

## The Bystander

The girl loved walking along the edge of the wall, pretending it was the edge of the world, and that everything would be different if only she could hop to the other side.

It was just a garden wall, and the other side was a barren patch of grass. She was sure, if the owners of the house happened to catch her, she would be punished. But they were never there when she was drifting home, and the low stone wall was too tempting a pleasure to pass up.

She slipped off at the end as always, already looking ahead to the join between the two roads, where there was a lamppost that was particularly good for spinning and a rock that was good for jumping.

However, when she rounded the corner of her little path and stepped out into the street, she was shocked to discover that there were other people there!

She stopped in the mouth of the lane and watched as they passed her. They were strange, she thought, the way that their eyes looked forward eagerly and their feet hurried without trying to seem like they were hurrying. Or maybe she just wasn't used to adults who looked excited.

Her feet followed theirs, and she heard the murmur of conversation all around her as everyone present seemed to decide that this was simply too interesting not to get all the information. The girl slipped in between the bodies and no one paid her much mind. She was too short to be in anyone's way.

She came quite suddenly upon the scene, as if stepping from between the bushes directly onto the road, as had happened to her one summer before. The first thing she saw was people crying. She knew them, vaguely. Well, she had seen them before. A father and two daughters. They owned the shop on this road, and the girl walked by there every day and sometimes felt guilty that she didn't have any money.

She couldn't understand their tears, but she was captivated by them. To her, they had always just been props that stood in place, and said the same kinds of things and did the same kinds of things every day. This proof of their humanity was thrilling.

Then she saw the shop and saw that it was burnt. There were firemen in the ruins, and she could faintly hear the sound of broken glass as they stepped on the remains of the big front window. The girl leaned forward, almost going under the police barrier, but she was so slight that no one noticed. The shop was completely destroyed. The damage had even spread outwards, like an explosion.

The girl slid to her knees, hugging the legs of a barricade, and sat there and watched. Even when the police officers shouted at the adults for getting too close, they said nothing to her.

After a time, even the family members who had been devastated left, and it was only the girl and a few stragglers at the scene, who stayed in hopes that there might be some other dramatic discovery at the last minute.

Of course, there was none, and eventually the girl had to concede that it was time to go home.

Her legs were stiff from sitting so long, and she walked as if she was still learning how. It only occurred to her just then, as she turned away from the wreck, that she would have to go a different way home.

The girl stood in the middle of the street, completely lost. She had never gone any other way. She didn't know how.

She began, hesitantly, back the way she came. The little lane between the houses was foreign in the late afternoon sun. The girl traced her hand along the fences, and even the familiar knots and whorls were strange on her other hand.

When she came to the crossroads, she looked to the low wall again, but it somehow felt wrong and dangerous to approach it, as if using it to travel the other way might break something fundamental to reality. Instead, she looked left. It was another lane, similar to every other little lane that wound between fenced-in gardens. It ran in the same direction as her home, so the girl thought she had better take it.

It was sort of exciting to be exploring a new place. Perhaps she could even walk this way again, if it turned out to be good. Although, that would mean missing out on the chance to see the objects of her new fascination every day.

She started swinging her arms back and forth lazily, twirling in the middle of the path. No one else was there. In fact, the dry, dusty mud of the path seemed undisturbed, the same way as the sand in her sandbox when she swept her arm across it and erased her drawings.

She paused and looked behind her at the solitary line of footprints in the soil. Her delicate little girl shoes seemed even smaller situated in the real world than they did when she looked down at her feet. It made her feel unsafe, in an appealing way. The kind of way she had felt last summer stepping onto that road and physically feeling the cars streaming past.

She pressed on. For a time, she walked with her head down, watching her feet making prints in the dust. When she next looked up, her surroundings were the same. She had not been paying attention particularly to the tall fencing before, but now she frowned uneasily when she realised that it seemed to stretch on for an awfully long time.

