

Jet Flight

*This short story is dedicated
to Matt, who shared my most anguishing moments.*

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Sheila Creighton

La tendresse de l'évocation, par l'auteure, de sa jeune soeur contraste violemment avec la narration de sa mort, crime commis par son mari. Séparée de lui depuis plus d'un an, Wendy vivait chez sa mère quand Jim entra de force dans leur appartement et la battit jusqu'à ce qu'elle perde connaissance. Elle resta dans le coma pendant un mois avant de mourir. Jim, qui l'avait déjà attaquée auparavant avec un couteau, fut condamné à huit ans de prison pour agression. Quand Wendy mourut, il passa de nouveau en jugement pour meurtre, mais la sentence ne fut pas changée. Il pourrait être remis en liberté dans trois ans.

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★ ★ **PART I**

Wendy had been bludgeoned almost to death. A jagged piece of concrete was the weapon. She is lying comatose in a hospital bed in London, no sight, no hearing, no sensibility — ever again.

" . . . I welcome you on behalf of Laker Airways and Captain Donald Rogers and the crew on Flight Number G27 to London." The crisp, bright English voice of an air stewardess broke into my thoughts. "May I ask you to please extinguish your cigarettes and pipes. Please fasten your seatbelts." I was relieved to see that I had no traveling companion for the flight; I could be alone with my thoughts.

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They had operated on her brain to remove the embedded fragments of her battered skull. They had put her on the life machine to help her breathe. When they had taken her off it and one of her lungs collapsed, they had performed a tracheotomy and put her back on it again for a few more days. Later she had developed double pneumonia, and once more they had given her life. A machine now keeps her going. They, the medical professionals, make the decisions.

Four sisters, a brother, and my mother are waiting for Wendy to die, praying for her to die. Probably without realizing it, their prayers are for themselves too — for an end to their own torment as they stand daily by her bedside.

Wendy had big, brown eyes, and her softness was livened by a sense of humour. She had never lost her girlish way of suddenly bursting into giggles — always somewhat surprising to me because of her very gentleness of manner. Now she is on the brink of death.

Since separating from her husband, Jim, thirteen months ago, Wendy had stayed for a month or so at the homes of two sisters, but after she had started a midnight shift as a telephone operator, she had lived with Mother in her modern apartment in southeast London.

The break-up of Wendy's marriage had mystified the family but it appears that, after the death of his mother, Little Jim's personality had changed, and he had become very morose and irritable. When I saw Wendy on my last visit home, she had had a sad and desperate expression. She had left both the sons with their father. I thought, however, that she looked very reso-

lute; so I concluded that she had definitely made up her mind that this was the way things had to be. Soon a letter in the mail from Wendy told me of her love for a man she knew she couldn't have because he was married. Underlying her sad acceptance of the situation was hope for a miracle to bring them together.

Wendy is my youngest sister. She was only eighteen, not long married and excitedly awaiting her first baby, when I left England for Canada more than twenty years ago. For at least another eighteen years she had lived with her husband Jim — "Little Jimmy," as the family called him.

Little Jimmy is illiterate. He is too short to fulfil his only ambition: to provide a good income as a long-distance lorry driver; so he works as a sorter for the General Post Office.

Wendy had supplemented the family income for years as a cleaner in the local school. Every morning she would be up at 5:30 to start her chores at the school by 6 o'clock. The work was light: dusting and vacuuming. At home on a visit one time, I marvelled at her contentment as she told me how suitable the job was, being so near to home, and discussing her pride in what she did.

Despite financial problems, Little Jimmy and Wendy had led a very close-knit family life. They seldom really complained and they sacrificed to allow the children to go on school trips, to provide them with musical instruments, Girl Guide and cub uniforms, and to get away to the seaside for a family caravan holiday each summer.

Besides a financial struggle, they had the burden of Little Jimmy's mother, who lived with them for thirteen years of their marriage until her death. She was a very depressing and sordid figure, dirty and unkempt, always with a cigarette hanging from her protruding bottom lip. She certainly wasn't a typical grandmother and, being a fire hazard, she couldn't be entrusted with the children.

Mother would baby-sit for the young couple occasionally. They didn't go out often because they couldn't afford to, but Little Jimmy enjoyed surprising Wendy on their wedding anniversary or on her birthday. They would go out to a dinner-dance or the theatre. I remember that when wigs were in fashion, according to a letter from Mother, Little Jimmy had presented Wendy with a mass of curly curls for her birthday. Now she is almost dead.



I am going over the agonizing details, as I have so often in the past few weeks. I think of the brutality inflicted upon Wendy. It is as though I can feel the blows. I am on the evening flight to London. "Why Wendy?" I repeat over and over to myself. "Why Wendy?" There is no possible reason for her to have suffered so.

