The Girl Behind the Lost Window

by Andy Thomas (May 2022)



Coffin Path (detail), Samuel Basset, 2019

Josh stood in the overgrown garden of the Victorian house which had recently become his home. A thick mat of green ivy covered the side and some of the rear of the building. He was watching Russell clear a dense thicket of brambles and weeds which had grown up around the house.

Russell turned and glanced at him. “Why don’t you help out?” he asked.

Born in the 1970s, Russell was fit for his age. His wiry grey hair was unkempt, but he wore what remained of it in a pony tail. He was wearing what he always wore—an old and tattered “Iron Maiden” T-shirt which had longed outlived its serviceable life. A relic of his youth, it was his favourite item of clothing and impossible to replace.

Josh was fascinated by the hand tool Russell was using—a hooked blade with a long handle. The blade was rusty but Russell had sharpened it so that its cutting edge had a metal glint. Josh didn’t know it was called a “brush axe”.

“I’m not sure what to do,” he answered eventually. Russell said nothing and continued working.

Josh was somewhere in his mid-twenties. Gillian, Russell’s wife, had found him living rough only a few months earlier. The couple had allowed him to sleep in the outhouse at the back of the old house. Although Josh didn’t talk much, the couple had become fond of him.

Unbeknownst to them, Josh had lived with his mother until she had died of untreated illness around six months earlier. He had remained alone with her body for sometime before being forced out in search of food. He had never known his father.

He had once worked briefly as a “social influencer” for a large virtual reality and gaming company. However, the population decline and rolling power cuts of recent years had seen the collapse of most commercial activity. The Internet still existed, but it wasn’t what it used to be. The Big Tech giants were no more, and it was hard for Josh to relate to the world as it was now.

“Why are you cutting all the weeds?” he asked Russell.

Russell looked at him in surprise. He hadn’t known Josh to ask many questions.

“We need to get to that wall to maintain the house,” he replied pointing. “All that ivy has to come off. Besides, things will look better when all this is cleared.”

It was a late July afternoon and Russell sweated heavily as he toiled to cut and tear out brambles with vines as thick as a man’s thumb. He wiped his brow, letting his gardening gloves soak up the sweat.

Josh sat down on the grass and continued to watch as he absent-mindedly took out his mobile phone and powered it on. The device showed the manufacturer’s corporate tag-line, “Making life better,” as it booted up. It was largely useless without 5G, but he couldn’t bear to be without it even now. He swiped and pawed at it for a few minutes before finally turning it off again to save the battery.

“But won’t it all just grow back again?” Josh asked, having pondered on things a little more in the last few minutes.

Another question, thought Russell. “Suppose,” he replied gruffly, “But you gotta keep things maintained.”

“Why?”

Russell, finding himself strangely irritated by the fact that he didn’t have an immediate answer to that one, stopped and looked up. His attention, however, was diverted by the sight of Gillian.

“Dinner is ready,” she called to them.

Russell, without a second thought, tossed the brush axe to the ground and headed after her. Josh remained sitting for a moment or two before following.

The interior of the house was dark despite the sun streaming

in through old-fashioned heavy-set curtains. Gillian had, over the years, painted the inside of their home in black and various concoctions of dark colours. A heavy chandelier, which she had found and carried home some years ago, hung over an old wooden dining table. The chandelier itself was a modern reproduction with fittings for electric lights. Each fitting, however, held a beeswax candle now rather than a light bulb. In the evening, the couple occasionally lit the candles and the wax would drip down onto the table.

Bizarrely, a coffin stood vertically against the wall. It was empty and served only as decorative furniture, but it was the kind of thing Gillian collected.

In olden times, Gillian was known as a *Goth* but was now seen only as a witch by the people in the village. She wore, as she always did, a long black dress from a bygone age. Her hair, which she dyed black whenever she could obtain hair-dye from the village, reached just short of her shoulders. Grey roots hinted at her age, however.

