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The Watcher

Written by Ross Armstong

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THE
WATCHER
ROSS ARMSTRONG



ONE PLACE. MANY STORIES

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For Catherine



7 days till it comes.

I look in her direction. About fifty metres away behind a sheet of glass stands a woman. Looking out at the reservoir. She's in the building opposite. I've spotted him in that building before, but not her. I've been watching him. She's about my height, my build. She could be my reflection. Except she couldn't because she's a little darker, has an air about her. European. Her hand rests on the frame of the door, softly. She is lost in thought. No, she is concerned. She scratches her bottom lip with her teeth. She wears lipstick. She has a tousled fringe. She has a light blue dress on, for the summer. I adjust the dial on my binoculars, to sharpen the focus. Her eyebrows, perfectly plucked, knit in displeasure. Her face is half lit by the early evening sun streaming through her window. North facing. Or perhaps it's not her window. I certainly haven't spotted her before. In there. With him. Which is strange.

She takes a careful step backwards. Steady, feline. The sun recedes now, kissing her features goodbye. The dark of the room smooths over her face, like a sheet, enveloping her. She's harder to read. But I can still see her. She's so

still. Careful. Intense. Pensive. Every muscle in her face firm and poised. Rich with intent.

She's still lit by the gentle glow of the room. But only just. Softly, so softly. A single lamp perhaps. A femme fatale. Shadowed. Like from a 1954 movie. How quickly they all turn into models. Through my eyes. All the people behind the windows in the building across from where I am now. Like they're posing for me. For a photo shoot. How well they perform. How beautiful. It's almost like they know.

Without thinking, my fist at my side turns into a gun. I lift it. Slowly. Until it points right at her. If I pulled the trigger now perhaps the glass of my window would shatter, then hers would too and the bullet would strike her between the eyes, one inch above the bridge of her nose. Her skull would break. And she would fall.

Bang. Bang.

Oh, God. She's looking. She looks in my direction. And she sees me. She's got me. In her sights. Her face tightens. But it's her body. Her body doesn't move a muscle. And neither does mine. I'm still. But not frozen. I'm ready. Poised. My elbow rested on the sill. My left hand gripping my apparatus. The right fixed in its gun-like pose. I hold firm for some reason. I'm not embarrassed.

She breathes in through her nose. Her chest lifts just a touch. Through my sights I see her eyes refocus. Her pupils shrink a fraction of a millimetre. And she stares me down.

Meaningfully, she raises her hands to her dress and, keeping her eyes on mine, she delicately lifts it and shows me her right thigh. A purple bruise. And above it, further still, a burn. She's looking right at me. Oh, God. Showing herself to me. She holds it there. Then glances behind

her. Sees something. Lets her dress fall. Maybe she's not alone. It's so still here.

Then, from behind me, the rumble of building work begins. Metal crushes concrete. Maybe it was always there but I'd drowned it out. With my focus. They're still working on the last few buildings between this one and the park. As I stare at her, the noise of machines and the crunch of the wrecking ball goes on. Behind my back. They crescendo and then dip inexorably. A heavy drone. A wall of sound, dipping and rising. I look at her. And she at me. She could be trying to tell me something. Is she play-acting? Is she pleading for her life? Trying to communicate something? Woman to woman. The corners of her mouth rise into a kind of smile.

Rumble. Rumble. Rumble. Rumble.

I'm going to call her... Grace.

From nowhere, a hand fixes around her throat and pulls her into the darkness. Her arms and dress flail forward as she's dragged out of sight. She disappears. My breath, which only now I realise I was holding, leaves me suddenly.

My home phone rings. I jump, clutching my sweater. Resisting the urge to cry out. It gets louder and louder. As if it's getting closer. Homing in on me.

It's strange. My phone ringing. Because it never has before. Not since I moved in. I'd forgotten it was even plugged in.

Ring, ring. Ring, ring.

My hands grip my jeans, needing something to hold on to. As I brace myself. And turn to look at it.

Ring, ring. Ring, ring.

It's strange, you see. Because no one even has the number. No one.

Not even you.

