

The Lights from Houses

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Obviously I didn't know how to dress for the Midwestern cold, how to dress for the walk to the bar in the warehouse district, for that night together at the Doubletree, or breakfast with your sister's family—didn't know what you wanted, who I was meant to be. Coat too thin, skirt too short. Dry snow all week. I hadn't seen you for a year. I was freezing in Minneapolis.

Your sister had so many perfect things: a white couch, a kitchen island, a cowhide rug, clairvoyance. Her children were also psychic.

The littlest one sat close to me in the plush basement with the big television and exercise equipment. Smiling, missing three teeth, she unwrapped the charm bracelet I brought her, and—when you left the room—read my mind out loud.

She was so many perfect things: squeaky voice, pink socks, compassion. I wanted her to love me as much as I wanted to still love you.

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She read my mind, I told you later. We stood around the kitchen island with your sister, cupping mugs of herbal tea, lit by waning candlestick stumps and a perfectly dimmed sconce.

What did she say? You asked. The weight of the house's peripheral darkness made us whisper, made us hunch. The weirdness of being together again, like we were some kind of family after all, this also was in our voices, our bodies. You dipped your finger into a fresh pool of hot wax on the marble countertop like it was no big deal.

They talk to fairies too, your sister mouthed, and build little worlds. Their school encourages it.

How to explain this. She was not joking, but she wasn't serious either. There was a sleepy security in the way she leaned back against the unblemished fridge, pulsing out a laugh when I raised my eyebrows.

But I knew about your family—of course this is what I had loved—the mythos, that out of six siblings your sister was the only one with real powers. That your parents had named you *bringer of light*, believing you would keep them safe when the big shift came, the apocalypse, when the world would be wiped of those who couldn't keep up with the evolving consciousness. That one of your aunts had a meltdown climbing Machu Picchu because there were too many dead people trying to talk to her at once. That this fostered some resentment in your mother, who, you speculated, felt left out. Felt, perhaps, she was not special enough.

Years ago, when we first met, I cried when your sister told me how many past lives you and I shared. It was all I'd ever wanted. Suddenly everything had meaning, was real and not real. Everything mattered and nothing mattered. Suddenly I had never been alone. Not really. After that I starting letting you fuck me in the ass, feeling all I could possibly feel, knowing what it meant to have been known for centuries.

And (I know I know, but) there was a night once on an island when light swam out of your chest and clung to my hair, neon drool trailing between us while the biggest and oldest universe began to tilt—trees breathing, rosehip bushes buzzing, the bay waves tinkling like tiny wind chimes, coaxing pebbles back into the sea. We looked at each other and up at the sky and cried without making a sound, because (this is how I remember it) you'd seen it, too. You were not outside of me. Not like everyone else. From the front yard we watched the empty beach house shudder, orange light pulsing from the windows like living organs. I could smell the age of them. The dust in the throw rugs, the salty quilts, the out-of-tune piano.

For years after I kept seeing it, that melty electricity between us in the dark as we fell asleep. Proof; that's what I remember thinking.

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As a kid I coveted all miniature things. Dollhouse foods made of colorful clay, heart-shaped lockets, acorn caps, tiny porcelain tea sets, hotel sewing kits, and the half-sized shopping carts at the co-op where my mother bought bulk granola—scarce and precious, claiming one was like finding a piece of blue eggshell in the backyard, only there for those who really look.

Artists speculate that we're attracted to miniatures because they allow us to experience perspectives not otherwise achievable, to suspend reality. Or that they invite us to pause, to look hard and with uncertainty. To lie on your belly in the grass and focus on one single blade, see the beetle who is living there. To pay attention is to be reverent and then somehow outside your body. Connected. Not alone. A woman in Japan who has etched a comic onto a strand of human hair. A man in Russia who sculpts golden shoes for fleas, who welds camels and guns into the eye of a needle, on the cross section of an apple seed. He can only work, he says, between heartbeats.

Of course I believed in fairies, too. Inside the little bark house I nailed together, my mother left gauzy ribbons and smooth shards of quartz for me and my brother to discover in the morning, running down to the garden, feet slippery with dew and caked with mown grass. Gnats swarming around the rotted knot of an oak tree were so small and erratic, it was difficult to be certain of their shape. They would hear me if I spoke to them—if I looked close enough I could see ears.

