

A Woman Who Watches

by Jill Chan

I am not a bad person. I'm like anyone else. In fact, I can be weak and passionate. When I was younger, I was regarded as someone with a penchant for turning things over—upsetting a table or a house. But I am normal. I am not boring though I find strength, the kind that pushes people away, the kind that holds on to weakness like something opposite yet determined—I find it terrifying. I find what I have terrifying.

She was a beautiful woman. I don't argue with that. I welcome it.

The first time I met her, she was laughing at something with a force so intense and relentless, she was dying like I was bemused with her ability to be there, holding my attention like that.

I don't know why but I intently watched her then like someone who had seen something strange yet satisfying.

She was about my age though infinitely wiser, more in touch with the world. My world was closed in like a house. Boring, you could say.

And she enlivened the room like light that fell through the curtains. I hesitated to answer when she asked me, 'Are you laughing, too?'

'No, but I enjoy watching you laugh.'

She cocked her head to her right and said, 'A woman who watches. How interesting.'

Then I kept quiet after that. As everything fell quiet after a thunderstorm. As only she could allow.

I was married by then and pregnant. My husband was away working. In a few months, our first child, Mary, would be born. And made our family all the more decent and satisfied with decency.

The woman who had just made my acquaintance was married to my husband's boss. As I found out later. He was in the media business. My husband was an accountant at one of his businesses. I was a photographer in my father's shop.

After Mary was born, I'd spend all the time at home taking care of her. I had to stop work and my father hired another photographer to fill in.

I didn't see the woman again for awhile. She had remained a figure forever laughing in my mind, a delightful distraction from all the busy work at home. The duties and cares of motherhood.

But one time, I came across her at the park. She was sitting on a bench watching people pass by, seemingly careless but strangely occupied.

She said, 'Hi. I remember you. How are you?'

'I'm fine. I'm just having a minute away from my baby, trying to keep my sanity.'

She smiled and nodded.

I detected something sad in her look. Her hand was absentmindedly touching a button on her coat.

She suddenly said, 'How's your husband?'

'He's good. Working.'

This time she didn't nod but merely smiled.

It seemed to me she spent a lot of her time asking questions which called for trivial answers. But she said then, 'Life is strange, isn't it? You want something, then you have it. Then you want it more and more. And pretty soon...' she stopped and looked away.

I could not see but I thought she must've been moved by something none of us could change. Devastation. Desperation.

When she looked at me again, her eyes were red but she was not crying. Only angry, as far as I could tell.

'I'm sorry. I must be going. Hey, how about you come to my house sometime. Hmmm? Well, I'm not doing anything. And you must want some company sometime, nursing your baby.'

'It's good of you to ask. Sure. Here's my number.'

Luckily, I found a piece of paper in my purse.

When she said goodbye, she laughed that laugh again, seeming now another person, another face.

I never heard from her again after that. My husband said that she split up with her husband and moved to another city.

How the city moved as if dangerous, as if alive in some way yet dead in countless others.

After Mary grew up and started going to school, I went back to my father's shop, taking photographs of people I'd never meet again. I still do this.

How I watch their faces like a lens. And capture something of theirs they'll never have again in quite the same way, at quite the same time.

Some day we'll stay the same in our minds. But now, I am reminded of how the table is sturdy. How it holds a coffee table book. A glass of wine.

I am tempted to turn the table over. In my mind, I do it a hundred times a day. Until the table is sturdier for my moving it. Or my attempt at moving it.

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I have been known as a good photographer. One who brings out the inner stillness of the subject. One who makes people sit and view themselves as subjects of the room at least. They are gods and goddesses in that second when the camera clicks, when I tell them to smile and be themselves. They seem to be happy. To be there in their own skin. To smile at the stranger in themselves. And hopefully occupy their own happiness.

I see the woman in every one of my subjects. She was the most beautiful by far. Even if I never took her picture.

I would've loved it—taking her photograph. She was a natural. Her smile distant yet endearing.

A woman who watches.

I am incredibly distant now from all my subjects.

I remember the last look on her face. She looked once behind her after she had stood up and walked away. As if suddenly terrified of closeness yet not getting enough of it.

There, I was not myself enough.

I could've said something which meant something else. Instead, I was the dumb one. The meek one behind the camera where no view could be held.

