

Girl in the Window, Part VII

Luciano Emmer, Dir. (1961)

In Amsterdam, later that evening, a boat chugs down the canal. Approaching from the other direction, we see Helse driving in her convertible, headlights on, a scarf on her head to keep her hair in place. “Hi, Helse!” someone calls out and she waves back.

She drives by some boys fishing a bicycle out of the canal. Nearby, others sit on the ledge, their legs dangling down. On Helse’s street, girls are dancing in the street; a bike leans against a railing. And, of course, men stroll by in suits, looking for women. Helse is back to her normal life after two days of drama. Well, she does have a little extra something with her: Vincenzo’s suitcase.

She pulls into her parking spot, the suitcase on the seat next to her. Someone has been waiting for her: Harry steps over to the car. He leans his hand on the windshield, looming over her. Helse climbs out of the car, purse in hand, to face him.

“Where are you coming from?” he demands brusquely in Dutch.

“Wijk aan Zee,” she answers. (This is actually not where she has been at all.)

“And what’s in that suitcase?” he asks, pointing to it.

“Nothing!”

“I will just check, if you’ll allow me,” he mutters sarcastically, taking the suitcase out of the car and opening it. We see that he is wearing a wedding ring.

Helse watches helplessly as he pulls out a shoe and holds it up. “And whose is this?”

She grabs the shoe and throws it back in the suitcase angrily, slamming it shut. “That’s my stuff.”

“Your things are also my things,” he replies, pointing to his chest.

Helse tries to take the suitcase, but he grabs it and throws it to the ground, his eyes fixed on hers.

He starts to hit her and she raises her arm to shield her face. A crowd begins to gather.

He yells at her, “Your business is also my business. Understand? Take that! I’ll knock your nose right off your face!” He has grabbed one of her hands so that she can’t run away.

A man from the crowd intervenes and tries to pull Harry off of Helse. But Harry pushes him away, yelling, “Leave me be!”

Harry grabs Helse once again, yelling, “Filthy whore!” The crowd is watching this spectacle without interfering. Many seem horrified, or at least disapproving, although a group of young boys is enjoying the fight. In any case, it seems clear that the onlookers regard Helse as the man’s property.

Even after two police officers grab Harry and pull him off Helse, he keeps yelling: “Filthy whore! Filthy goddamn whore!”

Back in her room, Helse stands at the mirror, still wearing the top from the night before, black with a scalloped edge. Gingerly, she touches her sore jaw, then applies lipstick. She gazes at herself for a moment before blotting the lipstick with a tissue.

She goes to the front room and turns on the light.

She picks up Vincenzo's suitcase from beside her chair and drops it heavily by the door. She eyes it guiltily for a moment. But she needs to get to work.

She fluffs some cushions and sets them on her chair. She picks up the hand mirror and touches up her hair, which is clipped to one side by a barrette.

She opens the curtains, sits down, and lights a cigarette, getting down to the business of selling herself. A man approaches the window, stops, and looks at her.

He walks on and the camera zooms in on Helse, who sits in her chair smoking and waiting, seemingly impassive.

She glances at the suitcase, then up at the clock tower as the bells begin to chime. It's 10:35. The train for Italy leaves at 11:00.

She gazes downward for a moment, with a thoughtful expression, and then looks up at the clock again. Finally she makes her decision: she puts out her cigarette, gets up, and puts on her coat. Picking up the suitcase, she turns out the light, and goes out the door.

She walks outside and takes off in her car. Within moments, Vincenzo appears, walking past a woman in high heels and a polka dot skirt. He peeks in Helse's window, through the half-open curtains. But the room is dark; she's not there.

He tries to get in the door, but it's locked. He bangs lightly on the glass with his open palm. The woman in the polka-dot skirt comes over, her spangled earrings swaying. "Are you looking for Helse?" she asks in Dutch.

"Yes."

"Helse not here. Left," she says in rudimentary Italian. She turns and gestures in the direction Helse went.

"Left?"

"Yes," Then, friendly though she may be, she gets down to business. "You come with me, ten florins."

"No, thank you, another time," he replies politely.

The clock chimes and he looks up at it, contemplating what to do now. He looks through the window again over his shoulder.

Helse is at the railroad station with Vincenzo's suitcase. Her coat is cinched at the waist, purse on her arm. She walks down the platform briskly, scanning around for Vincenzo.

Practically retracing Vincenzo's steps from the night before, Helse turns and goes down the stairs.

She walks past the spot where Vincenzo talked with Alberto Santandrea, the man with the wind-up toys.

As she turns the corner at the bottom of the stairs, she see Vincenzo running into the station. At sight of Helse, he slows down and approaches her.

She hands him the suitcase; his hand covers hers as he reaches to take it.

