

# Four Windows

## Transcript

Welcome to Easy Stories in English, the podcast that will take your English from OK to Good, and from Good to Great.

I am Ariel Goodbody, your host for this show. Today's story is for intermediate learners. The name of the story is *Four Windows*. You can find a transcript of the episode at [EasyStoriesInEnglish.com/Windows](https://EasyStoriesInEnglish.com/Windows). That's [EasyStoriesInEnglish.com/Windows](https://EasyStoriesInEnglish.com/Windows). There, you can also download the episode as a PDF.

If you hear some strange noises in the background of today's episode, I'm very sorry. While I was recording, the army – I guess? – The Royal Air Force decided to test jet engines, maybe fighter jets, over our house. So that noise you're hearing is big fighter jets flying over our house.

Because we live in quite a rural area, they do a lot of flying around here. I wonder if it has something to do with the fact that the king's coronation is coming up soon. Um, either way, I think it's horrible! So, love live the king...

Just a warning: today's story contains suggestions of drug use, addiction and depression.

OK, I'll just explain some words that are in today's story.

**Scrub** means to rub something very hard, usually in order to clean it. If you have stone floors and they get dirty, you'll need to scrub them clean. Some people like to scrub their body using a sponge called a loofah to make their skin smoother.

**Mundane** means ordinary and boring. Things like paying bills and washing the car are mundane, but casting magic spells and flying on a dragon's back is *not* mundane. Well, unfortunately, it looks like we're very much living in a world of mundanity!

**Warfare** is the act of fighting a war. Warfare has changed a lot over the centuries. In modern warfare, there is much more technology used than in the past.

A **quirk** is an unusual or unexpected part of someone's personality. For example, someone might have a quirk that they hate ice cream and doughnuts, which is unusual because almost everyone likes them. Personally, I have a lot of quirks, but I think you know that!

An **aerosol can** is a can filled with liquid at a very high pressure. When you press a button on top of the aerosol can, the liquid sprays out very quickly. Whipped cream is often kept in an aerosol can, for instance. In the past, aerosols used chemicals called CFCs which damaged the ozone layer, but fortunately that is no longer the case.

**Pristine** means very clean and new. If you have an object in pristine condition, it looks the same as it did when it was new. Of course, if you use something often, it's very hard to keep it pristine.

When you sleep longer than you should, you **sleep in**. For example, maybe your usual wake up time is 6am. Every day, you wake up at 6am. But on the weekends, you sometimes sleep in until 8am, or even 10am. I like sleeping in on the weekends, but it's kind of a bad habit. It's usually better to go to bed earlier than to sleep in.

A **rut** is a mark that a wheel leaves in the ground. In the past, carriages drove down mud roads, and they left ruts in the mud. The ruts were shaped like the bottoms of the wheels.

We often use this word as a metaphor. We talk about being 'stuck in a rut', which is when you keep doing the same things again and again and can't change.

**Distort** means to change the shape of something so that it looks wrong or unnatural. If you look through very old glass, it will distort what you see. And if a television is broken, it will distort the image you receive. Magnifying glasses also distort images slightly, but they do make them easier to read.

The **moral of a story** is the message you should learn from the story. Basically, the moral is what the story is trying to teach you. For example, the moral of *Little Red Riding Hood* is to not talk to strangers. The moral of *The Boy Who Cried Wolf* is to not lie. But not all stories have morals, and the morals aren't always clear.

OK, so listen and enjoy!

## Four Windows

Flat 33, Building A was basically perfect. It had no more windows than the other flats, but light poured into it, as if it were chosen by God Himself as the place of his second coming. Its furniture was pure white, like an angel's feathers, and the floor reflected light like a mirror. It must take great work to keep it clean, but it did not look like the kind of place where one would sweat and scrub. Elegant people would move through it with gentle ease, finding joy in the mundane act of cleaning.

Flat 33, Building B looked like it had been abandoned. At first, you might think its walls were painted with stripes of angry colour, until you realised these were marks made by furniture, alcohol, spilt food and various unpleasant activities. No amount of angelic scrubbing would clean these walls, but their owner didn't seem to care. The only furniture in the living room was an ancient sofa, which stared into an old television with a cracked screen, and beyond that, into the living room of the other flat.

I lived between these two spaces, and I shared the obsessions of the Man From Building A and the Woman From Building B. I was luckier than them, though, because while the man could spend all day staring at the woman, and the woman could pass her hours staring at the man, I could observe both.

Never before had these two seen their opposites. They knew that 'people like that' existed, but in far off, unfriendly places. Now, a 'person like that' stood in front of them, lived opposite them. I, of course, had seen far stranger and far sadder people in my time – the Great Cities of the world are the enemy of mundanity. But it was their obsession with each other, the shock that became curiosity that became mental warfare, that made them so special.

Separately, they were zoo animals, each with their quirks, but not worth more than a few hours' watching. Together, they were an aerosol can and a hungry flame.

The Man from Building A woke up early every morning. He walked out in a pristine white towel, but got distracted on his way to the bathroom. He would see something out of place – a lamp that was slightly too far to the right – and move it. And then he'd see some dust, and he'd dust it, and then he would rearrange his bookshelf, and then...

