

Widely spaced walkers hurrying along the slippery, wet weather dampened sidewalk paid scant attention to anything other than their own pressing urgency for getting themselves into shelter, and that quickly. Now and then someone might raise a worried eye to the check the darkly clouded evening sky. Here and there the first streetlights had already flickered into life. More were sure to follow as both the evening and storm wore on. Well, the weather guy was sure right on about this one. The brewing storm promised to be a doozy.

Actually, she was not one bit unhappy so few other pedestrians were out and about. Only those who had no choice at all ventured out into an evening such as this. For that matter it was not only those on foot who were so few and far between, there was no more than the single, infrequent automobile speeding past. Excellent. What she didn't need was a bunch of nosy types who later might remember seeing her. Intent as they were on their own hasty journeys, not one of the small number of passersby she encountered paid any more than the scantiest bit of attention to the slender woman as she bent slightly into the wind

buffeting her.

The dark, ponderous navy woolen jacket thrown over blue denim pants, worn, scuffed boots, simple knitted blue scarf and shapeless woolly cap the woman wore bundled against the chill and dampness of the expected storm were certainly nothing to catch anyone's attention. They served dual purpose to protect her against the inclement weather and to mask any hint of her true appearance. The sporadic assortment of engrossed pedestrians she had encountered were each similarly dressed, paid her little mind and every one had been hurrying along the sidewalk quite as quickly as was she. They each hoped to get into safety before the threatening storm menacing overhead burst fully upon them.

There was absolutely nothing to set her apart from any of her fellows. She knew she appeared exactly as any other on the street, and that was precisely as she wanted.

Blend in. Don't draw attention to yourself. Keep a low profile. In her mittened left hand she carried a weighty, filled, white bleach bottle. A small momentary grimace settled upon her countenance. The heaviness of the

narrow mouth jar was causing a growing ache in her wrist. She was anxious to reach her destination. The bulging, brown paper, grocery sack she clutched with her right arm was secured against her woolen padded hip. With a sharp ping, ping, ping, the first spattering of stinging, frigid rain began pelting against the stiff paper. Oh Great. The woman quickened her step. A meager smile briefly touched her colorless lip. Huge dark eyes glowed from the wan countenance framed below the bulky cap. Thank Goodness, her objective lay within sight. The promised rain began to fall in a steady, drenching icy downpour.

Standing alongside the cracked sidewalk there just ahead the dilapidated wooden frame apartment building condemned nearly a year ago had long been slated for razing. A city wide reclamation project begun by the municipality some time ago, early in the spring last year she thought, had at length reached the final block of the project. Each of the comparable buildings on either side of this particular old-fashioned artifact of former splendor had already been demolished. Nearly all of the residents had already moved from this building. She had been gladdened to

realize the young couple who had until today been living on the first floor had taken their three children and even the scrubby dog for a trip to Florida. She had no quarrel at all with them. Good night to be out of the building.

The fury of the plunging raindrops increased as the woman hurried up the four wobbly stone steps to the dimly lit front door. Why on earth had anyone painted the thing such a hideous yellow? Must have gotten the paint on sale. With a hurried, deft movement she shifted the bleach bottle for a moment in order to free her hand for grasping the battered doorknob. It jiggled loosely in the long neglected panel. The door, one hinge bent and hard to move, groaned open against the weight of the shoulder she placed against the old panel.

The woman stepped into the murky vestibule just as a huge crack of thunder crashed loudly overhead. With a small startled cry, the girl jumped back. She glanced around the entryway with a quick guilty look and then had to just chuckle at herself. Good Grief. You have heard thunder your entire life. Get a grip. There is no one here. She smiled. Well, her smile broadened, almost no one. Just that dunderheaded fool up on the third floor and he

doesn't count. Doesn't count for anything at all. Insignificant toad.

Moving more quickly now, the woman hurried to cross the poorly lighted foyer. Just visible there against the distant wall was a narrow, steep wooden stairwell leading up to the second story. At the top she knew she would find a dingy landing and another set of similar treads which led to the next and last floor of the building. Peeling paint, worn stair well and the loose, swaying banister all bore testament to the necessity for getting this antiquated derelict demolished as quickly as possible. It's a true wonder no one has been seriously injured in the old building already.

The one single, naked bulb suspended from the entryway ceiling by a fraying cord, winked as the electricity responded to the lightning and turbulence going on outside the building. It's twin there at the uppermost of the cramped series of steps flickered a reply. 'Don't need to get caught in here with the electricity gone down.' She set her grocery sack against the wall along the bottom rung. With a sigh she reached into her jacket pocket and removed the pack of recently purchased cigarettes. As the rain began falling in earnest

against the outer wall, the woman stood at the foot of the stairs for a moment longer.

Her movements studied, adroit, she lit the cigarette with a match taken from a 'give away' book she had picked up at a long ago forgotten motel. Had anyone been looking through the dingy pane she appeared only as a weary woman on her way home after a long day at work. After another moment she lay both the matchbook and the glowing cigarette on the step near the grocery bag.

As though she had been overcome with a sudden attack of forgetfulness, the woman left her just lit cigarette along with her sack filled with 'groceries' sitting there on the bottom rung as she quickly moved up to the dreary landing above. Once there, she paused to listen to the sound of the storm raging overhead. It was the only sound she heard. Carefully she unscrewed the jug's blue plastic lid, knelt and placed the bottle on its side to allow the liquid inside to begin flowing slowly downward, tread by tread, toward the bottom rung where the paper sack and glowing cigarette lay. Carefully avoiding the flowing liquid, she hastily retraced her steps to the bottom of the stairwell. The scent of the

gasoline was strong as she stopped to nudge the glowing tip of the cigarette closer to the paper sack.

Without a backward glance the woman pull her jacket closer to her, dashed across the vestibule, opened the door and stepped out into the drenching downpour beyond.