The houses were uniform, red shingle roofs, fibro walls, plain garden stifled by the heat of the afternoon. Row upon row, identical houses in lines, soldiers fighting in the war of modern housing. Stretched between them were bare tarmac roads and the occasional “car”, boxy, metal things on wheels. There were few signs of human habitation, a strung hills-hoist there, a lady in full skirt and heels on her way to the corner store, a few children playing on the dusty street. Even from a distance, and through the glass window, you could see something about them wasn’t right. Although the day was hot and dusty, their clothes were clean and beautiful, and around each person sat an aura, a sense of unnaturalness, a slight glimmer in the air around them. Or was that just a fancy.

Jo pulled her mind away from the scenery and back onto her text book. She was bored, dead bored. She flashed her hair back behind her ear with an irritated flick of her hand. Magic class! Which idiot had ever thought magic was worth studying? You could either do it well, or do it badly. Or not do it at all, said the harsh little voice in the back of Jo’s head. She shook her head to clear it.

It is a simple reality that there are some people who are simply exceptional in some way, shape or form, and these are the people that get noticed on the streets and remembered in history. Then, there are the rest of us, painfully average. Jo was just like that. She was normal in every way possible. She was of middle height and middle build, with mud brown eyes and common brown hair. She wasn’t creative or charismatic. The sentence, you wouldn’t look at her twice, was an overstatement. Where it concerned Jo, you probably wouldn’t even look at her once. There was only one factor that differentiated her, sitting in an average kitchen in an average house in the middle of suburbia, to all the other Jo’s, Peggy’s and Mary’s in all the other kitchen’s throughout Australia, and that was more a disadvantage brought about by a genetic quirk than anything.

Jo wasn’t magical. And everyone else was.

Jo finally closed her books and pushed them away, as a waste of time. She didn’t have the genetic capabilities to do magic and she didn’t think studying would be able to change that. Instead, she stood up and turned on the little television, the mid-range model, all plastic and small black and white screen. Channel one; there was one of those bland, mindless television presenters yammering away on his favourite subject, magic. Jo quickly turned the knob, jumping the second channel, which only worked when the weather was stormy and onto channel three. Of all things a sitcom. The mind-numbing Westernised stupidity of it was annoying. Again, an overuse of magic attempted to cover up a lack of plot, character, personality or any kind of interest at all, but it seemed to be doing fairly well so Jo could only assume no one else minded.

Jo turned off the magical box, in this case actually powered by magic, with an exasperated click. There seemed no way to escape from this mundane world, of boxes and hidden rules. The kitchen suddenly felt stifling, a cage, to be escaped from. Jo couldn’t stay there a moment longer.

Jo walked out into the dry air of the yard, bored and discontented. She wandered the small lawn for a while before, on a whim, setting off down the dusty road. No one was around. it almost felt like Jo was the only person on Earth, and she revelled in the freedom of it. No rules, no shame, no secrets to hide or social obligations to fulfill. She could taste the freedom, sweet like fresh honey. Laughter burst out, escaping her usual tight constraints.

“What’s so funny?”
He was tall and skinny, the type of boy who could be called gawky. Something about him reminded Jo of a crane, with a beaky nose and a reddened, blotchy face. He even walked like a crane; his legs folding like each had two knees, as he moved to tower over Jo.

"Nothing," Jo reacted instinctively, playing the part of the innocent, vulnerable girl. The kind of compliant girl who would grow up to be a compliant woman and housewife. It was an act she had been perfecting since birth, and one she could do moderately well, ducking her head humbly, twisting her foot, slightly melodramatic but usually effective. She had never known any male able to avoid becoming protective at the sight of a "poor, innocent girl." She peered coyly up through her lashes.

Apparently this boy was a first. He looked at her with a faint smile and the unmistakable glint of humour in his eyes. Jo was indignant, although she was careful not to let her feelings show on her face and spoil her act. How dare he laugh at her, as if she was something absurd created for his personal entertainment? Still, her eyes sparkled with suppressed fury, completely spoiling her natural good looks.

"What, you can't believe I saw through your little performance?" The boy was biting sarcasm, but amazingly accurate. Jo's eyes narrowed, crinkling the edges, before snapping wide open once more.