Something crashes against my window. I fall and put my back to the solid white wall. Out of plain sight. I'm breathing so hard now. Shaking. The hairs on my arm stand on end. My heart is beating out of my chest.

The glass is cracked. I daren't turn my head. But in my periphery I can see something. Pressed against my now cracked window. Don't Turn Your Head, I tell myself.

But I can see something. Out of the corner of my eye. Don't Turn.

I can see something. Sliding down it. Slowly. Dreadfully.

So I breathe in through my nose. Bite down hard on my tongue.

I turn my head. And look.

Part One:
The Look



42 days till it comes.

HS – *Passer domesticus* – Wetland – Good vis, wind light, 12 deg – Singular – 2 leucistic patches, buffish, pale supercilium, rich dark streaks on mantle, female – 16 cm approx. – Social, dominant.

I thought I'd send my findings over to you in particular. As I hoped you of all people might understand. We haven't seen a lot of each other recently of course, but I've had a think about it and there are a few things I want to say. Even if I'm not that keen to say them to your face exactly. Or on the phone. Or Skype, or the other platforms.

I'm not up for it. I don't want a scene. I'm not keen to 'have it out'. Woman to man.

I had thought I'd made everything pretty clear. Had said my piece. Is it piece or peace? I never know. But either way, I thought I'd said it. And I thought that was it. For ever. Between me and you.

But now I think about it, there are a few more things I want to touch on. Want to prod at maybe. Without having

to look at you and feel guilty or inhibited while I'm saying them. Without you butting in or anything.

It's probably all my fault. I know. I know you think it is. I know that's why you think we're not talking. But hear me out, OK? I want to say a few things and be heard. That's all. A friendly ear, without the glare of your eyes. Without any judgements.

I hope this doesn't sound too severe! It's not meant to be. You know, it might be fun. To help you remember a few things. Maybe hear some new things too. Things you don't know. I had this sudden urge to tell you. So much has happened since I made my decision.

I know the notation isn't always right but cut me some slack, OK? This is how I've always done it and you know I like to do things my way. Also, don't get all 'the way you do' if I'm telling you things you already know, you're never too old for a refresher. I don't mean to chastise, you are always so patient with me. You always have been. I just need someone to talk to. Someone at a distance to share my findings and the way I'm feeling, so maybe we can make sense of it all. Together. Someone level-headed. I know you're not a trained therapist! But we used to talk, when we were out there. Look. I think I might be getting myself into some trouble.

I don't know. Aiden thinks I'm stuck in a rut. Mentally that is. That's what he says. Mentally and emotionally. And financially. And creatively and career-wise. Which is always nice to hear. I didn't ask, he just volunteered this information. Apropos of nothing. He wasn't just being a dick. But he wasn't joking either. He's almost definitely right.

Aiden told me all these things this afternoon. God, he's

a clever asshole, isn't he? It's like he can see the inside of my head. He's staring at me now, grinning slightly as he leans against the window. He looks handsome as the light streams in around him. We're both tapping away opposite each other on our celluloid keys. A proper modern, alienated couple.

He's on his laptop and I'm on Mum's old typewriter. Maybe you remember the typeface. The font. I found it in the move and thought it'd be nice to get the old thing out. Aren't I retro? I feel like the woman from *Murder, She Wrote*. Only problem is I can't make any mistakes on this thing or I'll need Tippex and I hate Tippex. It stinks. So I type carefully. And if I say things I regret. Well, they just have to stay.

He shoots me a look and a smile that says 'make me a latte would you?' and I will, because that's always my job now for some reason. We've got this new machine, it's like we live in a coffee shop. I've bought some hazelnut syrup, to add some definition to our flat whites. And some sprinkles to lightly dust over our cappuccinos and cortados. It's all very middle class. We're Cameron's children, you'd wince.

I don't move a muscle. If he wants a coffee he can ask, like a normal person would. He looks away again. But even though his eyes are down he knows I'm looking. I can tell. His face lit by his screen. Smiling so smugly it's practically demonic. Cross-legged like I am, as if each other's reflection. He's silently trying to get a rise out of me.

'Coffee, please, ducky,' his look says.

He can tickle me by barely moving a muscle. Make me giggle with the way he sits or the rise of a single eyebrow.