She brewed elderflower and beetroot wine which she exchanged for necessities with the locals. It was her skill as a seamstress, however, that was in most demand. Recent years had seen frequent and prolonged power cuts, and her peddle-powered sewing machine had proved invaluable.

“Sit down,” Gillian said, as Josh walked in. Russell was already seated.

Dinner was a rabbit which Russell had trapped and killed that morning. The couple also grew their own vegetables, some of which were on the table.

“Now Josh,” Gillian spoke as they began eating, “We need to have a discussion about you staying on here.”

Josh looked up but said nothing.

“If you’re going to stay, you need to start contributing.”

“’Bout time,” Russell said through a mouthful of food.

“There’s a lot of work to be done in the allotment before winter. We have a greenhouse which needs assembling. Do you think you could help with that?”

Josh was good at computer games. He didn’t know anything about allotments and greenhouses. He looked at her uncomprehendingly and remained silent.

Before Gillian could think of what to say next, the conversation was interrupted by a loud knocking sound emanating from the old wood panelled wall directly behind where Josh was seated.

There were three knocks in quick succession: *knock, knock, knock!* It gave him a start and he almost jumped out of his chair.

Gillian and Russell exchanged glances.

Josh had thought they were the only ones in the house the whole time. He hadn’t imagined that there might be someone else. He glanced back over his shoulder at the panelled wall.

The three knocks came a second time: *knock, knock, knock!*

“That’s just Prudence,” Gillian said finally after a long pause to ensure that they had ceased. “Nothing to worry about.”

Josh didn’t reply, so she added, “She’s the girl who used to lodge with us before Covid.”

Josh instinctively turned around to look at the wall again, and then back to Gillian.

“She’s still here?” he asked finally, unsure of what she had meant.

“Well, you see, she took to her room during Lockdown and just never came out. She used to knock on the wall when she wanted food. She still does sometimes.”

“Stupid girl got herself walled-in when we built the larder,” Russell added unhelpfully.

Josh’s face showed confusion.

“Oh Josh,” Gillian said, reaching over and taking his hand. “Don’t look so shocked. It’s what she wanted.”

“I’m thinking about all that ivy on the side wall,” said Russell, changing the subject. “It’s been on there too long and could bring the wall down if we’re not careful. There’s going to be a lot of re-pointing to be done.”

“There,” said Gillian to Josh, “You can help with that, can’t you? Russell will show what to do.”

Josh nodded.

“The electricity should be on from eight o’clock. You can charge your phone for a bit if you like.”

Josh nodded again and smiled faintly.

“Would you like an apple?” she asked him.

Later that evening, Russell began burning the garden waste he had accumulated that day. Gillian brought out a couple big logs from the house to burn as well, as sitting beside the fire was something that they liked to do.

The three of them shared a bottle of elderflower wine. Gillian and her husband talked about the jobs to be done over the next few days, while Josh sat quietly with his glass, starring into the flames.

As the fire finally began to die, the couple said goodnight and retired to the house, leaving Josh alone. It was a long

summer evening and he lay back on the grass, savouring the warm air. A full moon hung low on the horizon against the twilight-blue sky.

He was thinking about something Gillian had once said to him about the house when, without intending to, he drifted off and fell into a fitful dream.

In his dream, he was standing in the garden. It was night and the full moon, now high in the sky, bathed the garden in a soft white light. He looked up to see it illuminate a cloud moving across its face.

He became aware that Gillian was standing beside him, pointing to the house.

“You know Josh,” she said, “The house is old. But its new parts are at least as old, if not older.”

Josh turned toward the house and began walking across the patch of land that Russell had cleared earlier that day. As he reached the ivy wall, he knew somehow that behind it lay the room which belonged to Prudence.

In his dream, he plunged his hands into the sea of vegetation. He worked he way around to the side of the house, feeling under the ivy as he went.

Then he found it. Under his hand, behind the ivy, was the feel of a flat glass pane.

He pulled at the growth and it started to come away. He could see the window frame now. It was a little rotten but still intact. It was dark inside the room, but the moon illuminated a spider’s web on the inside of the glass.