“Here is your forgotten suitcase,” she says softly. It seems she’s rediscovered her tender feelings for him.

“Thank you,” he replies, equally softly, as if he has weighed each word. He takes the suitcase and puts it on the ground.

They gaze at each other in the bustle of the station, surrounded by soda ads, the illuminated signs of the cafeteria, the travelers rushing by.

“I went to see you, but you... weren’t there... also because I should give you...” He reaches into his jacket pocket and takes out the envelope that holds his money.

“I didn’t ask for money,” she snaps angrily and walks away.

“Hey, Helse, listen!” He goes after her and takes her arm. She turns to him. He goes on, “I didn’t want to offend you. I thought that we had an agreement... with my friend...”

“Oh, your friend!”

From a loudspeaker, we hear that the train to Italy is about to leave.

“Go now,” she says. “You’ll miss your train. Go.”

He hesitates, uncomfortable. Finally, pointing at her, he says, “So... thank you. How do you say it? *Dank je!*”

She doesn’t seem pleased by this. “Why *dank je?*”

“Because you’ve been nice to me.” He begins to stroke her hair. “One day, if I win the lottery, I’ll come and visit you here. Understand?”

“Give me a kiss,” she says to him in Dutch. He’s not sure what she is really asking for. He looks uncertainly into her eyes, then down, then away. He doesn’t know what to do. He doesn't know what she wants – or what he wants.

“No kiss?” she asks, echoing a line from their first time together when she declined to kiss him as a customer.

She leans up to him suddenly and presses her lips against his, then she pushes him away and runs towards the station exit.

When he calls her name, she turns back to face him. He catches up to her just as they are announcing his train again. She reaches out and touches his arm: “You’ll miss your train! Go! Go!” Then she turns and runs out of the station.

The camera zooms in on Vincenzo’s face as he looks down, deep in thought. Still in close-up, he turns and looks at the door that Helse has run out of.

A quick cut takes us to the coal mine, where a whistling steam engine is puffing smoke. Men with blackened faces walk away from the mine, headlamps lit against the dark of night. Shift over, they’re headed for the baths.

One says to the foreman, “Now water is also coming in to sixty-four.”
“They’ll bring down the pumps tomorrow morning,” he replies.

The foreman grabs a bottle of milk and drinks it down thirstily. The white of the milk is a stark contrast to the dark, charcoal tones that fill the scene.

Men are arriving to start their shift, among them Federico. The foreman calls him and says, “In the hole number sixty-four this morning a bad water leak started.”

“I know,” nods Federico.

“Be careful! The pump doesn’t work well!” he yells. Federico walks away with a weary expression.

The men head into the mine, carrying shovels and other tools. They tease Federico about his weekend away.

Federico waits for the cage. As the two-tier conveyance rises to let his group on, something catches his gaze on the upper level. It’s Vincenzo: instead of going to Italy, he is back in the mine. The two did not part on good terms and they don’t acknowledge each other now.

Federico gets onto the cage. In close-up, we see Vincenzo looking down somberly. The cage makes its rapid descent with a long screech.

Federico takes out a sandwich and begins to eat. Just like the foreman’s milk, the white of the bread draws the eye in the dark image. A miner begins to sing “Scapricciatiello,” a popular Neapolitan song.

*You are too honest for this blonde,
She was born for a dishonest man.
Get away from this charmer,
For you will be ruined, mamma's boy!*

One level above, someone interrupts Vincenzo’s reverie: “Oh! The next time that you go to Amsterdam, why not pick up one of them and take her here?”
Everyone laughs, including Vincenzo. “Yes,” he answers goodnaturedly.

The camera shows us Federico, a little grim, still chewing his sandwich. Then it returns to Vincenzo, pensive again.

At pit bottom, the men step out of the cage. Once again, the safety procedure: they are told to give up their cigarettes.

Walking toward the coal face, Federico breaks off a piece of his sandwich and gives it to some rats.

By now, Vincenzo has left the cage. He walks behind Federico, who is still feeding the rats.

Noticing what Federico is doing, Vincenzo laughs. When he resumes walking, Federico joins him, saying, “Don’t tell me that this time you’ve missed your train again!”

“No, see, this time it was because of the suitcase!”

With a hearty laugh, Federico slaps Vincenzo on the back.

“You call that a suitcase, goddamn! Do you know what they call it in my town? Pussy!” replies Federico, using the Lombardi dialect term.

They both laugh uproariously at this; Vincenzo doesn't take offense in the least. Federico picks up a piece of wood and throws it at Vincenzo, who dodges and laughs.

They continue walking down the tunnel, laughing and joking. The empty metal tubs clatter alongside them. By the end of the day, the tubs will be filled with the coal that the men have cut, at great risk, as they make their way doggedly towards another weekend of freedom.