

AN ANTHROPOLOGIST IN METUCHEN

My whole life I've seemed to view the world as an anthropologist wandering through an unexplored landscape: a world that felt forever strange, unique, visually arresting. When I was a kid I rode my bike around the circle of Tamaques Way, and I imagined that the entire neighborhood was a film set: perfectly detailed — and I was a film director checking that each detail was in place. There were the three lawn chairs — arranged exactly as I had specified. There was the black Stingray bike on its side, back wheel still rotating. There was the aluminum weather stripping the wind had ripped from a roof. When I walk through Metuchen on these winter mornings — the houses mostly still dark, the melting frost on the car windows looking tiny frozen fir trees — the feeling is much the same: I'm walking through a perfectly composed film set. Lighting. Extras. The amazing detail of it all! The white-haired crossing guard in his green fluorescent vest and matching green ski cap. "I hate the cold weather," he snarls at me as I pass. I think of the phrase from *Great Expectations*: *It was a rimy morning*. What a beautiful old word (pronounced like "rhymey", meaning frosty.) There's the battered red Mustang convertible with its khaki cloth top parked always in the same spot in the St. Francis Cathedral School parking lot: a Rutgers decal on its rear bumper. To the side of the bench in front of the municipal building, I see what appears to be an abandoned walker — and I wonder if the elderly man I often see (bent double over it in the morning) has passed away — his walker orphaned forever. His name, I think, is George....

Luigi's Men's Styling Shop is now the generically named Main Street Barber Shop — and the red, white, and blue sign in the window (the word "Barber" cut in half) tells us that in addition to "Haircuts" we can get "Fades." I think: If you order a "fade" you get seated in the chair, and 40 minutes later you've completely vanished. "That's why you gotta pay upfront," explains the barber. Commuters walk past me, warming their hands around steaming coffee cups which they hold before them like votive candles. Both the Jewelry Shop and the Jewelry Doctor are not yet open; all the valuables have been pulled from their windows and replaced with decorative plates. I recently complimented Mike, the assistant physician at the Jewelry Doctor, on all the weight he'd lost, and he sang back to me: "I'm not half the man I used to be." I hum this song as I pass. At Smoker's Haven the bearded owner, in suspenders, puts out the display of empty cigar boxes. ("Empty Box Blowout. Limited Time Offer. \$3 each. 7 for \$10.) The guy in the window of Wade Appraisal, LLC sits (as always) in front of his dual computers, a Bluetooth piece in his right ear. Three women in the window of Brewed Awakening appear to be discussing the Hebrew books they're holding. Next to them two older guys in baseball caps and sweatshirts share *The New York Post*. At Boyt's, the woman behind the front counter talks to me about the holidays just passed. She's Ukrainian and we remember the old Kiev Restaurant on 2nd Avenue, and we both mourn its vanished chicken noodle soup and its potato pancakes.

She's part of my movie, standing exactly where she should be: framed in the arm of the Altec cherry-picker truck hoisting up the worker who's removing the Shop Small banner across Main Street. And as I return past the municipal building, I'm delighted to see old George, bent over his walker, shuffling down the street as slowly as a human being might

move. He's very much alive. I wish him a happy new year. He doesn't look at me but answers in a Middle European accent: "Cheppy New Year." I notice he's wearing dark blue trousers. I stand still, watching him move towards the church. Slow fade to black. Then the credits roll.