Pushing aside the vegetation, he put his face to the window and tried to peer into the darkness. It was too dark to make anything out, but then he remembered that his phone had a torch light on it.

He grasped for it in his pocket, swiped at the screen and found the “torch app”.

Shining the phone into the window, he put his face up against the glass again. This time he could make out an old table and chair. It looked dusty in there. He shone the light around and could see a picture on the wall. He couldn’t quite make it out, but he thought he could see a five-pointed white star.

There was a flash as the light from his torch reflected off what appeared to be a mirror on the far wall.

Suddenly, inches from the glass, appeared the ghost white face of a girl. Her face was lit directly by the bright LED of his phone. She glared at him briefly before hastily clutching at the curtains and snatching them closed.

Josh jumped back.

Back in the garden, he woke from his sleep with a start, almost shouting.

In that final moment of his dream, he had seen that the girl was wearing a blue face-mask over her mouth and nose. Her long blonde hair was horribly tangled and matted through neglect. Her eyes were dark and empty.

He sat upright and looked about in a state somewhere between waking and sleep.

He had no idea what time it was, but it was dark now and the moon was high in the night sky, just as he had dreamt. He looked across the garden toward the house.

Was this still part of the dream, he wondered? He wasn’t certain.

Still sleepy, he got up from where was and trudged to the outhouse which had become his. Once inside, he fell into his bed and slipped back into unconsciousness.

He awoke with the sunrise, as was usual for him in recent times.

Russell and Gillian were already awake and he could hear their voices in the garden. He could hear that Gillian was doing something with the beehives that she kept in their garden. He knew that she collected the honey and made candles.

He got out of bed and watched Russell begin work from his window. His dream of the window came back to him, and he wondered whether Russell was going to find it that day.

“So you’re awake then?” Russell asked, as he emerged into the morning sun.

Josh didn’t reply but just watched as Russell worked to cut through the thick vine roots at the foot of the wall.

Suddenly, Russell commanded out loud, “Here, grab this and pull!”

Josh, to Russell’s surprise, immediately complied and took hold of the thick mat of growth at which he was pointing. He pulled hard as Russell took a spade and drove it between the ivy and the wall—a huge swathe of the stuff came away as he pulled.

“We’ll need some ladders to get at the stuff higher up,” he said, wondering about Josh’s new found enthusiasm. “But let’s just keep going for now.”

With Russell using the spade to separate the ivy from the wall and Josh pulling the vines free, the pair worked their way along the rear and to the side of the house. In some places, lumps of cement came away with the vegetation.

“Was expecting that,” Russell said, noting the damage to the wall. “It’s got its roots between the bricks.”

For a moment, Josh thought that they had found the window in

his dream when they uncovered a small narrow one. This turned out to be a window to the larder, however, and not the one in his dream.

In Josh, there had always been numbness where feelings should have been and he was, therefore, a little disconnected when it came to prospect of finding the window. The image of Prudence with the face-mask, however, had brought back long-lost memories of his mother wearing one from his childhood. He discovered, now, that he didn't like the feelings which came with the memories.

Their work was interrupted when Gillian joined them later that morning.

"How's it going?" she asked, holding a tray with several glasses containing a cloudy yellow liquid.

"Oh, not bad," said Russell, reaching for one. He drank down the contents in a single swig.

"Would you like some lemonade Josh?" she asked, turning to him.

Josh took a glass and nodded thanks.

"We shouldn't have waited so long to do this," Russell said, "It's got its roots into the brickwork now."

Josh quietly finished his drink. As the couple talked, he turned back to the wall and took hold of some thick roots. He began tugging at them with determination without waiting for Russell.

Here, the vines had buried themselves deep into the wall, loosening the brickwork and so, instead of coming away from the wall, the wall came falling toward him. Rubble came crashing toward as a part of the side wall collapsed. There was the sound of breaking glass as the remains of a window frame came out too.

Josh fell backward, still holding the vines at which he was pulling. Russell and Gillian jumped back with alacrity.

