

That Woman Next Door

Edna

I stare out the frosted window and breathe, adding to the blur, thickening the barrier between me and the world outside. I limp to my rocking chair; it squeals as I unevenly shift my weight upon it. I stare at the black void: my TV. I search to find my reflection, which blankly stares back at me. My hand slightly shakes as I invite my frail fingers to twist the loose strands of my braid. Last summer, my hair was still an ashy black, but now the whites were inevitable. Who is to blame? It's me who barely goes out. Just day in and out of stepping between the window, my rocking chair, and bed. As evening settles onto the city outside, I heat chicken rice leftovers from yesterday. I slowly chew my meal, ignoring the cold bits of meat and clumps of rice that the warmth had not gotten to. Later, I soothe the wrinkles of my unmatched, half-untucked bed sheets and go to sleep. I just make out the shapes of my belongings in the dark and time the intervals of my blinks for long hours until drifting off. Sometimes, there's not even a toss or turn. I've gotten used to paralysis.

Ayaansh

It's a rainy day. The clouds, both deep and dull greys, remind me of the smudges in my sketchbook. I'm hunched over on an odd bench. It's lunchtime, and I see classmates roaming in the distance. I shift my gaze toward the sky again and see an eagle hovering in the mist of the clouds. Its sharp eyes indicate superiority and precision. Its posture shows pride and agility. An animal seen in solitude, yet never one seen as vulnerable. I let that thought sink in for a bit before I finish off my jam sandwich and use the concealed sidewalk back to school. I look down the entire way back. Analyzing each crack and crevice of the sidewalk, almost feeling small enough to fall through one. I direct myself towards a side entrance of the school building and jog up vacant stairs to find the first locker on the left. I crank the numbers in slowly, trying to envision opening a safe to invaluable jewels. Maybe imagining it would make it true, but no. I open my locker to a note again, and this time it comments on my acne. I've been receiving notes like this for a while now. I scoop my binder into my arms and let the locker slam. I've gotten used to this numbness.

Quinn

It's sunny, and the rain has cleared away. The earth seems to have had a bath, and the sunshine is now a warm towel. I watch as Miles introduces himself to every piece of equipment on the playground. I remember myself as a little girl viewing the playground as

the highlight of my day. Watching Miles, I can almost picture myself gripping the zipline with the rough calluses in my soft hands. I let myself fade into that idea. I ride the zipline and imagine mist from great waterfalls tickling my feet through my sandals and the vines of a rainforest whispering to the loose strands of my hair. The zipline hits the end, and the motion sends me back to the platform. My trip over the woodchips of the neighbourhood playground is complete. I make the rock-climbing station cliffs, and the sand pit a desert next. Then, evening settles onto the surrounding field, and crickets and mosquitoes harmonize for nightfall just as chirping birds do for dawn. Miles hits the end of the zipline and swerves back to the platform, breaking my train of thought. Miles' arms dangle from the zipline, though his baby hands hold a firm grip. He soon is satisfied with his playtime and signals to leave. I wrap my hand around his, and we stroll the neighbourhood sidewalks. I watch other parents invested in making phone calls while their kids walk unguided. Many people are coming home from work as well, wearing fatigued and expressionless faces. The setting sun truly does increase the shadows.

We're a few steps away from rounding into the driveway when I notice our neighbour's kid, Ayaansh. His backpack is slung over his shoulder, and he's fiddling with his keys at his front door. He probably just came back from a school activity. He's a hard-working kid. However, his smile always seems plastered. A coded command. I wave and am greeted by that familiar smile with his eyes too afraid to dwell on something a second too long. He steps into his house, and I start fiddling with my keys. Miles leans over the railing of the porch, and I follow his gaze to see Mrs. Edna Jones stepping out of her threshold to complete her daily stroll to the mailbox. When I greet her, Mrs. Jones doesn't even offer a smile. It's just a slight nod from a face with more frown lines than even skin. I step inside and get Miles cleaned up. Later, as I stir-fry vegetables in a pan for dinner, I wonder why my neighbourhood is set up the way it is. It's not the dainty picket fences, the vibrant garden flowers, the perfectly trimmed lawns, or the ever-present halo of clouds I'm thinking about. Rather, it's the gloomy faces among these beautiful wonders. I catch myself back in my reality of making dinner only to realize the stove hasn't even been on. No matter how I stage the vegetables in the pan and make swift motions with my wooden spoon, without the heat, the warmth, the vegetables are cold, lifeless entities.

Edna

One more grey hair marks its habitat on my sulking head the next day. I step with no rhyme. My walking cane makes uneven hitches in my steps. I check the mail and shuffle through the letters just to occupy a few extra seconds of my empty day. I notice an unusually pink envelope. I feel something. A hint of curiosity if I were to classify it. I tear open the envelope and unfold a letter. A letter from that woman next door. My face finds a

new, odd expression to display. I recall memories, memories from my childhood. I envision myself naive and young, holding a jump rope. There's a sensation, and I find my eyes dropping to my reflection in a nearby puddle. Even in the murky water, I see the U shape, that of a held jump rope, adorning my chapped lips.

Aayansh

I'm shoving my heels into my worn-out sneakers when Amma places a torn open letter on the stool next to me. Amma spares a few minutes for me from her busy morning. For the first time in a while, she asks how I'm doing instead of just assuming my straight A's mean well-being. The knots in my chest undo themselves as I heave and let a tear escape. Amma holds me tight and slides the letter onto my lap. It is the first time a written note thaws my numbness. And it is from that woman next door.