

The Window Across the Alley

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The Barrymore Building had been grand once, back when streetcars rattled past its limestone façade and ladies with parasols strolled beneath its corniced awnings. Now it stood as a dignified relic amid the city's more ambitious architecture, its narrow alley creating a perfect channel for wind and whispers between it and the nearly identical Preston Arms across the way.

Hannah Miller had chosen her third-floor apartment for three reasons: the rent was manageable on a librarian's salary, the bay window provided excellent natural light for her collection of temperamental houseplants, and—though she wouldn't have admitted this to the rental agent—the fire escape landing offered a perfect vantage point for an evening glass of wine and unobstructed people-watching.

What began as casual observation had, over six months, evolved into something more structured. By nine each evening, Hannah would settle into her window seat with a book she rarely opened and a glass of whatever red was on sale at the corner market. Her gaze inevitably drifted to the window directly across the alley, where apartment 3F of the Preston Arms revealed its occupant with clockwork predictability.

The man—she had privately named him Edgar, after Poe, whose complete works she'd spotted on his bookshelf—maintained a routine so precise Hannah sometimes checked her watch against his movements. At 9:15, he claimed his own window seat with a leather-bound journal, writing steadily for exactly forty minutes. At 9:55, he prepared a cup of tea in the kitchenette visible from her angle. At 10:30, he dimmed his lights and vanished into the part of his apartment her viewpoint couldn't access.

Hannah told herself her interest was anthropological. After all, cataloging and organizing information was her professional skill. But there was something compelling about Edgar that transcended mere curiosity—perhaps the careful precision of his movements, or the fact that, unlike her, he never seemed to look out his window at all.

Tonight, Hannah's ritual began like any other. Tuesday, which meant the Malbec from Chile and the blue cardigan with the moth hole near the left cuff. She curled into her window seat, adjusted the small cushion behind her lower back, and looked across the alley.

Edgar's apartment was dark.

She checked her watch—9:18. He was always at his window by 9:15, no exceptions, not even on weekends or holidays. Hannah frowned, sipping her wine as she considered reasonable explanations. Working late. Dinner with friends. Food poisoning. A date.

The last possibility created an unexpected twinge of displeasure that she immediately dismissed as ridiculous. She didn't know this man. Had never spoken to him. Had constructed whole personality traits from nothing more substantial than observing his reading habits and the methodical way he watered his single houseplant each Sunday.

By 10:30, with Edgar's apartment still dark, Hannah abandoned her vigil. Perhaps tomorrow would restore the pleasant predictability of their non-relationship.

But Edgar's window remained dark the next evening. And the next.

On the fourth night, Hannah did something she'd never done before. She set down her wine glass, pulled on a light jacket, and left her apartment. She didn't allow herself to analyze her actions as she descended the stairs, crossed the street, and approached the Preston Arms.

The building's security was a joke—the outer door latch had been broken for as long as she'd lived across the alley. The lobby mirrored her own building's faded elegance: mailboxes with tarnished brass numbers, an ornate but non-functional fountain, dim lighting that cast more shadows than illumination.

Hannah hesitated at the elevator, suddenly aware of how bizarre her behavior would seem to an observer. What exactly was she planning to do? Knock on a stranger's door and demand to know why he'd disrupted her evening routine? Admit she'd been watching him for months?

Her momentary clarity was interrupted by an elderly woman emerging from the elevator, a small dog tucked under one arm.

"Are you looking for someone, dear?" the woman asked, her tone friendly but evaluating.

Hannah made a split-second decision. "Yes, actually. The gentleman in 3F. I have a... book he lent me that I've been meaning to return."

The woman's penciled eyebrows drew together in a puzzled frown. "3F? There's no one in 3F. It's been vacant since I moved in two years ago."

Hannah felt a chill that had nothing to do with the building's inadequate heating. "That's impossible. I've seen—" She stopped herself. "I must have the wrong building. Sorry to bother you."

She retreated quickly, the woman's curious gaze following her out the door. Back on the sidewalk, Hannah looked up at the windows of the Preston Arms, counting from the corner to identify 3F. There it was—the same window she'd been observing for months. Lights off, as it had been for four days now.

But vacant for two years? Impossible.

Hannah slept poorly that night, troubled by dreams in which she sat at her window and watched herself sitting at another window, the observer and the observed in an infinite regression.