"No, I'm not a telepath, as you so ignorantly assumed. I am of a breed twice as rare, and ten times as talented. I am a logician." With that, he threw his arms wide, as if receiving applause from all around. It was a ridiculous vision, the skinny boy receiving the adulation of an imaginary crowd of spectators, of whom there was only a plain, confused girl. Jo could only imagine what a spectacle the two of them made. If anyone should happen upon them now, it would be a social death sentence. She glanced around hesitantly, fearfully. Only for a moment, of course, but somehow when she had turned around once again, the boy was right up in front of her, too close for comfort, looking into her with surprisingly piercing eyes. "But more importantly, what are you?"

"My name is Joanne," her face twisted briefly as she said it, like she tasted something sour. She hated the name, Joanne. It was boring, and plain, just like her and it was an effort on her part to tell him that much. Well, that irritating boy better be grateful he had gotten that much, Jo wasn't going to reveal any more. She simply lifted herself to her full height, still a full head below the stretched creature beside her, lifted up her chin and attempted to look down her nose at a person who towered above her. It was the same technique autocratic, noble women had used throughout the ages to cow brave men and bring kings to their knees. Unfortunately, Jo was as common and average as mud, and the approach made her look ridiculous. Still, the boy didn't laugh, perhaps the fierceness aight in Jo's eyes warned him off. He simply stood there with his head on one side and an enquiring expression on his face, looking more like a bird than ever. She exploded.

"What?" Jo was not a good actress. She couldn't retain a character for more than a few minutes at a time. Her own character was too strong, no matter how she tried to hide it.

"You didn't answer my question."

"Well, if you're waiting for my full name and address, you're out of luck." Jo's cheek twitched, and her eyes glinted like daggers, out for blood. Today had been an utter waste of time; she was just annoyed with herself that she could have been so free. It wasn't her lot to have freedom, she had to
fit in or lose out. It was just her luck this boy didn’t have the same restraints. Obviously rich, she reasoned.

“No, as a matter of fact, I’m not,” his voice chipped in again, part of the dialogue between a stranger and her most intimate thoughts. “Try to be more original. And you still haven’t answered my question.”

“What are you?”

His incongruous chatter continued his voice strangely commonplace to be speaking such harsh words. “Well, you’re a human, obviously, and a girl. Completely plain and just too boring. There isn’t the slightest element of mystery about you, no intangible quality to be grasped. You’re slightly dirty, just slightly, and overall completely devoid of interest.”

“Thank you for your amazing insights.” There was a prickling in the corners of Jo’s boring eyes, but she refused to give way, standing straight, holding her lips tight together and staring at the boy like a hawk closing in for the kill.

“But don’t you see, that’s exactly what makes you so interesting, at least here. Because everyone is mysterious, everyone has that same intangible or exotic quality; everyone is mind-numbingly interesting. It gets amazingly tedious after a while. Everyone is extraordinary except you. But then again, you’re not magical are you?”

He turned around, fluidly, and began to walk off, into the sweltering afternoon light. Or it had been. Now it seemed to have suddenly turned cold, at least Jo was shivering and felt clammy like a frog or a corpse. She forced herself to speak through her shock, feigning indignation, badly.

“How do you know that?” Jo’s voice cracked on the last word.

The boy stopped, considering, before looking back at her, black humour written across his face.

“Two things. Firstly, as I already said, you’re impossibly average. If you had even a spark of magic, the first thing you would do is make yourself more interesting. It’s just human nature. Secondly, you’re not dying.”

With that he spun on the spot, striding off along the road, and more real than the well-kept, suburban houses shunted into the background by his presence.

“Who are you?” Jo was panting now, and her voice barely rose above a whisper, a quiet sigh hanging in the still air.

After a still, contemplative silence, the ‘boy’ responded. “That was never the question.”

With that he left, to wherever it was that such things as him lived, a world where normal rules didn’t apply. And Jo was left, with a heart beating fast as a drum and a thought nagging at her, something he had said. No, it was nothing, but maybe...

Down the dry road, she walked, with a distracted, thoughtful, and almost calculating air. And, it was odd, but Jo seemed to have changed somewhat within the space of a few minutes. She seemed, if it was possible, more ordinary, more real. More real than the fake houses half plastic, half not there at
all. More real than the waxy, suburban gardens full of impossibly bright, perfect flowers. More real, even, than the occasional person, wandering home, with a contrived air of mystique and their impossible prettiness, glossing over their tired eyes, waxy sallow skin and all their other imperfections, everything that made them unique.

Slowly, Jo became more and more visible, moving through the counterfeit world, everything around her fading, until there was nothing left to see. Then she left to, to change the world, maybe, and with her, the last, best chance for humanity. Not human-kind but everything good that defines them. So what happened then? Well, my friends, that is another story.

Anna Hawkins