

THE MOONLIT PAGE

The Woman on the Cover



Hana put her book on the table with the woman facing up.

Ruth put hers beside it with the door facing up.

They had read the same novel. They had checked the title twice.

"I still think she should have left," Hana said.

"She'd only just arrived."

"Not at the beginning. At the end."

Ruth looked at the woman on Hana's cover. She wore a blue coat and stood beside a dark sea, holding something that might have been a suitcase.

"Who is that supposed to be?"

"Elsie."

"Elsie doesn't go to the sea."

Hana turned the book over, as if an explanation might have been printed on the back.

Elsie did not go to the sea. She went to a town to help her sister empty a house, and stayed long enough to discover that neither of them wanted it emptied quite as efficiently as they had first agreed.

"Perhaps it's before the story," Hana said.

“A very long time before. She doesn't own a blue coat either.”

They were meeting ahead of their book club because Hana liked to arrive with an opinion and Ruth liked to arrive having located the page that might complicate it.

Ruth's cover had a white door, a dark keyhole and no people. She had spent the first fifty pages waiting for someone unpleasant to come through it.

“It's the kitchen door,” Hana said. “Nothing comes through it except dinner.”

“I didn't know that at the time.”

The waitress brought their tea. They moved the books away from the cups and found the dinner scene.

Hana read a few lines under her breath. The sisters were sitting opposite each other with a dish between them. One asked whether there were any more potatoes. The other said she would look.

“Listen,” Ruth said.

She read the same exchange, leaving a small, suspicious pause before the reply.

Hana looked up.

“Now she's hidden the potatoes.”

“Possibly.”

Hana tried it again, briskly, as if the speaker had half risen before she finished speaking.

“That's how I heard it.”

“Then why did you want Elsie to leave?”

Hana glanced at the blue coat.

“She looked ready.”

Ruth laughed, softly enough not to disturb the next table. She turned back a page and found the description of the kitchen. The door was green.

Neither of them had remembered that.

“May I borrow your copy until Thursday?” Hana asked.

Ruth pushed it across. Hana sent the woman and the dark sea the other way.

For a while they read without talking. Hana went back to the first page. Ruth stayed with the dinner.

When the waitress returned, she asked whether they wanted anything else.

Ruth looked at Hana.

“We haven't decided about the potatoes.”

To remember

1. Hana and Ruth bring differently covered editions of the same novel and discover that the pictured woman does not match the character's actual journey.
2. Ruth admits her door cover made her expect a threatening arrival; they locate an ordinary dinner scene while keeping their tea clear of the books.
3. They quietly read the same exchange with different pauses, then check the kitchen description and find its door is green, unlike the cover.
4. They willingly exchange copies and read again; Ruth's answer to the waitress carries their private joke about the potatoes.