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People Watching II

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PEOPLE WATCHING II

Phillipa Armes

I wonder if they knew they were neighbors.

I would never have known had I not followed them to their doorsteps. I would never have guessed that these two seemingly average men happened to live next door to each other in their million dollar houses. I would never suspect such a coincidence. Was it coincidence?

But maybe I should learn to expect the unexpected, be it cliché or not.

I couldn't get out pen and paper and jot this all down while following these two men at a safe distance on foot, so this edition of people watching is a little unorthodox. I like to think that this is also a good exercise for my memory. A little brain stimulation never hurt anybody.

He was tall and wore faded jeans with worn-out back pockets. He had a red and black backpack slung over his left shoulder, and he wore a cardinal red baseball hat on his too-small head. For his height, I felt as though he was taking uncomfortably small strides.

Maybe he was tired.

I was tired.

Something about this stranger was simultaneously frightening and thrilling to me. I'd walked down that street countless times, alone, at night, in almost total darkness, in much tighter jeans and far less sensible shoes. But this time, I felt the need to keep my distance from this ominous and haggard form.

He seemed sad.

His tiny backpack looked like it carried the weight of all the world's sorrows. I never saw his face.

I did see him walk up the driveway of one of the nicest houses on the street, however - the one with the huge windows and flowers hanging from the balcony and the quaint blue paint job.

Robbery? I thought.

Never judge a book by its cover I've been told.

Never judge a faceless man by his back.

Is that why they call it stabbing in the back?

I didn't see the elderly man walking 30 feet ahead of the tall pin-headed man until I saw the latter cross the threshold of his opulent abode. The wizened gentleman walked with a hunchback, and also remained faceless to me.

I want so badly to put faces to the mannerisms of these two fascinating characters. But then maybe their identities would ruin it all. Who knows. I'll never know.

The old man wore muted earth tones. A simple tan sweater above dark pants and those little "grandpa" shoes. He shuffled. He hunched. He looked like he was in pain. I imagine his facial expression to have been either one of two things: acceptance and contentment with a full-life lived, or hurt and longing for youth that too quickly slipped away.

He lives next door to the tall man. His house is slightly smaller, but nonetheless beautiful and warm. It gave off the aura of having been lived in and loved for a great number of years. The last image I have of this man was of him fiddling with his keys at his doorstep.

In our society, we collectively and generally place our measurement of wealth on material goods. What we have in goods is a representation of our personal value. We have price tags. We are labeled. We ignore the inside stuff; the stuff we are actually made of.

If I have to measure my life, I want to measure it in possibilities. And as commonplace and unimportant as watching two stranger-neighbors walk home seems, it was bizarrely magical to me at that moment. There's still a tingly magic lingering there. The impossibly normal became extraordinary for me; possibility became reality for five minutes, and still fills me with that warm fuzzy feeling.

I wonder if they knew they were neighbors.