

## THE WINDOW

*A horror story.*

The violent gushes of wind came more frequently now. On them, like involuntary hitchhikers, rode brown and red and yellow leaves, dead and wrinkled in the pale autumn sun. And other leaves. The wind kept pushing a single newspaper page through lovely old Lavender Street. The headline of the feature article read “More people involved in unexplained happenings: One suicide.”

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Panting, Helen came storming into the living room, the right hand with the paper envelope victoriously raised as if she had returned from some urban hunting excursion.

“There they are, I finally got them!”

She threw her bag into one corner of the room and with a content sigh sat down on the couch next to Robert, her long-time boyfriend. Both were 28 years old and had just moved into the beautiful old house in Lavender Street. Robert reached for the remote control to turn off the TV, kissed her on the cheek and curiously looked at the envelope.

“And what might that be?”

“The first photographs of us in the new flat, stupid!” She smiled and gave him a little hug. “Come, let’s have a look...”

Quickly she opened the envelope with the Photo Wizard logo on it and pulled out the pictures.

“Oh look! There, all the huge boxes... sometimes I wonder how we managed to get everything here in one piece... and there, oh my god, you’re completely covered with paint... and there... and...”

It went on forever. Robert patiently watched, alternatingly the photos and his girlfriend ablaze with enthusiasm, from time to time pointing out some details he found especially interesting. When they were through with all of them, she started over again, cheeks reddened with joy. He tenderly kissed her on the mouth after every photo, just because he had fun hearing the rapid flow of words out of her mouth stop and start again. She barely seemed to notice, completely engrossed in the photos, but smiled every time his lips approached hers again. A little game lovers play. They were happy.

“Wait! Can I see the last photo again?” Robert had put his hand onto hers, stopping her from starting yet another round.

“Sure... why, honey? It’s just the house from the outside, don’t you remember, we went out that evening celebrating, and I thought I’d take a picture of our new house to show our friends...”

“Yes, but wait... Ah, there, I knew I had noticed something. Do you see that?”

“What?”

“Look at the windows!”

“I know they weren’t repainted yet back then, and I know you did a wonderful job, darling, well

except for that strange jungle green...”

“Not the paint”, he interrupted her, then pointed with his finger. “There.”

For the first time since she had come bursting into the living room, Helen went completely still and silent. She frowned, looked closer, mouth slowly widening with surprise.

“But that can’t be! And I don’t remember seeing it when I was taking the picture!”

“But it’s there.”

“Strange... I’m almost sure it wasn’t when I took it! The landlady said that we were the only ones in the house so far...”

“Apparently not.”

And there it was, the last photograph, clutched a bit too tightly in her slim, beautiful fingers having turned white. There was the front of the lovely old house, rather small and taken a bit from the distance back up Lavender Street, with its row of eight windows at the ground and first floor, respectively. The four windows to the left on the ground floor were theirs. On the right were the windows of the second of the three flats, which was supposed – and still was – empty. Yet, quite clearly upon closer looking, the last of the windows, nearest to the right corner of the house, was lit by a dim yellow light.

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The next day Helen phoned Mrs. Kenford, their elderly landlady. There were still shivers running down her spine when she thought about the photo, but she didn’t dare to mention it – didn’t want to seem like a panicky little girl. After having talked about the new sewer pump that was supposed to be installed next week, she casually asked when it was again that the other tenants would arrive.

“So far”, Mrs. Kenford replied, “I’ve only found a couple with three children for the big flat on the first floor, but they’re not sure, and there’s no one interested in the other apartment next to yours yet. Why? I hope you’re not feeling lonely? You shouldn’t be, love, with such a gorgeous bloke you’ve got for a boyfriend, and all the work you’ve put into the house...”

She went on and on, asking when they were going to marry, whether the flat would be big enough for them if they had at least four children and so on. She only listened with half an ear, then threw all pretence aside and asked Mrs. Kenford whether there had been any people inside the other flat since they had moved in.

“You know there haven’t, everything’s locked and secure, and the other two are quite a mess, mind you. I haven’t been in there for, I don’t know, two years at least, ever since my husband died, god have mercy on his soul.”

That telephone call definitely was not able to ease Helen’s mind. She checked the photo over and over again, but no matter how hard she looked – she even put to use the ugly magnifying glass she had gotten as a Christmas present from Robert’s mother – the strange yellow light was there, clearly coming from somewhere inside the outer right room of the supposedly deserted flat. Nothing else

could be made out, though. Just a blur of light. Helen felt her throat tightening. She always had been the timid and superstitious type, having tried to conceal it all her life. Back in school, as she recalled with some regret, mainly with arrogance. And this here was absolutely creepy. Especially when she moved the magnifying glass to the left, to the heart-shaped blob of white paint Robert had put there onto their bedroom window back when they were repainting the whole apartment. Something very strange seemed to be going on here, and so close to where they thought they were sleeping peacefully and securely.

For a few more days Helen kept bringing up the topic with Robert, but he had already dismissed it as some mistake during the printing of the pictures, and Helen didn't tell anyone else – what she feared most was that others would know how easily she was afraid. She decided to simply throw the picture away. Days passed, and after some time she seemed to have forgotten about the whole issue, especially after that wonderful day when Robert had proposed to her. They planned to marry soon, in early autumn, and she got very excited about the preparations.

About two weeks later, though, the forgotten incident caught up with her again. For some reason she had taken pictures in the flat again, and also one outside of the house. In high spirits about the wedding gift list, she carelessly flicked through the photos. Then her heart almost stopped. There it was again – a light in one window of the empty apartment. Only this time, it was behind the third, not in the outer right. Cold sweat formed on her forehead and back of her neck. Trembling, she ripped the photo apart, being unusually quiet for the rest of the day.

After that second photo, she couldn't forget anymore. At first, she planned to ignore it as well as she could, but finally curiosity won over fear, and this time she took a picture on purpose. Robert had just left, on an important business trip that would take two weeks. And there she sat, alone, in the brightly lit living room. Before opening the Photo Wizard envelope, she had already had several good sips of whisky to stop her hands shaking. When she finally held the new photo in her hands, for a moment she didn't even dare to look at it. And then she saw it. Another light. Now it was in the second window. Closer to their own. It was getting closer! And still they were the only ones in the house. She had checked with Mrs. Kenford weekly now. In a sudden rush of panic, she sprang up, ran to the telephone and tried to call Robert. But she couldn't reach him. She never had been so frightened in her whole life.

When Robert returned from his business trip one day early, he found the flat deserted. He had tried to reach Helen all day, but she hadn't been home. On the nighttable in the bedroom he found a half-empty bottle of whisky, a toppled glass and a photo of their house – with a light behind the first window to the left of the empty apartment, exactly beside their bedroom.