

Joyce Carol Oates

---

## Mistaken Identity

**T**he pretense on her side was that she was asleep and on his side that he did not know of her pretense that she was asleep.

This was during the second fall and winter of their living together when G. began getting up before dawn, dressing in the bathroom not wanting to disturb her, then quietly leaving the apartment to jog in the park, rarely for less than an hour, and frequently more: and K. lay in bed unmoving as if asleep, waiting until he was gone before fully opening her eyes. At the start she had tried to go back to sleep but failed, trapped in her spinning thoughts as in a deranged kaleidoscope, so she too began rising early, 6:30 AM, 6:15 AM, and one January morning not knowing what she meant to do she dressed swiftly, fumbling for her clothes as in an emergency, for perhaps it was an emergency: *I have to know*.

So in the frigid dusk-like dawn of the wintry city there was K., a young woman of integrity, a young woman of pride, and self-respect, who abhorred hypocrisy, and never lied—there was K. following G. in her car, knowing the route he would take to the park, if he was going to the park: a mile-long median strip of a wide boulevard where in warmer weather she'd run with him occasionally. K., who was not an athlete, was never able to keep pace with G., but she'd exerted herself so gamely and with such resolve he'd smiled at her in affection, as one might smile at a child; he hadn't shown the impatience she'd sensed he felt, for G. was a marathon runner, he took it all very seriously, to the point of defining himself as a runner who did a little architectural design on the side. (Which was meant to be amusing, witty, the sort of oblique humor with which G. and K. and their friends communicated, understanding one another perfectly.)

There are code-words, unmistakable signs, you understand without analysis. Who was it, a French artist they'd studied in one of K.'s undergraduate art history classes, saying *The world is a forest of signs*.

The absence of words too is a sign, obviously: silence. And the absence of touch. The unspoken like a deepening pool of shadow not to be acknowledged. Mutual pretense.

But K. wanted to know and so that morning, breathless, her bulky down coat over her flannel nightgown, bare feet in boots, she hurried to her car and drove slowly, cautiously, tremulously, no headlights, along the boulevard, past the old, spacious,

still-darkened houses of another era, sighting G.'s figure as he ran ahead: with that look, she could not help but think, of running from something.

K. had no difficulty recognizing G. The median strip, beloved of runners in the city, was virtually empty at this dreary hour; and there was no mistaking G. in any case—tall, narrow-shouldered, purposeful and graceful in his running, a white-knit cap on his head, gray down parka, gray runner's pants. K. drove slowly, about a half-block behind. Thinking, *This isn't really me doing this. But I have to know.*

For, when G. returned to the apartment, he wouldn't be hungry for breakfast, he'd explain that he'd stopped for coffee and a bagel, nor did he want to make love, of course, never now was this early time of exquisite privacy a time of love for them, as once it had been. G. would have to leave for work by 8:15, and so was preoccupied with showering, shaving, dressing for his lengthy day, a day that in winter stretched from one darkness to another. Not words but the absence of words. *The absence of touch. I'm not jealous, and I'm not upset . . . I just want to know.*

She was watching G.'s figure a half-block ahead, never varying in speed, rhythm. Her vision blurred, the harsh cold air of the car's interior brought moisture to her eyes. She'd forgotten to turn on the heater.

G. turned now onto another street, as K. knew he would, for the park was in that direction; and K. followed, discreetly, hugging the right curb as faster-moving vehicles passed her. There were trucks here, city buses. K. drove as slowly as she dared, keeping G.'s figure in sight as if to look away from it, for even a split second, would be to lose it. Now there were other runners approaching the park, figures in parkas, heavy-knit sweaters, here and there a woman among them. How could they! In this cold! K. had to stop across the street from the park, idling her car in a no-parking zone, and here, sitting very still, she saw what she had been preparing herself to see yet had not believed she would actually see: G. was greeting one of the woman runners at the entrance to the park, clasping hands in a gesture midway between the emphatic handshake of friends and the more intense hand-clasp of lovers. He'd stopped, he was smiling, talking. The young woman was smiling up at him. She was no one K. knew—was she? K. stared, blinking moisture from her eyes, watching in a state suspended as certain kinds of pain are suspended. G. and the young woman ran into the park, still talking, companionable side by side.

Had they met by accident, or by pre-arrangement? K. did not want to think which.

They'd quickly disappeared into the park. Where K., in her car, could not follow. At least at this end of the park.

*It doesn't mean anything. He has friends, of course—women friends. A life before meeting you* instructing herself inwardly in the careful primer tone with which one might address a needlessly frightened child, *You know that!* even as her heart beat so rapidly she was in terror of suffocation.

