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MARY RUEFLE

Woman with a Yellow Scarf

I was reading in bed in the morning, something I like to do, something I try to do every thirty days, two or three hours, usually on a Sunday, reading in bed in the morning is not like reading at any other hour—first thing!—your mind fresh and alive and responsive, sometimes you read something you would miss at any other hour, especially the late ones, midnight, that’s another time for reading and there are things you don’t miss at midnight but they are not the things you don’t miss in the morning. That was when I saw her. *A woman passed holding a yellow scarf over her head.* She does this in a story by Albert Camus. A French engineer is in a remote village in Brazil, the mayor has given him lodgings in the hospital, which is called by the curious name of “Happy Memory,” which is not so curious when you consider the building of a hospital in a village that has none is a happy memory for those who live there and will use it. Our protagonist wakes up in Happy Memory Hospital, it’s raining, he looks out the window at a clump of aloes being rained on, and then the sentence happens. *A woman passed holding a yellow scarf over her head.* A simple sentence, of no import in the story—our lady never again appears, and without her presence on page 169 (in my copy), the story would not appear to be missing a single necessary moment. Yet the yellow scarf is needed by this woman at this moment, it is raining, she is passing by the hospital, she doesn’t want to get her hair wet, or her head, or her body, luckily she has a yellow scarf she can hold over her head, stretched like a sail between two hands, or maybe not, maybe the scarf is triangulated and she is holding it under her chin. Who is she? Where is she on her way to, or coming from, how old is she, is she married with children or not? What difference can it make, this fictional woman is born and dies in the same sentence, her moment passes us holding its yellow scarf, her fate is to appear in a story by Camus, and when I think of her fate I realize it could be worse, she could be walking past a window in a story by Thomas Gilbert, surely a woman can sense the importance of whose story she is in, perhaps that is why she chose, this morning, to bring along her yellow scarf—a keen author

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couldn't fail to notice that. Still, her fate cannot be commended, one day it is raining, she puts on a yellow scarf and goes out in the rain, never to be heard from or seen again. She is among the missing, but we don't even know her name, or what she looks like. I doubt the scarf was made of silk, canary yellow with a map of the world on it. I have such a scarf draped over a wooden hanger in my coat closet, I have had it many years and never once worn it, rain or no rain, I do not recall how I came by it, perhaps it was given to me. But in this remote village in Brazil in the nineteen hundred and fifties, this yellow scarf—well, maybe, ok, silk. I often fall into the habit of thinking anyone born in the ages before I was born lived in the Dark Ages. Nothing could be further from the truth, as they say, but I've noticed people everywhere stand as far from the truth as possible. *A woman passed holding a yellow scarf over her head.* I don't remember half the scarves or half the women I see in an ordinary day. But this woman was different. She held her head up high as she walked across the street in the rain, and I came to believe she was on a mysterious and important errand, whose nature I might never know, and that somewhere concealed on her body she was carrying the tip of a forefinger wrapped in a bit of yellow fur inside a white leather ring box, and that the finger was mine, I had used it to follow words, for words seemed to me to be always walking alone at night, even in broad daylight they were walking alone at midnight, and I confess, yes, I shadowed them, I shadowed them by way of the alley that is always there and always empty and narrow and hopeless and yields not a single clue.