Early one morning Wendy awoke to scuffling outside the patio window. She could see a man's shadowy

figure. She called to Mother, "Mum, there is a man in the courtyard; I think he's going to break in." The shattering of glass stopped her frenzied dialling of the police. As the man lunged across the room, she dropped the phone; he pushed her and put his hands around her throat.

Mother rushed out of her bedroom at the man, pulling at his thick overcoat, so thick she couldn't really get a grip on the cloth. He pushed her away and, as she fell to the floor, he shoved Wendy into the bathroom and locked the door after them. Mother witnessed the terrified and agonizing screams of her daughter. She pulled herself to her knees and tried to turn the knob of the bathroom door. She was helpless to do a thing but despair and listen, until the ghastly silence. The door flew open and the man pushed past dragging Wendy, with Mother trying to clutch at her. Without her glasses she couldn't see the man clearly, but she glimpsed a ruddy, bloated face. Dragging Wendy out onto the concrete patio, he banged her head on the ground until she was unable even to moan. Within seconds the man had disappeared into the dull, early-morning grayness.

Neighbours, realizing by this time that there was a bad scene going on next door, phoned the police and the hospital. My mother was bent over Wendy's body when they arrived. Blood and glass were everywhere. Later a lethal piece of concrete was found on the floor of the blood-spattered bathroom.

The jet is going up, winging its way over Manhattan. The mid-February evening darkness envelops those huge concrete buildings.

Do I have to see Wendy? I am going to comfort Mother, but do I have to see my sister in death? I want to remember her, beautiful, serene, and loving.



PART II

We sat around the hospital room, motionless, the plaintive sound of Barry Manilow singing "I can't live without you. . ." filling the air, as we watched Wendy, lying in bed. Her eyes were half-open, vacant, and sunken in her gaunt face; faded brown bruises covered both her eyes and cheekbones. We actually hoped that her favourite pop singer, and particularly this song, would bring her back to reality. My chest was becoming tighter and tighter with emotion. . . I can't stand it. . . I can't take this. . . I can see Big Ben from the window. . . 7:59 p.m. . . That is Wendy, shaven head, open wounds, bruised, lying expressionless. . . hooked up with tubes. . . Can you hear your song, Wendy? . . . you can't live without him? . . . die then,

Wendy, I wish I could help you to die. . . Big Ben is booming, 8 o'clock.

Next day the doctor told us once again that Wendy would never improve beyond her present state: "Don't clutch at straws," she advised my brother Alf.

Earlier this summer I had a call from England. The trial of the "murderer" was held at the Old Bailey; eight years for assault with intent to kill was the verdict. No witnesses were needed since the man had immediately given himself up at the local police station after he had committed the crime. He pleaded guilty. He had no self-recriminations whatsoever over his premeditated and vicious attack. If Wendy dies before one year and one day after the attack, he will be on trial again — for murder.

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PART III

Wendy died slowly over the last few weeks with the turning of summer into autumn, quietly and alone one mid-September Sunday afternoon.

The case reopened at the Old Bailey on the Wednesday following. Let justice be done? Little Jimmy's sentence remains unaltered. With no psychiatric help and as a "model prisoner," he will probably be released from jail within three years.

As for Wendy, she lived in the state of death the four seasons through.

Summarizing the case, the judge said Little Jim "was a weak and ineffectual man. He was totally reliant first on his mother and secondly on his wife. He was a lonely man who had great difficulty making friends. When his wife left him, his pathological hatred of her made him totally preoccupied with vengeful thoughts which led to this murderous attack."

Wendy had lived in fear of her life for over a year. Just before Christmas, only one month after she had left Little Jim, Wendy visited the house on his plea to discuss Christmas arrangements. Quite unsuspectedly he attacked her with the carving knife. She had stitched slashes on the back of her hand when I arrived home to celebrate the Christmas holiday that year. Drawn, thin, and bewildered, she explained that, fortunately, her teenage son was able to intercept this ugly, and obviously planned, assault.

Wendy was urged to charge her husband. She explained why she did: she thought the court would impose the psychiatric visits on him which she had wanted him to have for his depressions. The social worker involved in the case agreed. However, Little Jim merely got a fine of £25 (\$50) for attacking his wife with a carving knife, for making an attempt on her life.

A year later Little Jim attacked Wendy again, and this time she died.

Witchwoman

Nothing to do but
wipe dirty bottoms
rap grasping knuckles
wring the wash
sweep the hearth
want for something to
break the monotony
so dabble in henbane
pull screeching mandrake
steep belladonna
fly high over rooftops
out of your skull
gain a healing reputation
from garnered herbs
and folksy cures.
As years pass
and back crooks
eyes cross in fear
power becomes suspect
then
hated
hunted.

Cackle in derision
then screech in terror
as flames lick
or prove innocence
floating
head down
witchwoman.

Ah, the legacy you've left
of the worthiness of
wiping dirty bottoms
wringing out wash
sweeping the hearth.

Rita Rosenfeld
Ottawa, Ontario