

# WINDOWS

## A short story by A.A. Abbott

*Disclaimer: this is a work of fiction. Any similarity to real people is completely coincidental and unintentional.*

Juby unpegged squares of washing from the line, stiff as boards and smelling of sunshine. He made his bed, corners just so, as he'd been taught in the Army. He noticed a fly buzzing at the window and smartly swatted it. Damn! The glass, so clear before you couldn't tell it was there, was smeared with black legs, red blood, creamy eggs. He couldn't leave it like that. He made for the kitchenette to fetch a cloth and white vinegar.

Engrossed in polishing, Juby felt his phone before he heard it. It jumped up and down in his pocket, buzzing. Frowning, he looked at the number on the screen. Miss Tetley. Would that woman ever give him any peace? She should know he was on his lunch break.

"Juby here." He couldn't ignore her.

"Hello, Darren."

That annoyed him too. Apart from Petal and his mother, nobody had called him by his first name since he was at school. He bit his tongue. "What can I do for you, Miss Tetley?"

“We need some boxes moving. Geoff has visitors after lunch and wants his office looking nice. And it’s June, not Miss Tetley.”

Boxes moving at lunchtime? You’d be lucky, he was tempted to say. Still, she had used the magic word: Geoff. The CEO’s name gave her total power over Juby. How she enjoyed using it, he thought. Juby sighed.

Miss Tetley – he absolutely refused to call her June - was tidier than Petal had been, he admitted grudgingly. The cardboard boxes were sealed and labelled and she told him precisely where to put them in the basement.

The basement was cooler than the rest of the building, but he was still perspiring by the time the boxes were neatly laid out on the archive shelves. Juby thought lovingly of Petal waiting for him with an ice cream. His mind drifted to an art exhibition he had attended with her. That had been before they married, when Petal still made an effort to arrive on time, cut her fringe before it flopped in her eyes and wash up after cooking. She had known one of the painters. It was a display of modern art: performances, sculpture and film as well as pictures. One of the exhibits occupied a separate room, kept below zero. The punters put on old fur coats when they entered it. Juby wanted to refuse. The fur was obviously sourced from a charity shop and might contain lice or bedbugs as well as the previous owner’s sweat.

“You have to suffer for art,” smiled the smarmy young man who Petal introduced as the curator of the exhibition. If Petal hadn’t been with him, nudging him with her elbow and smiling anxiously, he would have punched the man’s lights out.

Juby shuddered at the feel of the greasy lining enveloping his shoulders, until he saw the artwork: a life size model of Disney’s

Snow White, carved from vanilla ice cream. He quite forgot his distaste.

Posters gave tribute to a well known ice cream brand, while at the same time warning that the model was not for human consumption. Juby only had eyes for Snow White: perfect, pure, peaceful in repose. She wasn't really dead, he remembered, just sleeping. He was about to kiss her frozen lips when Petal said crossly that he should hurry up, or they would have no time to see anything else. That broke the spell, and Juby had gladly shrugged off the dreadful coat and followed her round the gallery.

His lunch break was finished now. Miss Tetley had stolen it. Juby fantasised about sticking a knife between her shoulder blades. A sharp knife, gliding through her flesh as if cutting soft butter. He hummed as he busied himself repairing an aircon unit in the marketing office.

"You're cheerful today, Mr Juby." The remark was addressed to him by Colin Brown, one of the sales executives.

Juby nodded. At least now he was being shown some respect. "You too, Mr Brown."

"Another day closer to retirement." Brown smiled. "Glad you're sorting out the temperature for us; it's like a sauna in here."

"Happy to help, Mr Brown. Don't want you having to strip off at the office, after all."

The other man chuckled. "Might give the girls a thrill. I say, take a look over there."

Juby's eyes followed the man's finger. The office, while modern, overlooked a block of thirties mansion flats. In the window of one of

these, a girl was standing; pretty, blonde, not wearing a great deal and rapidly wearing rather less as she removed most of it.

"Don't get many of them to the pound," said Colin Brown.

Juby was transfixed, staring at the girl. Brown nudged him gently in the ribs. "Hey, she'll notice you in a minute."

Silence hung in the air, thick with menace and shock. It was Petal. He knew it. Those were Petal's curly locks, a flower tucked behind her ear. They were her clothes: the flowery cotton smock, the fuschsia lace bra on which Colin Brown's eyes were trained. But how could this be? Juby's memory must be playing tricks. He thought he recalled stuffing her frilly things and fripperies into a huge wheelie bin, to feed the steel jaws of a Westminster council dustcart only hours later.

Petal spotted them and waved. She drew the curtains.

"You dropped your screwdriver," Colin Brown said.

Juby thought he could read the man's mind. Poor lad, he imagined Colin Brown thinking; he doesn't get out much. Juby shrugged the thought away. Women existed in a separate compartment of his life now, as they had before Petal had noisily spilled into his consciousness. Later, he would walk south for ten minutes, crossing Oxford Street at the point where glitz frayed and souvenir shops began, to Soho. He was still stunned and needed comfort. A walk-up, they called it. He would hand over £20; it would be quick enough for him to ignore the dust and smells in the room, and afterwards the rat-gnawed rubbish everywhere and the gawping tourists barging into him.

First, at the stroke of five o'clock, Juby returned to his flat. He chose a Magnum bar from the freezer and sat, consoled, on his pristine

leather sofa. He hadn't seen Petal in the mansion flat after all. He enjoyed order and calm, anticipating a treat.

