round the park at the end of the road. It must have been about seven in the evening. I remember the sky was turning a beautiful hue of pink and the colour reminded me of flamingos. I remember because I stopped at her gate and said just that. She was standing in the porch doorway, arms folded across her chest, as if she were waiting for someone or something. But that's the stance she always took. At first I thought she hadn't heard me, so I repeated myself in a louder voice. I was determined to get a response from her. In fact the sunset was reflecting on her face making it appear quite beautiful, in a funny sort of way.

She looked quite startled as if in trying to speak to her I'd committed some kind of crime and I was aware that I'd frightened her. The look she gave me just before the door closed certainly indicated terror. And when I told Greg he shrugged his shoulders.

'Wouldn't bother any more then,' he said. 'If she can't be bothered with you.' Greg was, during this time busy with his business and, when he wasn't working,, preferred to stay in with his feet up and a good book to joining me and the neighbours in the local.

For a long time we thought she lived alone and thinking this gave her a more mysterious air, a shroud

of loneliness perhaps. The presence of a baby and with it the speculation that she was an abuser faded. Strange enough a woman who spent her days doing nothing except look out at the world as it passed her by. Stranger still, a woman living alone who chose to isolate herself from her neighbours. It was Jim who found out she lived with a man who worked away from home. He was a long distance lorry driver. Jim had spoken to him only once and said he seemed a nice enough man. Kim, his name was. But it was her that intrigued me. Some of us wondered if she had some mental disorder. I believe Jim's neighbour even called the welfare people, asked them who she was and whether or not she might be dangerous. Some people on our crescent misconstrued this idea and took to calling her names and shouting abuse at her. Fortunately this behaviour stopped after we'd all held a meeting about it in the pub.

Before the woman at number twenty two moved into our crescent, we were a disparate bunch of people, all of us with busy lives, mortgages to pay, families to feed, jobs to keep and we didn't share a table in the pub as a rule, but nodded and passed the time of day when one of us sat down with a drink at the neighbouring table. It was one of those recently improved pubs with small tables scattered round the bar in a supposedly informal manner. And it was at one of these intimate tables that we would each sit with our partners or friends. Gradually, as the subject of the new neighbour became uppermost, we moved our tables closer to form a group. A Neighbourhood Watch Committee, somebody called us, as the woman at number twenty two's purpose was dissected and analysed. Thinking about it now I realise that we were using her as a local gluing process. If we tossed her image around enough we would strengthen our team spirit.

The next rumour to run round the crescent that she was a terrorist and that her husband was driving round the country looking for places in which to plant a bomb. Though this idea was squashed fairly early on as it just seemed ludicrous after we'd turned it round a few times, chucked it across the pub table for a few nights, so to speak. She simply didn't look like a terrorist, Jim said repeatedly. Firstly, she's not dressed right, secondly her hair's dyed blonde, thirdly - he said as he counted on his fingers, hesitating at this point, we have no evidence. We all agreed, the fact that we didn't have evidence of her being a child abuser or a woman with a mental disorder conveniently shoved to the back of our minds. Jim had taken the place as leader. It was always Jim that had the final word. Some of the neighbours stuck to their belief that she was up to no good, planning something unlawful or part of a gang. I believe one of them, I forget who, even went as far as calling the police. We all gathered in the pub the following evening waiting for the man's report on his investigation. 'Thanks but no thanks,' is apparently what the police told him. 'We're busy trying to catch criminals of specific crimes,' they said. 'I'm only trying to help,' the man apparently told

them. 'Being a good citizen, reporting anything untoward.' But they didn't want to know, he said. 'Last time I'll be helping them with their enquiries. They can keep their crime statistics to themselves.' So that was that. Jim, as ever was right. And I remember distinctly it was that evening before I went to the pub, as I was getting changed out of my work clothes and into my jeans when I realised I was taking a little more care about how I looked; taking pains over my make-up, making sure what I wore flattered me. I had a vested interest in keeping the Neighbour Watch Committee going, as now I had a role. I was Jim's 'deputy'. Greg took it all in his stride, thought it was all a bit unnecessary, all these meetings and committees, but I didn't listen to him.