“Oh, for the love of God!” she cried, dropping the tray she was holding to the ground.

When the calamity had subsided, the three of them found themselves staring blankly into the dark void which had suddenly materialised in the side of the house. Fortunately, only part of the wall had fallen and the structure remained intact. Loose green vines now hung down in front of a gaping hole where once had been a window.

“Well, that’s gone and done it!” said Russell, matter of factly.

“We don’t want this entire wall coming down,” Gillian added with no small measure of concern.

“I’ll get something to prop things up,” Russell replied. “We’ll need to rebuild this wall now.”

As he trudged off to the shed at the other side of the garden, he muttered to himself: “Knew this would bloody-well happen.”

Once he had disappeared, Josh and Gillian stepped closer to the gaping hole to peer into black interior of the house.

“Is this Prudence’s room?” Josh asked.

“Yes,” she replied simply.

Josh took another few steps forward. It was dark inside. He was waiting for his eyes to adjust when he heard Gillian sobbing quietly behind him.

He turned back to look at her.

“Poor Prudence,” she said, tears now streaming down her cheeks. “She was so afraid. She blocked up the vents and shoved her wardrobe up against the door. She wouldn’t come out

and would only take food through the window.”

She continued crying softly for a few minutes. “Nobody knew what was happening and they told us people were dying. In the end, we just accepted things. And then one day, she just stopped taking the food.”

Finally, regaining her composure, she concluded: “I never cried over her at the time. I just couldn’t feel anything before now. Those were such terrible times.”

Josh turned back toward the house and pushed aside the hanging vines as he climbed over the rubble to get inside.

“Careful,” Gillian said to him gently.

“I can see her,” he said a few moments later from inside the room.

Inside, the sun streamed through the gaping hole; its rays illuminating dust that was circulating in the air after the collapse. Gillian followed him some way in, making her way on all fours over the rubble. Her long black dress did not seem to hinder her.

Josh could see the picture on the wall that he had glimpsed in his dream. It wasn’t a picture as such, but rather a rock music poster from another time. It did depict a five-pointed star, and above it were the words: “Sisters of Mercy.” Josh wasn’t sure what that meant, and thought it might have something to do with religion.

“What can you see Josh?” Gillian called in.

Prudence’s dessicated remains lay at his feet. Her last act was to curl herself up into a foetal position on the floor. A matted tangle of blonde hair buried her head and shoulders. Clumps of hair lay all around her, as if she had torn them out.

“She’s here,” he called back, looking down at her.

“At least she *stayed safe*,” Gillian replied, without the slightest hint of irony.

A few moments passed, and Josh could hear that Russell had returned from the shed.

“Come out now Joshie,” Gillian called, “We don’t want to lose you in there as well.”

Josh remained unmoving, looking down at Prudence. Gillian remained at the entrance also, awkwardly positioned on all fours atop of the fallen rubble, her white trainers showing under the mountain of black material that was her dress.

“Are we going to leave her?” Josh asked finally.

“I think it’s time that Prudence came out into the light,” Gillian replied. Then, turning to look at Russell over her shoulder, “Don’t you think so?” she asked him.

Russell nodded. After a moment, he said: “Suppose we have a use for that coffin of yours now.”

“Yes,” she replied, “I think we’ll put her under the apple tree.”

* * *

This is a work of fiction, nevertheless, names have been changed to disguise the identity of some of the characters. Gillian is happy with her depiction, although was slightly irked that her character had white trainers. She did, however, admit to once owning a pair in real life. We do, indeed, know of a woman who sealed up the vents and used a wardrobe to barricade herself in during Lockdown, but we don’t know what became of her. Finally, my mother used to tell a story from her childhood of an elderly relative who was bed bound and lived in their parlour. When she wanted something, the woman

would ring a bell (rather than knock) for attention. After she died, the bell continued to ring occasionally.

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Andy Thomas is a programmer, software author and writer in the north of England. He is interested in the philosophical implications of science, the nature of nature, and the things in life which hold ‘value’. You can find him on substack: https://kuiperzone.substack.com.

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