The girl squinted into the distance, even putting her hands up to her eyes to act as binoculars. All she could see was the half-shaded lane stretching away before her. She stopped. She hesitated. She looked behind her, but as she saw how far she'd already come, she decided that she'd better press on. She only hoped she didn't overshoot her street and have to loop back.

Now, though, the girl began to notice the nicks and swirls of the wood that bracketed her. She even looked up at the branches that overhung the lane, trees and bushes that shaded the area and protected her from a rather harsh sun.

She traced the patterns with her fingers, imagined that she was reading something secret in the unintelligible code. She walked.

At some point, her school bag started to annoy her. It wasn't even heavy, but the straps didn't sit quite right anymore and the sharp angles of her empty lunch box were cutting into her

shoulder blades. She felt like she could leave it behind, except for the fact that it was her school bag, and if she did they would just replace everything in it and start again.

She hitched it up higher on her shoulders, hoping that might alleviate the points of contact. She heard something rattle against the hollow metal of the lunch box, and it was shockingly loud in the hush of the little lane. It was almost as if the foliage was insulation, a thin film around the lane.

It did not grow dark in the lane. It did not grow cold. The girl kept walking without consciousness, without understanding.

Some vague time later, she became aware that she *should* be tired, she *should* be cold. She wasn't sure why she thought this, as it was obvious that it was still early evening. The light was the same; slightly orange and dappling across her skin. It still warmed her.

But her body was telling her something different than her senses. There was, she discovered, a faint ache in her thighs. When she stopped, she began to tremble and eventually to fall.

She landed in the dust, scraping her hands and knees. She sat heavily, in shock, and looked at her palms. They were red and dirty, but not broken. The girl looked around, as if an adult might inexplicably appear and tell her to pick herself up. She didn't know when she stopped expecting to see other people on the path.

She didn't know when she had realised that she was truly alone.

Except that couldn't be right and she was just being silly, because she was in the middle of her town. There were gardens and houses on either side of her. She was surrounded.

The girl rolled up onto her knees. Her shoes scraped the ground. She hobbled closer to the fence, suddenly desperate for a lifeline. A single thread to prove that she was connected to another human being's life.

She found a small, round hole and put her eye up to it, expecting to peep into someone's back garden.

For a few seconds, it was completely silent as she gazed through the fence.

Then suddenly the girl reeled back with a shriek, falling over onto her bag and slapping her hands over her mouth. The noise echoed strangely along the lane, like a horn in a tunnel. The girl lay on the ground, staring at the little hole. For a long time, she didn't dare to move. Her breath hissed between her fingers, and her lunchbox bruised her back.

What she had seen beyond the fence... It was not for little girls' eyes. It was not, she suspected, for anyone's eyes. She wondered, half insane, if this was her punishment for being greedy.

Perhaps it was years, or perhaps it was no time at all, before she was able to move again. She kept her gaze on the gap in the fence, and it almost seemed as if the hole kept its gaze on her as well. She crawled backwards slowly, afraid to attract its attention, and then when she

thought she was sufficiently far, she suddenly pushed herself to her feet and broke out running.

Part of her thought she might be dreaming. People didn't understand dreams. It could be that she was having a nightmare.

Except that would mean that she had imagined what was on the other side of the fence. That it had come from *her*. And that couldn't be right. She would never - she *could* never...

She had to look behind her as she ran. Nothing followed. Nothing chased.

The girl came to a stop a short while later. Her heart continued to beat, she continued to breathe, but she could not forget what she had seen. She stared all around her, flinching from every rent in the wood, like a hundred tiny mouths gaping at her. Now that she knew what was on the other side, the dust and the fence and the foliage took on another meaning. Now she was in a tunnel, a pipe, but the walls were very thin and getting thinner all the time.

She was not at home. She had not been home in a long time.

She wanted to go back, but could not face returning the way she had come. She almost expected the little hole to be following her, and in fact experienced a rather absurd vision of a life-sized hole, cut away from the fence, slowly walking up the path towards her.