Morning brought no clarity. At work, she found herself distracted, shelving novels in the biography section and snapping at a regular patron who asked about new arrivals. By closing time, she had convinced herself that the old woman was confused, or perhaps protective of a reclusive neighbor.

There was an obvious solution, Hannah realized as she walked home. She would ask her own building manager about the apartment across the way. Mrs. Perlman had managed both buildings for decades, according to the long-time residents, and knew every squeaky floorboard and faulty radiator in each.

Hannah found her in the basement laundry room, occupied with what appeared to be a decades-long battle against a leaking washing machine.

"Mrs. Perlman? Could I ask you something?"

The older woman straightened with a grimace, one hand pressed to her lower back. "If it's about the hot water pressure, I've already called the plumber. Again."

"No, it's about the Preston Arms. The apartment directly across from mine—3F, I think. Do you know who lives there?"

Mrs. Perlman's expression shifted from harried to thoughtful. "Preston 3F? That's been empty for ages. They had some kind of water damage a few years back. Owner's been in litigation with the insurance company ever since."

Hannah felt that same chill again, stronger now. "You're certain? No one's living there currently?"

"Not unless they're squatting. Why do you ask?"

"Just curious. It's directly in my sightline, and I thought I'd seen lights recently."

Mrs. Perlman squinted at her curiously. "Lights? When?"

"Every night. For months. A man living alone. He sits by his window and writes in a journal at exactly 9:15."

Mrs. Perlman's expression changed from curious to concerned. "Hannah, are you feeling all right? That apartment's been empty since before you moved in."

"But I've seen him," Hannah insisted, her voice rising. "He waters his plant on Sundays. He has a collection of Poe on his bookshelf. He wears the same three sweaters in rotation."

Mrs. Perlman laid a weathered hand on Hannah's arm. "Maybe you're mixing up the windows, dear. The buildings have similar layouts, but they're not identical. Easy to get confused about which apartment is which from across the way."

Hannah pulled away. "I'm not confused. I know what I've seen."

Mrs. Perlman sighed. "If you say so. But no one's been in 3F for years. That's a fact."

Hannah climbed the three flights to her apartment slowly, trying to make sense of the contradiction. She had been watching Edgar for months. Had cataloged his habits, noted the changing seasons through the plants on his windowsill, observed the three different sweaters he rotated during cold weather.

Had she imagined a whole person?

The question felt absurd, but the evidence was troubling. She unlocked her door, feeling suddenly exposed in a way that had nothing to do with the apartment's minimal security measures.

Out of habit, she glanced toward the window across the alley.

The lights were on in 3F.

Relief washed over her, followed immediately by confusion. She moved closer to her window, squinting against the evening glare on the glass. Yes—lights definitely on, but no sign of Edgar. The apartment looked... different. The arrangement of furniture had changed. The tall bookcase that had stood to the left of the window was gone, replaced by what appeared to be a drafting table.

Had she been looking at the wrong window all this time? No—impossible. She knew exactly which window was Edgar's. She had watched that specific window, that specific man, for months.

Hannah pressed her palms against her temples, suddenly doubting her own memory. Had she been so desperate for connection that she'd constructed an entire person from glimpses of different apartments? From fragments of passing figures combined into one coherent character?

No. Edgar was real. She had seen him clearly—his meticulously trimmed beard, the way he pushed his glasses up with his knuckle rather than his fingertip, how he mouthed words silently as he wrote.

These weren't inventions. They couldn't be.

Hannah watched for nearly an hour, but no one appeared. Eventually, the light clicked off, as if on a timer.

Sleep eluded her again that night. She lay awake, parsing possibilities, each less plausible than the last. A subletter. A housesitter. A burglar with extraordinary patience and a fondness for interior decoration.

Or perhaps the more disturbing possibility—that something was wrong with her perception of reality itself.

The following day was Saturday. Hannah canceled her usual morning yoga class and instead positioned herself at her window with a cup of coffee, determined to maintain surveillance on the apartment across the way. The Preston Arms remained quiet throughout the morning, most of its windows curtained against the weekend light.

At precisely 11:17, the lights in 3F came on again. This time, Hannah was ready with her father's old birdwatching binoculars—a boundary she had never before crossed in her observations. The drafting table was there, along with a new floor lamp she didn't recognize. The wall color seemed different too, a soft gray rather than the warm beige she remembered from Edgar's tenancy.