She was going to drive away, anywhere—away!—desperate to be gone but her vision was so blurred and her hands so shaky she worried she might have an accident. So she sat, blinking tears from her eyes, determined to regain her composure. *You know it's nothing! you know.* Then she began to hear someone, a man, yelling at her, yelling rudely, she was parked in a loading zone at the rear of the hotel . . . so, quickly,

confused, she pressed down hard on the gas pedal, and the car leapt forward, and the engine went out, and there was a blare of horns and K. found herself suddenly the object of strangers' angry attention, in the center of an intersection. My God, if she was arrested! Hauled to a police station in her flannel nightgown!

She collected her wits, drove away. Through the intersection and onto a side street bordering the park. Townhouses, slender trees denuded of leaves, a wintry-mica glare to the sidewalk. She could not face the empty apartment, just yet. Though admonishing herself *You know he loves you: don't you know he loves you?*

She parked for a while. Then, self-conscious suddenly (for what if someone were watching?) she drove on, into the next block. Parked. Waited. Then drove again . . . unconscious of how much time was passing though aware of the increase of traffic on the street, and the gradual lightening of the sky. She was not thinking of G. Especially, she was not thinking of G. in an intimate relationship to herself, K. who was herself, this pale, distraught young woman with the disheveled hair sitting in her car with nowhere to go, no underwear, no stockings or socks just bare feet jammed into boots, with the look of an accident victim. She too had a day stretching before her: her job, and her twenty-minute commute to her job: but she was not thinking of that, simply sitting dazed as the heater now blew sickly-hot gusts of air into her feverish face *You know! he loves you.*

Sitting waiting not knowing for what or for whom she was waiting as if in a suspension of all emotion; like a great withheld breath whose locus was the entire city.

*You know. Don't you.* Driving on then quickly for a squad car was approaching from the rear, she should not be idling her car in such a place on a busy street . . . driving slowly and cautiously along the edge of the park until she found a way in, a curving road into the interior, this region of wintry beauty, placidity; and the squad car passed on by, and did not follow. Still she pressed down hard on the gas pedal, though she was crying. She thought it crucial that, if anyone happened to be watching, she should give an impression of being fully in control; of not crying.

Then she saw G., ahead. Running in the road, on the opposite side, away from her. In his white cap, his gray runner's clothes, unmistakable. And beside him the woman, a stranger, K. was certain she was a stranger, conspicuously smaller-bodied than G., unmistakably female in the motions of her body. And were they talking together, so companionably, with such a look of ease? When K. had run with G., he invariably pulled away from her after the first several minutes; he wasn't the type, he said, to chat while running. Except now.

K. was beginning to feel panic. What if, as she passed him, G. glanced up and saw her? He would know instantly why she was here. There was no other reason for her to be here, in the park, in her car, at such a time. *Following me? spying on me? My God!* K. could see G.'s hurt, angry, incredulous expression. His deep disapproval. He would stare at her as if he'd never seen her before—never before as she truly was.

K. stepped down hard on the gas pedal. She had to get out of there—had to escape. She gripped the steering wheel tight, intent upon passing the runners, speeding beyond them hunched over the wheel in such a way that, should G. happen to glance up (but what reason was there for him to glance up, absorbed as he was in his con-

versation with the woman beside him?), he would take no particular notice of her. Would he recognize her car, did he know the license plates? A wave of anger washed through K., that she was so desperate, so humiliated, and she pressed down harder on the gas pedal, and the car's rear wheels skidded on the damp pavement, and—so quickly! she scarcely knew what was taking place, only that it was taking place beyond her control—the car skidded in the direction of the runners.

A sickening plunge, a helpless sliding, a sudden jolting, K.'s teeth rattling in her jaw—the runners leapt aside, and the car struck a wire guard rail, lurched, bounced, came to a stop.

She saw their white, shocked faces. Strangers' faces. The man was perhaps fifteen years older than G., the woman was dark-haired, in her thirties, with small delicate features like K.'s own. How astonished, incredulous they were—so close they had come to being struck down! K. saw the color seep back raggedly into the face of the man she had believed was G., but who bore only a superficial resemblance to G., she heard his angry raised voice, she threw open the car door to stammer an apology, her knees were too weak to support her if she tried to stand, what if she fainted at these strangers' feet, but already the runners had turned aside from her, not running now but walking, stiffly, the man's arm around the woman's shoulders.

And so K. sat in her car, and wept. Though, weeping, breathless and trembling, she was elated, too, dazed with relief. For the man had not been G. The man she'd believed was G. had not been G. That was the fact, the single important fact. Nothing else mattered. She would drive back to the apartment, and very likely the apartment was empty as she'd left it, for G. would not have returned yet; G. would not know.

How happy she was, suddenly: whatever was to happen, it had not happened yet.