It was roundabout this time that our neighbour, the woman at twenty two, vanished from her porch. For a week there was no sightings of her. The house silent. Not that this was unusual as there was never any noise coming from the house, but this quiet was different, morgue like, still. I began to worry. The evenings were getting lighter now as the solstice grew nearer and on my way home from work I took to lingering outside her house, looking for signs of life. Her curtains were floral. Pink, blue and beige. So different from the rest of the crescent's choice of fabrics. Our curtains were muted colours of cream and white. Some of us used slatted blinds. Hers was the only chintzy house on the crescent and every time I passed those curtains, I was reminded of the rose patterned ones I grew up with and the smell of chip fat that infiltrated every fibre.

I stood there in the fading light. There was a piano playing one of those mournful classical pieces; it stopped for a moment and a light was switched on, the glow showing through the heavy curtains. This, I had never seen before. Feeling satisfied that she was still around I returned home. Now of course, after the event, I question my attitude on that particular day. Was I worried about her safety? Or was it that I would have missed our meetings in the pub with Jim's presence as leader? Of course I realised we were ganging up on her and to this day I've no idea whether everyone on our crescent felt as uneasy about this as I did, once they were away from our joint influences. Or perhaps it was just me.

Sometimes I wonder whether I should have got to know her, invited her round, tried a bit harder to speak to her, but then I'd think that it wasn't me, that after all it was her that was creating the distance with her odd behaviour and unwillingness to share.

The next day she still wasn't there. Or the next. I was beginning to miss her presence and I think in some way I felt cheated of a form of entertainment. I don't know who made the decision, but in the pub our tables were separated once more. It was by then about ten days since she'd been seen – and I was missing our sessions. I made my decision. One late afternoon after work I rang her bell and waited. There

was the same sort of melancholy piano music coming from her house. The street behind me was empty. Someone was cooking a barbecue. The rush hour traffic from the main street at the bottom of the road appeared loud, much more frantic than other days. I waited, listening to her approaching footsteps. She opened the door a fraction. She was wearing round old-fashioned glasses and a black dress fastened to the neck. Her lips were pale. Her face ashen.

I put on my cheerful, no nonsense voice. 'Haven't seen you for a while. Just thought I'd check whether you need anything.'

'You live there, don't you?' She pointed down the road towards my house.

I told her yes.

'Thanks, but I am OK,' she said without returning my smile. 'Are you?'

'What? Sorry?'

'Are you OK?'

'Well, yes,' I said.

'I have to go now,' she said and I saw her bite her upper lip as if she was stopping herself from saying more. 'Thank you for asking.'

It is hard to describe but there was something sad about her, and it quite shook me to my core. She seemed so resolute in her isolation, determined to remain aloof. I would never be like that. When Greg and I moved to this crescent, we went out of our way to befriend the neighbours, to be accepted by them. And over the five years we lived there, we acquired similar tastes in furnishings, the cars we all bought were of a homogenous style and age. Our front doors were painted to match each other and we took it in turns to visit each other's homes at Christmas and to admire the interchangeable furnishings. And our similarities brought about a pleasure, a contentment with our lot. We were doing things right. Everyone approved of everyone else and at the same time our privacies were maintained.

That evening, as I was watering the tubs in the front of my house, I saw Jim leave his house and I called to him, told him I'd spoken to my neighbour, the woman at number twenty two. I didn't know her name then. No one in our crescent did. No one had bothered to find out. Looking back, I realise that perhaps we didn't want to know, that without an identity we had more opportunity to make her into a scapegoat. Greg didn't want to go to the pub. Said he didn't enjoy the company anymore. Looking back, I see what he was getting at.

In the pub, we put the tables together and a couple more neighbours joined us. Naturally, the conversation turned to the woman at number twenty two and then someone, I forget who said they'd had

a couple of ceramic planters taken from the front of their house. They were bought in Italy, hand-painted apparently. There in the afternoon, gone by the next morning as well as the geraniums. As I'd just spoken to her, they all considered me the expert on whether she or her husband, the long distant lorry driver would be capable of carrying out such a deed. I bathed in the attention as all eyes turned to me and waited. I took my time.