Surely this lane could not stretch on forever. There had to be an end. She didn't think she had been repeating sections, or going in circles, because this pattern of whorls didn't look familiar. Which meant there must be an end.

She wanted to go home. She wanted to go home. She wanted to go home.

At some point, she became hopeless. She wandered. She fell. She wandered some more. She did not feel hunger, or anger, or drowsiness. The sun never set. The world did not collapse either.

Nothing to do but keep pressing on, except there was nothing to press on *to*. She could see the dirt road sweeping on before her and only the fear of what was behind urged her forward.

Eventually, however, even that wasn't enough, and the girl stopped on quivering legs and sank slowly into the dust.

She removed her bag for the first time, and it was so foreign to have something in her hands. Her Scooby-Doo schoolbag and her Scooby-Doo lunchbox, placed preciously on the ground. Next came her pencil case and water bottle. The girl lined them up like spectators to a show. Lastly was her notebook, but instead of putting it down she flipped it open.

The words on the page were so strange to her; she could hardly remember any of them. She traced the indentations of the letters with her fingers and eventually remembered how to read again. The endless evening was patient with her as she did so, but once the girl found herself reaching for a pencil, she felt something shift.

She froze, unsure if she'd imagined it. All looked the same, but it had not been of this realm anyway. It had been beyond.

The pencil shook in her unpractised hand. The girl didn't know what to write. To whom.

What she wrote was this: a short explanation of her situation, in little girl words; a few sentences about the horror she was experiencing, not well articulated; and finally, a plea for anyone who finds the note to come and save her. She had used as many words as she knew, but she was still left staring at the note like it was deficient. Incomplete. Inadequate.

It would likely never reach anyone anyway.

The girl tore the page off carefully and rolled it, like a note in a bottle. Then, she knelt there in front of her witnesses with the note cradled in her palms and felt the world as she had come to know it. It was different, now, than when she had first entered, all those years ago.

Something had been changing. Slowly, she thought, so slowly that she had not noticed it until the first crack, right when she had reached for the pencil.

Onward. Yes, onward.

Her things stared into her. The note rested on her knees. It was quiet.

And then the paper was being poked gingerly through a hole. The girl didn't look before she poked, had no idea where her Ave Maria was being sent to. It would get there or it wouldn't.

She had put herself out into the world, and now all that was left was to see if the world would reach back.

It was almost freeing, in and of itself, knowing that she had taken the leap. It almost didn't matter if it paid off.

There was one other item the girl had. It was something she wasn't supposed to have. She had stolen it, you see, and had not decided what to use it for yet. She pulled it out of her pocket to show the bystanders.

It was a lighter.

Cheap. Plastic. Dangerous. She imagined the objects were very impressed with her. It seemed so innocuous sitting there in her hand.

The girl tore out her previous work in the jotter. The pencil lines stained her fingertips with lead. She crunched the pages into a ball in the middle of the path, and then she held the lighter up to her face.

She wasn't cold, she reasoned. It wasn't dark. But her spectres were husks. They watched her with empty eyes. Fire moved and breathed and lived. This lighter was the power of life.

The trigger was stiff, and when the first flame appeared, the girl was so startled that she dropped it. The second time, she held the fire in her hands and slowly lowered it, like a box of precious metal. The paper caught. She and the bystanders sat around it like acolytes.

Fire burned. The wind whistled through gaps like teeth. Fire roared. Shadows danced in the dust. Fire raged. Ice prickled along the girl's spine, like two fingers slowly walking.

When they reached her neck, she gasped at the vice that engulfed her. The fire before her eyes grew and grew and grew. It thundered around her as if she was standing in the middle of a busy road.

And then the girl blinked, and the fire was still blazing, but it was lesser. And then she blinked again, and she was staring at the scene of a fire as a family sat coughing in the road and fire trucks bellowed around her.

The girl watched, entranced, until the path urged her on.