

LIGHT JUNKIE

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“Payment?” the woman asks you with clear distrust.

You open the lid of the black box, just a crack. Brilliant, blinding light leaks out. You close it quickly, and the box dissolves back into the shadows of your hands.

You both wait a moment to savor the luminous residue coating the inside of your eyelids—moonlight in a world of perpetual night.

But the box is quickly reabsorbing the escaped photons.

When the lingering light fades to shimmering black, then smoke black, then mud black, then dull black, then black black, the woman finally acknowledges the receipt of payment.

“One quarter flux.” She takes the box to discharge it.

You scratch at your beard in anticipation—a tic you’re glad she can’t see.

“Here,” she finally says. You can feel that her arm has moved by

the displacement of the air.

You reach into the black black and follow the warmth of her body heat to her outstretched hand. It is holding a syringe.

But soon, you are holding it. And soon, you are sitting in your favorite dark corner of your favorite dark alley, tucked away from the dark streets full of people using every sense but their eyes to see their way in and out of homes with aesthetically pleasing wall art no one will appreciate again, of unlit grocery stores to select canned goods by the sound of their shaken innards, of labyrinths of office cubicles now used for the kind of work the VP of HR could never have imagined (even while tugging the slug during his scheduled, closed-door, “ideation time”).

You uncap the syringe. Feel the veil of air between the needle tip and your open eye. Even though you can’t see it, you blink on instinct. Lashes brush past metal, razor-sharp.

You force your eyes open. You stick it in.

* * *

A white waterlily unfolds. A fly, shimmering green, lands on it. The green becomes the sunlight filtering through summer trees. Mint leaves are stirred through a mojito with a silver straw. Sparkles on rippling water. Golden hair as bright as a 10,000 lumen lightbulb before they were all stolen, broken, or burned out.

* * *

The sound of a drum beats your brain back into consciousness. Your head throbs to it. You feel pressed down into the concrete by the weight of the darkness. At some point, your light-hallucinations turned to dreams. You keep your eyes closed. Focus on the filling and emptying of your lungs. Try to remember how your fingers slipped through that golden hair like wind through

a North Dakota wheat field. But the memory is forced—like reading a description of a sunset versus viewing it with your own two eyeballs. When you finally give up and open them, there is no difference than if you had left them closed.

If others bother opening their eyes in the black black, you can't know. But you bother. You're not sure whether it's an act of hope or stubbornness. Or masochism.

Every time you get lit, you become even more aware of what you've lost. What the world has lost. But you're past lying to yourself that you'll never do it again. You'd rather be dirty in the light than clean in the dark.

You feel sick, but you can't just stay here, face in the pavement, drool crusting in your beard, stomach tight as a drum.

As you exit the alleyway, you feel the street open up in front of you. The dark is less heavy here, less stale. Apart from the solid object beside you. You know it is there by the way the air has to move around it. How it absorbs the ambient sounds. Even though the streetlamp no longer functions, it has the audacity to still take up space. Self-important piece of— you kick it.

Yup, solid.

You walk. Out of sync with the relentless drumbeat.

Some people prefer to walk in the streets, but most are blocked by car crashes—drivers panicking without traffic lights or streetlamps in the headlight-eating dark dark. Many ended up abandoning their vehicles, blinker lights left flashing until the batteries ran out.

At first, after the sun never rose, everyone flailed around. Knocking over vases, cursing at whacked funny bones and foreheads hit on corners of cabinets. But as the weeks and months of

blundering blindness persisted, a heightened awareness arose. And while it took months more for some to stop stretching their arms out in front of them, eventually most settled into a trust of their senses, a knowing without knowing how, of where the sidewalk ended and the lip of the curb rose. Someone looking for an Alicia told you it was the brain learning how to echolocate. Like you're all bats in a cave, and that cave is what used to be your average dot on a map in bum-fuck USA. *Proprioception* was another term you've heard thrown around. Whatever the reason, people stopped tripping. Noses stopped bleeding. Blind faith took on a new and real meaning.

The drumming is getting louder. You are pretty sure it's coming from the church at the center of town; probably think they're guiding lost souls though the darkness to the light of Jesus or some shit, but you've never bothered to investigate. He wouldn't be there.

