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The Window's Cleaner's Wife

by Des Holden

Austerity pleased her - it gave her the comfort of sacrifice.

She put the jumper down. She could have mended the small hole under the arm, but the colour wasn't quite right. Really she wanted to support Shelter and BHF. If the jumper had been on their rails well...

She picked up her shopping bags and made her way through the small crowd of women, pushchairs, pre-school dependents with catarrhal noses and lolly or sweet smeared faces and stained clothing. The number 15 pulled up and a scrum of passengers formed. She adjusted her bags and walked away. The three quarter hour walk would help her own heart fitness and would save another £1.80.

Ten minutes from home she saw her husband's familiar ladder with its three replaced rungs propped against a nondescript semi. The curtains were drawn. She noticed the rusty tricycle on its side on the paved over front garden and a battered football part way up the unkempt hedge dividing the house from its neighbour.

Washing windows was their sole source of income since Derek's breakdown. A middle aged geographer with booky skills and no grants wasn't at the top of anyone's list, except hers. She bowed her head and walked past quickly, not wanting to be caught checking on him.

At home she made a cup of tea, returning the teabag to her second-use saucer on the window sill. She unpacked her shopping and made bread and butter pudding with best-before-yesterday bread and the split, under-filled bag of sultanas she'd found on discount at Tesco express. She made herself toast. She cleaned the cupboard under the stairs and recovered two carrier bags of clothes. Then she cleaned the house. She checked the inside covers of the library books on Derek's bedside table and found they were due that day. She didn't linger in the lukewarm shower, but decided to walk back into town, donate the clothes and visit the library.

Coming out of the library she clutched two books to her chest and briefly considered getting the bus. Derek would be home by now and she wanted to share her news. She decided to walk and put her best foot forward, following the same route as earlier. Derek's ladder was gone, and the curtains were open. She rehearsed what she would say. Derek, I've got a job. Derek, I'm going to help out in the library. It's not paid, Derek, I know others need salaries more than I do. But I can be useful, Derek, like I used to be. I want to be useful.

She unlocked the door and even in the winter gloom noticed the two suitcases in the hall. Derek sat at the kitchen table. She thought of the drawn curtains in the middle of the day and her judgement of sloth. How long she asked. Six months he said. You know I've tried? Yes, he said, but do you know I have? Not hard enough she answered. Not hard enough.