Sure, you said whenever fairies came up in conversation, but it's more than that for these kids.

I could tell you were jealous by the way you sucked your teeth.

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Your sister's son was her eldest. Ask him about the masks, she said, rolling out a lemon on the kitchen island, releasing the juice. She sliced the lemon in half and dropped the glistening hunks into a glass pitcher of ice water. Then she sprayed the counter with an organic lavender mist and wiped it clean with a cloth towel. Her nails were neat and cut short.

You and I went upstairs and stood against the wall while the boy pointed to four Mayan relics strung up in a row. I nodded when he told us what the masks told him: something about the earth and the future, about not being afraid. This was before the apocalypse didn't happen. Or did. Either way, the kid was ready. The room smelled of incense; the blinds were drawn against the swing set, the garage, the guesthouse, the road to the lake where the boy's father's speedboat waited beneath a tarp for spring. I was quiet, watching the kid, watching you. All afternoon my eyes were big and open.

But in bed that night I was my usual self.

I'm sorry, I said, but what the fuck? (I was a little drunk.)

Yikes, you said. (An unmistakable cringe.)

So I went down on you beneath the flannel sheets to take it back, I suppose—my disbelief or resentment. To make peace. Quietly pretending to be nineteen again, when you had not yet seen the bitter and cynical parts of me, the feverish need, the lonesomeness. The stuff you hated because it looked so much like your stuff.

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In the morning we all went out to the snow-stubbed driveway in our pajamas to admire their brand new white Range Rover. The kids chased their puppy around the frozen yard. Your sister's husband was Chilean. He worked for a big company, spreading GMOs and herbicide. He traveled a lot and your sister was often left alone with the kids, the house, her cowhide rug, her crystals, and her meditation room.

This is exactly what she wanted, your sister's husband said, wrapping her up with both arms. (He was ecstatic.)

Well he knows I would send it back if we could have him around more, she said. She showed us how she could heat it up with a button before leaving the house.

I think she saw how it looked. The new car, the excess. I think we all saw how it looked close up, the three of us. As though someone was owed an explanation. Here I was, spending the holidays at your sister's house, drinking her tea, borrowing her mittens. Here you were, inviting me. Here she was, with her husband's money and her indigo children. I stood beside you, the stillness of the thin morning air ringing around us like the end of a tolling bell, and tried to be kinder, to see us all doing our best.

Later (my big mouth) I rolled my eyes: A Range Rover?

We were naked, flossing our teeth in the bathroom, waiting for the shower to heat up.

It's tough, you said. Another cringe, but this time it was different. I wasn't sure we were talking about the same thing.

I'm having a hard time understanding what's going on here, I said. Like, what's real.

What did you expect? You asked, and spit.

Then we looked at each other's faces in the steamed-up mirror and saw that you were uncertain, too—about me, about your family. How much easier it used to be, to see what we wanted.

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Once, a year earlier, when we were both living in Santa Monica, I followed you to a Hooters off the promenade because I didn't think there was anything else to do. We ate wings—me, you, and your roommate—and drank Coors Light, and I passed out in your bed after a drowsy walk home in the sun. When I woke up in the twilight I was dizzy and sweaty, seeing white spots and black holes where none should have been. Your eyes slid off your face when I tried to hold them in focus. My ears throbbed with the tide of my own blood. You drove me back to my father's friend's garage, where I was staying—where I had moved from New York to finally

be with you—and I begged you to lie down on the futon and talk about how strange the world looked.

I'm tripping, I'm tripping, I kept saying, because I wanted you to tell me it was ok, to tell me about hallucinations and past lives, about the future and not to be afraid.

But you had somewhere to be.

It's probably just food poisoning, rancid cooking oil, you said gently. (Were you always more rational?) You'll be fine.

