

American Scene

The Road Not Taken

By Anil Shrivastava 'Musafir'



I live in a wooded area. The nearest shopping plaza is about five miles away from my home. I go to my gym every afternoon around 2 O'clock which is past the nearest shopping plaza. The only road

leading to the gym goes through woods and picturesque houses. If you take that road during the afternoon, you'll crisscross through rays filtered through the leaves of tall maple and oak trees. Midway to the

gym, you'll pass through a quaint cider mill on the left. You may stop there for freshly picked apples, cider, and warm donuts.

It's right there where I see this woman walking straight and fast going towards the plaza every day like a clockwork. I've been spotting her for the last 22 years at that marker during summer, winter, snow, blizzard, rain, or what may come. She dresses according to the weather but always dons a reflective jacket and an oversize school bag. No one else walks through that road since it's a state highway. Some days I have seen her making a return journey during the evening.

Twenty-two years ago, she was a charming young lady in her twenties. Now, she appears a little ragged and pale. I wonder whether she prefers to walk or has no money to buy a car. Does she have a husband or a boyfriend? How come I always see her alone with determined steps? Where does she go every day? Does she work in a grocery store or is she a tutor? How come her routine has not changed ever since? That makes me wonder every time about her intended mission.

I have not seen anyone offering her a ride or walking with her. I always have this curiosity to stop and talk to her but I don't want to bother her or look like a stalker. No one else does. It is unthinkable that I should walk out and accost her and start asking invidious questions. She is striking above all because I don't know what she is about. I have no idea. Not even the shadow of a hypothesis.

And what is that bag about? What does it contain? Snacks and water? The unusually

hefty dimension of her bag makes that unlikely. Spare clothes or uniforms? Could it then be the instruments for an uncommon trade? Photography does not need more than a tripod and a few extra lenses. A surveyor has more streamlined folding gadgets. A cosmetologist carries a large assortment of stuff but in a more compact container. Even an arborist carries smaller implements that fit into a reasonable bag. But, fancy apart, I cannot think of a good reason for that oversize bag.

So, there I stay, in my car full of curiosity, watching the stranger fade away in my rear-view mirror walking the road with an oversize bag, mystified as ever by the woman's mission and her genuine identity. I realize, after many years, that I will never know the answer. No, I will never have my curiosity satisfied and know why she walks this way.

Then, suddenly, the significance of the whole business dawns on me. There are many questions to which we will never find the answer. There are many, many mysteries in the world to which we will never know the solution. But we should know that mysteries will abide, to excite and entrance us. To challenge us to make the best use, if not our grey cells, at least our imagination on the winding road of life. That is what our life is all about.