Movement caught her attention—someone entering the apartment. Not Edgar, but a woman with cropped dark hair, carrying what appeared to be a garment bag. She disappeared from view, then returned to the window area and did something Hannah found extraordinary.

She looked directly at Hannah's window, raised her hand, and waved.

Hannah dropped the binoculars, her heart hammering. There was no way the woman could see her—Hannah always kept her own apartment relatively dim during her observation sessions, creating the perfect one-way viewing scenario. Yet the woman's gesture had been deliberate, targeted.

As if she knew she was being watched.

Hannah retreated deeper into her apartment, unsettled in a way she couldn't articulate. She busied herself with mundane tasks—laundry, dusting bookshelves, reorganizing her spice rack in alphabetical order rather than her usual arrangement by frequency of use. Anything to avoid returning to the window.

But as evening approached, the compulsion grew stronger. By 9:00, she found herself drawn back to her usual perch, this time without wine or pretense of reading. The apartment across the way was dark again, but Hannah maintained her vigil, pulse quickening whenever a pedestrian entered the Preston Arms.

At 9:46, movement flickered at the edge of her vision. Not in the window across the alley, but reflected in her own glass—a shadow shifting behind her in the apartment.

Hannah spun around. Nothing. Just her familiar furniture, the half-empty mug of tea on the coffee table, the stack of library books she'd brought home to review for next month's display.

Yet the prickling sensation at the base of her neck remained.

"This is ridiculous," she muttered aloud, her voice unnaturally loud in the quiet apartment. "You're scaring yourself over nothing."

She rose, intending to turn on every light and banish the creeping dread with bright rationality. As she reached for the nearest lamp, the lights in apartment 3F blazed on across the alley.

The woman with the dark hair stood at her window, staring directly at Hannah's apartment. And she was holding binoculars.

Hannah froze, exposed in her own window like an animal caught in headlights. The woman slowly lowered the binoculars, her expression unreadable at this distance. Then she deliberately raised her hand and beckoned—a clear invitation for Hannah to come over.

For a wild moment, Hannah considered it. Cross the street, enter the building, knock on 3F, and demand explanations. Who are you? What happened to Edgar? Why are you watching me?

Instead, she stepped back from the window and closed her curtains—something she had not done at night since moving in. The fabric barrier felt flimsy, insufficient protection against the scrutiny from across the alley.

Hannah slept on her couch that night, away from her bedroom windows that faced the same direction. She dreamt of glass walls, of watching and being watched, of Edgar writing endlessly in his journal while slowly transforming into the dark-haired woman who wrote down every move Hannah made.

Sunday dawned gray and drizzling. Hannah called in sick for her Monday shift and booked a last-minute train ticket to visit her sister in the suburbs. She needed distance, perspective. Maybe even a psychiatric referral, though she wasn't ready to admit that possibility aloud.

As she packed an overnight bag, a knock at her door startled her so badly she dropped her toiletry case, sending bottles rolling under the bed.

No one ever visited without buzzing from the lobby first.

Hannah approached her door cautiously, suddenly aware of how vulnerable she felt in her own home. "Who is it?" she called, trying to keep her voice steady.

"Delivery for Hannah Miller," came the reply—a woman's voice, crisp and professional.

Hannah hesitated, then engaged the security chain before opening the door a few inches.

There was no delivery person in the hallway. Only a manila envelope on the floor, her name written in an elegant script she didn't recognize.

With trembling fingers, Hannah retrieved the envelope and locked her door. Inside was a single sheet of paper and what appeared to be a journal—leather-bound, worn at the corners, distressingly familiar.

Edgar's journal.

The note read simply: He wanted you to have this. Third floor, Preston Arms, apartment 3E. Come when you're ready.

Hannah stared at the journal, afraid to open it yet unable to set it aside. 3E—not 3F. The apartment next to the one she'd been watching.

Before she could reconsider, Hannah grabbed her keys and crossed the street. The broken outer door of the Preston Arms admitted her as easily as before. This time, she took the stairs, needing the physical exertion to steady her nerves.

On the third floor, she hesitated. Apartment 3E was to the left of 3F, sharing the same view of her building. She had never paid attention to it, her focus always drawn to Edgar's window.

Hannah knocked before she could lose her courage.

The door opened to reveal the dark-haired woman she'd seen through the window. Up close, Hannah could see she was perhaps a decade older, with sharp cheekbones and eyes that evaluated Hannah with unsettling directness.

