

Night Watch

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Ruby walks at night. Not every night but often, especially when she is restless and unable to sleep. Her favorite times are during or right after a rainstorm, when most people opt to stay warm and comfortable, either at home or sequestered in a cozy bar or 24-hour coffee shop. At these times she is less likely to attract attention or attempts at conversation, anonymous in her dark green rain slicker and hat - plus hand-knitted purple scarf in cold weather - or beneath a black umbrella when it's too warm for bundling in layers. Often she will make her way down to the docks, where she can see the city lights reflected in the slowly flowing river, hear the faint droning hum of machinery punctuated by bursts of talk and laughter. She loves the sounds of night work; random snippets of conversation floating to her more easily because the rest of the city is more quiet.

Her favorite job during summers off from college was as a baker: Three blocks from her small apartment were the welcoming lights of the bakery kitchen, where she would walk in the middle of still-warm nights to join [her cohorts](#) Jack and MaryAnn for the ritual firing up of the large ovens and make the many loaves of crusty bread required for the coming day; mixing and kneading and cleaning to the rhythms from the stack of rock-and-roll CDs they kept on hand. They would always take their break at sunrise, sitting out on the back porch of the bakery with fresh coffee and cigarettes, watching the sun rise over the downtown office buildings feeling like they owned the morning, owned

the whole world. She loved walking back home afterwards in the middle of the now wide-awake city, feeling like she held a secret.

Ruby believes that if she stays awake while others are asleep then there is the chance no harm can come to them, because she is watching. All the active living that simmers and breathes unnoticed; the desires and labors, laughter and companionship of those who inhabit the darker, emptier hours is made more substantial, more real because she notes it, though she never actually puts pen to paper. Bearing witness is enough. She doesn't remember how she got this idea, or how long she's had it. She remembers a distant time when she tried not to fall asleep but did, when her baby sister turned blue in her crib; when they tried to reassure her that it wouldn't have made any difference if she had managed to stay awake. Did she believe them? In her adult heart she knows it's true, but is it her adult heart that beats in the middle of the night?

She thinks of the question about whether or not a tree falling in the forest makes a sound if no one is there to hear it and she wishes she could be there to hear every tree that falls. Feels it as a tug of desperation. That anyone or anything should be lost to oblivion without acknowledgement is a kind of sadness. She wonders about this sometimes as she walks. She thinks about God, but not too much. Mostly about how he, too, worked alone.

She has several circuits that she travels, and in each has come to know many of the inhabitants – not their names, except those announced on curbside mailboxes - but rather their habits and consistencies. This gives Ruby a sense of connection to them and

something akin to affection. When the woman in the small brick house near the All-Night Laundromat had her baby, Ruby felt a rush of happiness like she was a distant auntie. She considered leaving a small gift – a hat, tiny socks or rattle – on the front steps. But she knew it was out of the question, knew that her watching would be labeled (labeled) as something creepy or suspicious. It made her sad, but she understood the truth of it. People think they are anonymous in their lives unless they choose to share them. And if you read the papers or watch the news, it's enough to make you suspicious of everyone, isn't it? It's just the way of the world, Ruby thinks to herself, turning the corner to her own flat, where her yellow tabby cat patiently waits for her return.

Ruby walks and watches and listens and cares and protects and no one will ever know. Her obituary, if ever written, will be empty of this secret part of her life. Like the unheard tree falling in the forest, it will fade away to nothing like the night is dissolved by the rising sun.