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One night at your sister's house we camped out in the basement with the kids, falling asleep with the littlest one next to us on the floor. When I woke before dawn, she was lying on her back with her hands behind her head, one ankle resting on her bent knee. Such a grown-up posture that at first I was not sure if it was real. Her eyes were wide open, big round whites slick and reflective in the moonlight. I could see that she was smiling, as though remembering something sweet and very old, but without regret, without longing; a dream, a love letter. As though she already had everything she needed. I could not understand.

Are you ok? I whispered.

Yes, she said. I'm thinking. She faced me briefly, smiling with all her missing teeth.

About what? I asked.

It's possible she said she was thinking of nothing. Or that I read her mind. (But I remember her saying it was the woods she was wondering about. About the woods and who was in them. And I panicked because time was running out and I wanted her to tell me something else, anything else she knew. I wanted her to keep looking at me, to know me.) Then she

turned back to the ceiling, back to the biggest and oldest universe tilting around her, back to her perfect peace, and I felt a familiar sharp pang whining up through my guts. Hollowing me out from inside.

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Your sister had given us passes to a yoga studio as a Christmas present. At the end of the week we drove fifteen minutes to the strip mall but never got out of the car. In the parking lot you told me you were moving to Budapest. Just for six months. Just for work. You asked how I felt and I said fine, because of course I had been trying to stop caring about where you went since you told me to leave California without you. Still, I cried a little; this was the third time you had tried to leave me in someone else's car.

Maybe you could come visit? You said.

I yelled at you: Get your shit together! I stamped my boot against the dashboard: Make up your mind!

Then it was dusk. Women, lanky and bundled, trickled out of the studio door onto the salted pavement, unlocked SUVs with the touch of a button, and drove away.

Before going back to the house we parked by a pond and walked the narrow half-mile trail around its shore, out of habit mostly, to make some space for the unreal so maybe we would feel more real. I don't remember whose idea it was, but this was the kind of thing we always did. Make up rituals.

The night sky was overcast, no stars. More snow on the way. Far off, blocks of light shone from scattered houses beyond the icy meadow, and I remember longing for them, and then of course for you, or the memory of you, a few steps behind me. The lights were small, hovering out there in the void, the only indication of shelter for miles. I imagined the miniature people inside. Little families getting dressed for parties, pulling on tights and merino wool, shouting over the hum of a hairdryer, finishing off each other's first glasses of wine.

Or maybe I was looking at it all wrong. Maybe we were the small things.

I remember saying something out loud, something like: I want that someday, those lights from houses.

I think you knew what I meant. I think you understood that you were not a part of that someday anymore. (I think you knew, though I cannot be sure. I cannot be sure if I knew either.) But it was New Year's Eve and I was warm in your sister's mittens and her REI parka, still feeling hopeful and very alone, which was the way I remember always feeling with you. Nothing had changed, not really.

Now when you visit New York, you get drunk and leave your hand on my thigh under the table all night long.

THIRD COAST

I worry all the time about what I could be missing. What I did miss. I worry about paying attention, about being reverent enough. Sometimes it is the only way to feel less alone. On the train from Brooklyn to Manhattan, I wait to catch a glimpse of the zoetrope in the tunnel before the track emerges to cross the East River. It makes my throat hurt if I think about it too much: in the seventies an artist installs two hundred and twenty eight paintings behind a light box, so that as the train speeds by, the painting appears to come to life. Red splotches spread into spiraling yellow noodles, orange and blue squares are shuffled like playing cards, a friendly rocket ship blasts off into orbit. If the train stops, there is no film, there are no pictures, just slivers of light seeping through dirty slats. It's a beautiful trick.

Over the years the zoetrope disappears from neglect—the last fluorescent bulb blows out, layers of grime and graffiti cover the original work—only to be cleaned and restored several decades later. Somebody, more than a few bodies (and this is the part that hurts), believed in its worth, as if they understood how badly people might need this thing of sweetness, a gift of momentary awe, available only to those who look at just the right moment. Fifteen seconds? Twenty? A robin's egg.

Each morning I face the tunnel wall and wait for the show like a pilgrim, devout. Look up, look closer. This is what you have been waiting for. There is something more than darkness, something better. Something just for you. It works like a mirror—it says, you are known. This is proof.

And then it's over, and the sudden muddy black beyond the subway car window could be anything. It could be the woods.

THIRD COAST