"You came sooner than I expected," the woman said. "I'm Dr. Eliza Carver. Please, come in."

Hannah found herself following the woman into an apartment that served as both living space and what appeared to be a home office, with filing cabinets and a desk covered in stacked documents.

"You're probably confused," Dr. Carver said, gesturing for Hannah to sit. "I apologize for the unorthodox approach, but he insisted on certain... parameters."

"You know Edgar?" Hannah managed, clutching the journal she still carried. "Where is he? And why did you leave this at my door?"

Dr. Carver tilted her head slightly. "Edgar? Interesting. Is that what you called him?"

Hannah felt a flush creep up her neck. "I... I never knew his real name."

"That's fitting, actually. He was rather fond of Poe. Had a complete collection." Dr. Carver's expression softened. "His name was Daniel. Daniel Thorne."

Daniel Thorne. The name struck a chord in Hannah's memory, though she couldn't immediately place it.

"I'm a psychiatrist," Dr. Carver continued. "Daniel was my patient for nearly seven years. He suffered from severe social anxiety and agoraphobia, among other challenges."

"Was?" The past tense registered like a physical blow.

"Last week, Daniel took his own life," Dr. Carver said gently. "He left specific instructions regarding his possessions and affairs. The journal was to go to you—his 'window friend,' as he called you."

Hannah felt dizzy, the room tilting slightly. "I never even spoke to him."

"But you watched him. Every evening." There was no accusation in Dr. Carver's tone. "And he was aware of it. Found comfort in it, actually."

"That's... disturbing," Hannah whispered, though she wasn't sure which side of the equation disturbed her more.

"Is it? You created a ritual around observing him. He created a performance knowing you were watching." Dr. Carver's expression softened. "His writing sessions at the window began after he noticed you. Those were the only forty minutes each day when he didn't feel cripplingly alone."

Hannah looked down at the journal in her hands. "Why are you telling me this?"

"Because Daniel asked me to. And because I'm concerned that his death has affected you more deeply than might be expected for someone you never met." The psychiatrist leaned forward slightly. "The apartment manager mentioned you'd been asking about 3F. That's been vacant for some time. Daniel lived in 3B—the window that would appear to be 3F from your vantage point."

Hannah's mind reeled. She had been watching the wrong window all this time? But that was impossible—she had seen Edgar—no, Daniel—clearly, had noted details of his apartment...

"I don't understand," Hannah said, her voice small.

"Perspective can be deceptive, especially across distances," Dr. Carver said. "And our minds fill in gaps with what we expect to see. When you knocked on my door just now, did you notice the apartment number?"

"3E," Hannah said automatically.

"Look again on your way out," Dr. Carver suggested. "This is 3B. Daniel's apartment is through there." She gestured to a door that presumably led to an adjoining room. "I've been clearing out his belongings. The light you saw in what you thought was his apartment was actually the vacant unit being shown to potential renters."

Hannah felt sick. Had she misremembered everything? Confused the windows, manufactured a relationship with a man who hadn't even lived where she thought he did?

"Did Daniel really exist?" Hannah asked suddenly, the question escaping before she could stop it.

Dr. Carver's eyebrows rose. "What do you mean?"

"Everyone tells me that apartment has been empty for years. The old woman with the dog, Mrs. Perlman... they both insisted no one lived in the apartment I've been watching. And now you're telling me I was looking at the wrong window entirely?"

Dr. Carver studied her closely. "Hannah, are you feeling all right?"

"No, I'm not," Hannah admitted. "I feel like I'm losing my mind. Like maybe I invented a whole person because I was lonely, and now everyone is playing along with some revised version of my delusion."

"Daniel was very real," Dr. Carver said firmly. "Why don't we start with something concrete?" She reached for the journal Hannah still clutched. "May I?"

Hannah reluctantly released it. Dr. Carver opened to a page near the beginning and held it up. The handwriting was precise, methodical—exactly as Hannah would have expected from the man she'd observed.

"This is Daniel's handwriting," Dr. Carver said. "Unmistakable. He was meticulous about his journaling. Said it helped him process his thoughts when verbal communication became too overwhelming."

Hannah peered at the page, her heart rate slowing slightly at this tangible evidence. "But the apartment..."

"The confusion about which apartment Daniel lived in is understandable. The buildings aren't perfectly aligned, and the angle from your window creates an optical illusion." Dr. Carver closed the journal and returned it to Hannah. "Perhaps seeing his actual apartment would help?"