As the outer shell of chocolate shattered under Juby's teeth, Lula heard the key in the lock. She remembered the day they moved in, when Al had carefully drilled the lock out and replaced it with a new one.

"Is that you, love?"

"Who else?" he grinned.

"Might've been the law."

"What's the chance of that? I thought everyone believed you were the old lady's niece, looking after the place while she was in hospital."

"They do. It's mainly true, anyway. We are taking care of the flat. Look how clean it is."

"Good girl. Right answer. Do I smell toast?"

Lula gestured to a plate with a half eaten crust.

"By the way, I like your dress. Is it new?"

She smiled, thinking this was his way of asking her to make toast for him. He was such a gentle and polite soul, considering his profession. "I found it in a bin last week. There were mountains of lovely clothes in it, all a perfect fit."

"I can see that." He grabbed her waist and began to tickle her. She shrieked with laughter, spraying crumbs and hitting him with the remains of her toast.

The next day dawned cool and dry, which suited Albert well. Extremes of weather were a nuisance when you did outdoor work. "Have a good day," he told Lula, grabbing his toolbox and donning a fluorescent jacket. He couldn't imagine that cleaning sticky-floored Soho clubs meant a good day for her, or anyone else for that matter, but it paid surprisingly well. Hush money, perhaps. Ask no questions about the mess, just tidy it away.

She watched him through the window, disappearing round the corner. The invisible man in his high-visibility waistcoat. Somewhere in the mansion block, a clock chimed; one, two, three, four, five, six. Just time to vacuum the flat before a seven o'clock start in Wardour Street; five hours to make the club look beautiful again, an hour of language teaching and then back for a bath. Lula hummed as she busied herself with a duster. They never lived anywhere for long, but at least they left properties in a better state than they found them.

Juby had spent a restless night, wondering what he had really seen in the afternoon. Maybe it was a ghost. He had to resolve this once and for all. He unlocked the office for the early receptionist and slipped away.

There was nobody in at the flat, or at least, no one answered the buzzer. Petal loved to stay in bed until midday, of course. His finger stabbed the button for over two minutes before he gave up. He tried to drive the dark fears in his mind away with espresso from the sleek silver machine in Miss Tetley's office. It was supposed to be for the directors only. She wouldn't know he'd used it; the lazy woman never arrived before nine o'clock.

There was plenty to do that morning: more aircon problems, sticking locks, light bulbs to change. At one o'clock precisely, exhausted, he took the lift to the top floor, mounted the stairs that led to the roof,

opened the padlocked door to his roof garden. It was an oasis of calm. There were workmen gutting the property next door; they had been drilling for hours behind its scaffolded façade. All was quiet now. Lunchtime. Still, Juby tutted, thinking he spotted shrinkage in the lead that lined the gully. He'd have to fix it soon, or water would drip into the offices beneath and Geoff would be asking why they paid that useless caretaker so much money for nothing. Walking past a line of potted box balls, Petal's bedraggled herbs a distant memory, he reached the sanctuary of his flat.

Lunch was, as usual, two rounds of toast: crusts cut off, and a perfect circle of baked beans on each one using a cookie cutter as a template. He was just finishing when he glanced out of the window, his eyes drawn to the block of flats opposite.

Petal was there again, two floors below, watering a window box.

Why was she still haunting him? He had to see her. For the first time, he left doors unlocked as he raced to the lift, willed it to deliver him quickly to the ground floor, buzzed at the entrance to the mansion flat.

"I say, what's our creepy caretaker up to now?" Colin Brown asked. The window opposite revealed a surprising tableau: Juby, wagging a finger at the beautiful blonde. Brown's amusement rapidly turned to horror as Juby produced a knife.

What was he to do? There was no way of getting to the flat in time to save a lady in distress. Anyway, Brown knew full well that Juby was ex-Army, fit as a fiddle and holding a weapon besides. Why would he listen to an overweight, middle-aged salesman?

Even Juby could be cowed by one person, though. Colin Brown's despair lifted. He dashed to June Tetley's office.

"June, my love, can you page Darren now, please? It's urgent."

"Can it wait? I'm typing a letter for Geoff."

"Just ring him now, my darling; I'll explain in a moment."

Juby was irritated. Petal's ghost was surprisingly solid, and vocal. Her yells were ear-splitting. He didn't really want to use the knife, had hoped the phantom would simply vanish.

He heard the phone. It had to be Miss Tetley again. He must answer it.

Taking advantage of his distraction, Lula fled to the bathroom, locking herself in.

Albert congratulated himself on climbing the scaffolding adjacent to the office block while the workmen were at lunch. He climbed over the retaining wall into Juby's garden. Lula had told him not to work close to home, but he took no notice. They would not stay in the flat much longer, he was sure. He had an instinct for such things. Here, too, was the proof that his intuition was right: a lead gully, several metres long. He had begun stripping the metal before he noticed Juby's open front door.

It was an invitation to explore the flat for riches, especially as the weather had improved and the sunbaked lead was becoming uncomfortably warm. Cautiously, Albert approached the door. He listened carefully for several minutes and heard nothing.

The first room, a kitchen, was warm and stuffy. Albert noticed a huge chest freezer in the corner. Whimsically, he wondered if it might contain ice cream. There were Magnum bars stacked neatly in the freezer, but that was not all, Albert realised. He quite lost his appetite.

Colin Brown, June Tetley, Juby, and indeed the police who had recently arrived at their offices, wondered who was screaming.

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