

THE ONLOOKERS
(excerpt)*

By

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The market is no place for a man my age. It's too noisy, too busy. The sonic shrieks of children as they scamper down the aisles make my hearing-aid buzz. Today, everyone was packed in so tightly, I briefly fantasized about leaping into a sardine can for a little air.

No, this wasn't my grocery day. I just needed something, a refill. I clutched the empty bottle as I made my way to the pharmacy counter. Another customer was already ahead of me by the time I managed to will my lethargic body to forge ahead. I stood behind the red line as a silver-haired woman mumbled something to the pharmacist. He disappeared momentarily, then returned with an orange-red cylinder in hand. The pharmacist placed the bottle into a paper bag, and—thanking him—the woman turned to leave.

That was when I saw her face. Tired and weathered as it was, I recognized the young girl who peered from behind every wrinkle. My lungs iced over.

“Alice?”

The woman looked up at me.

The night clung to my body like maple sap. It was so humid and so dark. The streets and alleys were devoid of moonlight, with rows of lamp posts as my only beacons. I sprinted past the long chains of dark houses, their windows blank and still like closed eyelids. I was in a hurry.

Cutting across freshly mowed lawns, I ducked beneath low-hanging willows and hopped over homey, white picket fences. I ran until the lamp posts were only a fleeting memory, until the only light I saw was through a window of a house just ahead of me. Breaking to a soft trot, I squatted closer to the ground and joined the others. All the boys from my street were already there. They barely acknowledged me as I slipped in amongst the group. They were too busy watching the window.

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