

Beryl Langley Sees All

by

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Welcome to

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Beryl Langley Sees All

Beryl Langley sees all the goings on in Mercer Close from usually one of two places, either from behind the pristine white net curtains of her immaculate living room, that only she frequents, or from behind the low brick wall of her front garden that borders the path as it curves in front of the properties at the end of the close. Beryl's garden is as neat as the inside of her house with the flowers in tidy groups against the weed free soil.

Beryl was witness to George from number 33 being thrown out of the house after his wife found out that he had been meeting up with a secretary from work. She had seen him scrabbling to pick up his clothes from the front lawn as his wife was hurling them from an upstairs window. To be fair most of the close would have looked to see what was going on as there was a lot of shouting and screaming. His return two weeks later was a much quieter affair and Beryl was not sure than many of the neighbours, apart from her, would have noticed.

Beryl observes the numerous empty wine bottles in the recycling box outside number 40, where a middle-aged woman lives by herself – too many bottles for one person in Beryl's opinion, and the teenage girl who sneaks out of the house after her parents have gone to bed to meet up with a lad who is waiting for her by the lamppost at the entrance to the close.

Beryl's world has shrunk. Apart from the house and the garden, the only place that Beryl visits regularly is the florist on the high street just around the corner, where she works part- time, in the back room, making up the orders.

Beryl has spent much of her life trying not to be noticed. She read once that once a woman reaches the age of 50 she becomes invisible. At the age of 52, this suited Beryl just fine. She was content with her routine. No drama, just the comfort of predictability and calm. The turmoil of other people's lives viewed from a distance.

It was on a chilly Tuesday afternoon in February that Beryl noticed new

people moving in to one of the upstairs maisonettes. A young woman in her early twenties, Beryl thought, with a toddler of about 15 months, just walking but not yet steady on their feet. There was also a man. Something about the way he looked at the woman, leaving her to struggle with bags and the toddler up the steps made Beryl feel uneasy and stirred up memories that she had tried to bury a long time ago. Beryl turned briskly away from window and busied herself with sorting out her laundry, she did not want to think about the memories that were stirring, she needed some distraction. She turned the radio on and listened to Radio 4. She did not want to be alone with her thoughts.

The rest of the week passed by uneventfully and Beryl's equilibrium returned. Her hours at "Florals by Shelley" were mostly taken up with preparing flowers for Valentine's Day and printing whatever message the sender wanted to be included in her neatest writing on the small card that would be attached to the front of the bouquet.

The following week when things were quieter at the florist, Shelley let Beryl leave a little early "You've earned a bit of downtime after all the craziness last week" she said, "Go home early – do something nice for yourself".

Beryl felt almost lightheaded at this unexpected kindness from Shelley and decided that she would take a detour on her way home and walk through the park. The spring bulbs would be starting to put on quite a show and the sight of them as they pushed their way up through the ground always lifted her spirits.

As Beryl wandered through the park, enjoying the warm sun on her back she wondered why she didn't do this sort of thing more often. The sound of a child's laughter drifted into her consciousness, and she glanced over to the direction of the noise and saw the young mother and her daughter who had moved into the maisonette. The child giggled with delight as her parent pushed her on the swing. Beryl smiled to herself, it was so nice to see them having fun, like they didn't have a care in the world.

That evening as Beryl was drawing her living room curtains something caught her eye. From where she stood, she could see straight into the kitchen window of the maisonette. She saw the silhouette of the young woman holding the child to her chest and raising one arm to protect herself from the blows that the other figure in the scene was raining down on her.

Beryl felt sick, she drew the curtains together to shut out what she had just seen and ran to the kitchen where she stood holding on to the rim of the sink as she retched. "Take some deep breaths Beryl" she said to herself, but it was if

she was back in that familiar scenario, her heart pounding so fast that it felt like her ears were going to burst and the tears started to flow.

Beryl tried to protect herself from Frank's punches. He'd come home drunk from the pub again. Her daughter was crying. Today Frank didn't think that the house was clean enough and she was being punished for that but it could have been that he didn't like what she had prepared for dinner, or he didn't think her clothes were suitable, but it was always her fault for making him angry. Beryl wanted to leave him but was so afraid. He had threatened to kill her and their daughter if she ever did and she believed he would.

Frank died 10 years ago; he had been run over on his way home from the pub. Too drunk to notice that there was a car approaching as he stepped in to the road. For Beryl it had been a relief, a way out from the situation that she would never have been able to take if fate hadn't intervened. She had moved to the other side of town, away from the memories, to start again. Her daughter was living in Manchester where she'd gone to university, starting a new life. Yet here Beryl was, all these years later still allowing his brutality to impact her life.

Beryl spoke to herself -firmly – “Beryl Langley stop feeling sorry for yourself, you're safe now. He could have killed you, but he didn't, yet you're carrying on as if he's still here, hiding, skulking about, living half a life, yet that poor girl is going through it now –get your act together”

Beryl wasn't sure what she could do, she thought back to what might have helped her when she was going through it, how lonely it had been and how much she could have done with a friend.

Beryl slept fitfully that night but woke the next morning with the beginnings of a plan.

She was due to be working at Florals by Shelley from eleven until two thirty in the afternoon and her day started much the same as it had done for the last few years. A quick shower followed by her habitual breakfast of one piece of toast with some orange marmalade and a mug of Yorkshire tea. Then she changed out of her dressing gown and into her clothes, just a simple crew neck jumper in beige and some brown trousers. When she got to Shelley's she would pop her green tabard over the top and get to work. This morning however, unlike most mornings, Beryl looked at herself in the mirror. What she saw was a shadow of the person she once was – a faded image , like a statue that had been

worn by time and the features were starting to look a little indistinct.

Beryl reached forward, took an old lipstick off the dressing table and applied the lightest covering to her lips. She then took a scarf her daughter had brought her one birthday ,adorned with flowers in the palest pinks and greens and tied it around her neck. She looked back at her reflection and the person she saw seemed just a little more alive.

On the walk to work Beryl held her head just the tiniest bit higher and met the gaze of some of the people she passed, giving a nod of acknowledgement if they greeted her with a good morning.

On her journey Beryl decided that she would walk home through the park again after work and if the woman and her child were there at the swings she'd go over and say hello.

Today was going to be a good day.