By the time he got to the shower, his flat was pristine and he was sweating. The Woman from Building B only saw this rarely, because she usually slept in. It was only when she came back in the early hours of the morning, from one wild party or another, that she could watch the man work like an ant. She moved to the sofa like a snake – not that he could hear her – and took pleasure in the hurried movements of this tall man.

The man almost certainly saw her once or twice, but he was so focussed on cleaning that he never gave her more than a quick glance. The woman never watched for too long. She soon started yawning, and would wander to bed. Sometimes, she lay down on the sofa and watched him until her eyes fell shut.

This did not mean that the Woman from Building B was lazy. Every day, at eight thirty, her alarm sounded and she rolled awake. With the speed of a tornado she fell into the shower, scrubbed herself, threw some liquid, food or cigarettes down her throat and left the house dressed in a smart business suit, her dirty black hair tied up behind her. Once a year, she got it cut down to a few short inches.

The Man from Building A watched this, of course, while enjoying a mug of something. Coffee, you would assume, out of some shiny machine. But on some days the mug steamed, and on others it didn't.

The man didn't seem to work, but these days, 'work' is such an ambiguous word. He spent time reading, if that can be considered work, though his eyes never rested on the pages for long. He sat at his computer – after dusting the desk and wiping the screen – and clicked and typed and did *something* important.

And surely he must have done some kind of work, because he had food, although he never ate much, and every week or so he would disappear into the city and return with a gorgeous painting or stylish sculpture. In truth, there were more colours than just white in his house, but the way he moved through it sucked them all out of the air.

There was no doubt that the Woman from Building B was working hard. Each evening she came back with her face hanging below her knees. She undid the buttons of her shirt, pulled a drink from the fridge and collapsed on the sofa. She watched TV – probably some terrible show. How would I know? She barely laughed at it.

Several hours later, she would pick herself up, change into ripped jeans and a band shirt, call some friends or go out.

As the months passed, the ruts they lived in grew deeper. The man's flat got cleaner, purer, more pristine and more artistic, but equally less human. The woman's flat grew dirtier, warmer, livelier – the parties never seemed to stop. The bags under her eyes were as deep as her rut of exhaustion.

They watched each other. They envied. They dreamed of being in the other's shoes. They compared their ruts and thought the other's didn't look so bad. Yes, he spent too much time cleaning, but his life was so *organised*. He knew what he was doing. He got up early. Yes, she was always tired and lived like a pig, but she had *friends*. Her life was full of joy. She went to bed and slept in whenever she felt like it.

That's what I thought they were thinking. You see, my eyes are windows, too. And windows, even the most perfect ones, distort. Light travels differently through them. Some things grow, others shrink. Just as our thoughts are distorted when they travel through our lips, the world is distorted as it passes into our soul.

The two never met, you know. Did you think they would see each other at a party, confess to their envy, and discover that they were wrong all along? That they had seen each other's quirks through a broken piece of glass, the image distorted? That would not be the story of a Great City, where aerosol cans sit neatly on supermarket shelves, and flames are fed every few centuries.

I know what happened. I saw through the other windows, the windows that look into our dark, wet insides. Bathroom windows. I know I shouldn't stare, but, well, I was doing my job. I saw the only room that the man left dirty, though it was still filled with white. Neat rows of

white powder sat like dead fires, ready to burn at any moment. I saw the only room that the woman kept clean, although she often washed the sink with her tears and nothing else.

I heard his heart stop in the shower, one time when he tried to wash himself to sleep, because the silence of a heart stopping is loud enough to break every window in a small German town. But not a Great City.

I heard her shout over the phone to her friend – not angry, just passionate with exhaustion. ‘I’m going to change, I’m going to be like That Man. I’m going to clean up, I’ll quit that stupid job, I’ll –’

Sob sob sob.

But the Woman from Building B did change. She had already begun the process, long before she moved there, long before her eyes distorted the image of the Man from Building A. The drinks she stole from the fridge had no alcohol in them, the job she worked paid well, although she hated it, and the friends she brought round were those who had suffered the same addictions she had. In reality, her rut was ending. The earth was smoothing out. Her life was becoming deliciously mundane.

The Man from Building A could never have changed. His ancestors weighed on him like mountains of coal, the coal they had pulled from the earth so many decades ago. The money flowed into his computer, into his furniture, into his tired blood, and all he could do was make things pure and perfect, while his heart stayed black and empty.

They were never fighting against each other. This is a Great City, remember? Two rats do not fight while a cat holds their tails. Their warfare was always inside them, trapped in the four walls of their flats, the four corners of their lives.

The Woman from Building B did not realise he had died. She went to stay with a friend for a while, and when she came back, there was a new person in the flat opposite her. He displayed an offensive amount of colour. She waved at him. He closed the curtains.

‘What a shame,’ she thought. ‘But I suppose he was too good for this place.’

She got on with her life, and it was rather boring, but she was happy.

Or am I just speaking for myself? If you’re wondering what the **moral** of the story is, I’m afraid I have to disappoint you. I don’t have a clue. I’m just a window cleaner.

## THE END

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