

Through the Looking Glass

by Sonia Nicholson

Same street. Same number of steps (exactly 1,663) from door to door. They took her through three turns, along one crosswalk, and past one stop sign. The best commute. She passed the same blue rancher with white shutters and the magnolia tree out front, which was nearly ready to bloom. The two-story modern with the electric car in the driveway. Two Edwardians across from each other—she could never decide which was her favourite.

Yes, the same street. But not.

Claudia shouldn't have been surprised, really. Her husband was home, the first giveaway that everything had changed. Before setting out, she'd eyed his jogging pants and t-shirt. Coffee in a regular mug. A new office, not in a plane or on the road. Just...there. The spare room in the basement beckoned him.

"Have a great day at work, I guess?" he'd offered.

"I guess. You too."

"Maybe."

"This is so weird."

They'd stared at each other. The children, patting the dogs absently, had watched them over the back of the couch. She wondered how much mac and cheese they would consume over the coming days, weeks, months. If they would ever return to school. They were latchkey kids now, of a different sort.

"Well, I guess I'm off then." She had forced a smile and pulled her umbrella from the stand. Best to be prepared. At least with rain, she knew how to protect herself. The rest? No idea. No, this day was not the same. She'd tried to ready herself before walking out the door.

Still, the contrast had shocked her—the silence most of all.

No huskies barking at her from the place on the corner. The Philippine woman who splashed dust off her SUV, tossing water from a

yogurt container, wasn't there. No sign of the young professional with the cross-body messenger bag and the oxford shoes, or the lady who Claudia thought worked at the grocery store at the top of the hill. Not even a deer or squirrel.

On the last stretch of her route, she studied the boulevards and driveways. There were more cars than she'd ever seen, filling every possible parking spot. They didn't have anywhere to go today. There was nowhere to go. She was one of the lucky ones, if you could call it that. She pictured all the people tucked inside. Pajamas and coffee. A new office. Kids and dogs and time.

She saw something then. Proof of life, so rare she thought at first she must have imagined it. Movement from the window of a late 1950s suburban special, the one with the yard decorated for every season and holiday. A neighbourhood attraction but somehow, she'd never interacted with the owners. Not once. The morning sun hit the glass so that the reflection obscured her view. She shielded her eyes, squinted, moved her head like some kind of exotic bird. Yes, it was something.

The hands appeared first. Waving, with a level of enthusiasm usually reserved for parades or airports or royalty. Claudia was no queen. She looked around her and back to the window. There was no one else. Of course not. Undulating arms led down to smiles curved up like caricatures of themselves. Strange. It wasn't a mistake; the motions were for her.

Her hand came up, slowly.

The next time she was ready. Best to be prepared. By the third day she anticipated, pulling her hands from her pockets half a block early. She progressed from a single- to a double-handed wave to mirror theirs. Included a smile of her own. At least with them, she knew what to expect—unlike with the rest of the world. Besides, she reasoned, it would be impolite not to return the gestures. Especially when they were her only contact with the outside. Theirs, too, probably—the strangers on the other side.

She suspected in a year it would be different again. The “before” times pushed farther into the past. Silence replaced with pressure washers and generators and barking huskies. The lady from the grocery store giving her a wide berth as they pass. A dressed-down young professional. Maybe the Philippine woman would never return, like so many others lost.