'Well, she doesn't seem to have much,' I said. 'I mean she always wears the same clothes and she doesn't own a car.' I paused for effect. 'Maybe she's a bit envious of us. Perhaps she wants our pretty things. So I suppose it could be her.'

That started them off. They made plans to secure their pots. The conversation got quite out of hand with talk of burglar alarms and broken glass, of Alsations and trip wires. Though of course none of this was carried out.

And a week later she was back in her porch looking out wistfully at the bright blue sky.

The summer was one of rare stifling heat, reminiscent of lazy holidays and we took to sitting in the pub garden; we pulled two white plastic tables together and sat round sipping iced lager or beer. The pub garden was at the back of the pub and faced the main road at the bottom of the crescent. Although the pub managers had made an effort with half barrel kegs full of flowers and benches set against the wall, they could do nothing about the noise and fumes from the traffic. And it was on an evening like this that the fire took hold. I remember I was sitting next to Jim's brother who was visiting and Greg, was sitting opposite fanning himself with a menu. There were half a dozen or so of us and the night seemed noisier than ever. There was a party in one of the flats over a shop and the bass boomed out from the open window. And as I've said, the traffic fumes were pungent and then there was the strong smell of ale. So it wasn't that surprising none of us realised what was going on. Though I remember sirens. But aren't there always sirens in a large town? And perhaps we would have remained ignorant if it wasn't for a man coming out and telling us. We didn't know him, and I suppose he told us out of concern; concern that it was one of our houses that was burning.

We all rushed through to the front of the pub where there were a few people standing around, holding their drinks and staring along the street as if they were watching a film. From there, at the end of the crescent, there wasn't much to see except the tail end of a fire engine as it rounded the curve in our crescent and the rest of the drinkers including all of us, all headed towards the burning house where the woman at number twenty two lived.

It was on the news that evening. A suspicious fire they called it. They were still trying to get hold of

Kim who was somewhere in Scotland with his lorry load. Deidre Moore, or the woman at number twenty two as we'd known her was badly burned but 'comfortable', in a special burns unit so the news reader said. The house was just about gutted by the flames. Despite the heat of the night, I couldn't stop shivering; I kept on remembering her pale frightened face.

Our crescent was in the headlines for a few days. But the worst of it were the interviews. As it was a relatively small crescent, the police knocked on every door asking us questions about what we knew of her and any enemies that she might have. Apparently, she'd reported incidents of hate-crime: dog shit through the letter box, a threatening letter made up from cut out words. I was astounded. Halfway through these interrogations we all gathered in the pub. But there was no joviality and little conversation.

'I never knew she was called Deidre,' I said. 'I feel bad I never even found out her name.'

'No point in taking the blame for that. Takes two, you know,' Jim said and put his arm round my shoulder as if he were trying to comfort me. 'Terrible thing to have happened. Don't expect we'll see her again. With the house gone and everything. I wouldn't want to see that wreck of a house. Would you?'

I shrugged myself away from his arm. 'Who would do that? She could've been killed.'

I distinctly remember it was at this point that I realised Jim hadn't been in the pub on the night of the fire. But he wouldn't do such a thing. Would he? An uncomfortable silence hung over us all and I wondered whether other people were thinking the same. I noticed for the first time the way he smacked his lips together after he'd had a drink of beer and his lean face now looked mean. His need to dominate a conversation irritated me. The chatter turned to other more mundane topics; the continuing hot weather, work, the boredom of commuting, that kind of thing. But there was an unease about us, the comfortable camaraderie gone.

It was the local television station's decision to make our crescent the central topic of a series on the existence or not of a society which was cohesive and helped the weaker members, which finally pulled the inhabitants of the crescent apart. It was the television journalists who discovered that Deidre had been suffering from depression after losing a baby. I remembered the mention of a cot when they moved in and the evening of the flamingo pink sky when I tried to befriend her. The programme depicted us as the non-caring side of a disparate society who allowed a vulnerable woman to be harassed and ignored.

I saw her one more time. Before Greg and I decided to move away. She was standing in front of her burnt-out house. Just staring. I noticed the livid red scars on her hands. Hopefully they'll heal. Hopefully she'll forget. But I was told by someone, I forget who, that she'll never play the piano again.

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