Hannah nodded mutely, following Dr. Carver through the door she'd indicated earlier. The room beyond was clearly a bedroom, with a window that Hannah suddenly realized would indeed align with her apartment from the exterior.

The space was partially packed up—boxes stacked against one wall, empty hangers in the open closet. But the window seat was still there, with a small side table that would have held Daniel's tea. And on the bookshelf against the wall, a complete collection of leather-bound Poe volumes.

"This is where he sat each night," Dr. Carver said quietly. "Where he could see you watching."

Hannah moved to the window, looking across the alley to her own apartment. The angle was perfect—her bay window clearly visible, the window seat where she spent her evenings on full display.

"The journal will explain better than I can," Dr. Carver said. "Daniel was a remarkable observer. I think you two might have had that in common."

Outside in the hallway, Hannah checked the number on the door. 3B, unmistakably. She looked down the corridor to where 3E should have been, then 3F beyond it. The perspective was disorienting. From her window seat across the alley, she realized with growing horror, the angles would indeed create confusion. What she'd thought was 3F was actually 3B, offset by the building's slightly different layout.

Back in her apartment, Hannah sat in her window seat one last time. The buildings across the alley looked different now, the windows no longer neatly aligned in her mental map. How much else had she misinterpreted? How many other patterns had she imposed on random events?

With trembling hands, she opened Daniel's journal. The first entry was dated almost six months ago:

March 17 - There's someone watching from the window across the alley. A woman with copper hair who drinks red wine and pretends to read. She doesn't realize I can see her watching me. I wonder what she sees when she looks at me? Whatever it is, I've decided to give her something worth watching. A life that seems ordered, purposeful. Maybe pretending to be that person will help me become him.

Hannah turned the pages with increasing disbelief. Entry after entry detailed Daniel's observations of her, his careful choreography of movements designed to present a specific image. He had noticed her watching and had created an entire performance for an audience of one.

The final entry was dated the day before he disappeared:

I've arranged everything with Dr. Carver. The window observer will receive this journal after I'm gone. I hope she understands that she gave meaning to my final months. By watching me, she made me real in ways I hadn't been before. I wonder if she knows that for every night she spent observing me, I spent my days watching her at the library, cataloging books with the same careful precision she thought she was cataloging me.

Perhaps she'll look for me there, in the spaces between stories, the way I've learned to look for connections between moments. Or perhaps she'll simply close her curtains and find a new window to watch. Either way, I leave her with this truth: we are all simultaneously observers and observed, creating and created by the attention we give and receive.

In watching, we reveal ourselves. In being watched, we become real.

Hannah closed the journal, her mind racing. Daniel Thorne. The name had seemed familiar when Dr. Carver mentioned it, but she hadn't been able to place it. Now, suddenly, she remembered—a library card. A soft-spoken man who always returned his books in pristine condition. Who checked out poetry and psychological texts and, yes, complete collections of Poe.

Who would smile shyly when she stamped his returns, then disappear into the stacks without further interaction.

She hadn't recognized him across the alley—the distance blurring his features, the context so different from their brief library encounters. Or perhaps she had recognized him subconsciously, her mind drawn to his window precisely because something in her had known who he was.

Hannah rose and moved to her bookshelf, pulling down the librarian's notebook where she sometimes jotted patron observations to help with future recommendations. And there it was, from months ago:

D. Thorne - Likes Gothic classics, poetry (esp. Poe), psychology. Very quiet, appreciates privacy. Recommend: Ishiguro, Byatt, Hill.

She had known him, in her way. Had cataloged him professionally even as she observed him privately. They had been circling each other all along, neither fully seen nor entirely anonymous.

Across the alley, lights flickered on in what she now knew had been Daniel's apartment. Dr. Carver moved about, boxing his possessions, dismantling the careful stage he had created for Hannah's benefit—and his own.

With a deep breath, Hannah rose and closed her curtains. Tomorrow, she would return to the library, to the mundane rhythms of her cataloged life. She would look for traces of Daniel in the checkout records, in the books he had touched, in the margins where perhaps he had left the faintest pencil marks despite library rules.

Tonight, she would sit in darkness, finally understanding that the window she had been looking through all this time had been, in truth, a mirror.

And somewhere, in the space between observer and observed, a connection had been real after all.