You're surprised no one has shattered the drummer's hands—drummers' (has to be more than one. Never fucking stops). There've been moments where you might have done it yourself, but the masses seem to like it. Some way to keep time. A beat for every second, double beat on the minute, and so on, and on, and on . . . because apparently, everyone else is afraid of losing track of it. But you don't see the point of keeping track of how long you've existed like . . . this.

Perfume ahead. Floral and soapy. It doesn't quite cover up the smell of unwashed undergarments. The inside of your nose itches. Sneakered feet pass on your left. Stockinged thighs rub against each other. Bracelets clink softly.

You imagine a secretary out on her lunch break "getting her

steps in,” heels tucked under her office desk. But the offices have all shut down. Maybe she used to be one. But why anyone these dark days would bother to dress in anything but sweats, you can only guess. Maybe she has nothing else to wear? Maybe it gives her a sense of normalcy? Maybe you don’t care.

“Carl,” she says as she passes. It was once a question.

“No,” you answer, indicating that you are not Carl and also don’t know any Carls looking for their lost one. You don’t need to ask the name of your lost one because you know that this is not him and no way his scent sensitivity could handle this lady’s level of spritz. But out of courtesy, you return the now obligatory greeting. “James?”

“No,” she says, power walking away in her cloud of stale perfume. A flutter of disappointment moves through you. But you leave it behind as you too walk on.

The intensifying beat and consequent headache indicate that you’re nearing downtown.

You hear the commotion a block away. Must be a couple hundred already congregated there. *Shit*. You slept too long.

The approaching motor drowns out those who, up until this moment, had waited patiently for its arrival but are now shoving and elbowing each other to get in a better position. It *almost* drowns out the sound of the drum.

You arrive outside the grocery store just in time to see two massive lights pull up. Their light doesn’t penetrate like normal. But this darkness is not normal. Denser. The delivery truck’s headlights search into it like a deep-sea submarine.

The morning after the sun never rose, people were afraid. Most hid in their homes, carelessly using up all of their candles and

flashlights, even lighting multiple at once because they were terrified of the dark. When they went out, it was with generator-run strobe lights and flashlights with a full pocket of batteries. That was before folks wised up and started to hide their light behind closed curtains or down in windowless basements. Before people were mugged for a keychain flashlight. Before every match had been struck and burned to the finger-singeing end. Before whole houses were set on fire and let blaze to embers.

All the batteries were instantly gone from every store. Those who saw the writing on the wall? Or had they been removed ahead of time? You never saw the point in speculating, though you seemed the only one. In the early days, everybody exchanged life stories with every body they bumped into on the street. *Had the sun gone out? It was cooler, but not dark-side-of-the-moon cold; why not?* They congregated together for rigorous debates in Town Hall. *Why wasn't the electricity working? How were they supposed to hear news without electricity?* Talked themselves in circles. *Why was the darkness so thick? Volcano eruption somewhere? Dust cloud? Government experiment? Some alien weapon?* You went to a couple of them yourself. It was the sort of thing James would have gone to. But while there had been a few other Jameses, none of them had been your lost one.

The second the truck stops, people gather around the headlights like moths. A fluttering of frantic pale faces and flux boxes gorging on photons, significantly dimming the effectiveness of the bulbs. You'll never get close enough to collect more than a stray photon or two, and you need more than that to refill your box. The one you just emptied took weeks.

Next truck—another will come.

You hear the *click cla-clunk reeeeeeep kunk* of the trailer doors being opened. They're never locked. Some self-appointed do-gooders begin unloading the floor-to-ceiling boxes of provisions. Other do-gooders stand guard, creating a path from the truck to the store doors—once automatic, now permanently wedged open. You're pretty sure they're only guarding the goods so they can keep all the canned peaches for themselves.

You missed out on the flux, but you stay for your ration. The line moves quickly when no choice is offered. Some peach-stealer hands you a can. You shake it and hear corn sloshing inside. At least it isn't mushrooms.

Where the food is coming from, you've got no clue and far as you know no one else does, either. *Backstock from before? Warehouse full of grow lights still on the electric grid, somehow? Or could it be that not everywhere is as dark as here?* When the trucks first started coming, the crowd called out to the driver. Begged him for answers. Called him a coward for not getting out to help them unload. Once, there was a riot and the cabin door was pried open. That's when they discovered that there was no driver inside. Someone looking for a Raheed told you that self-driving vehicles use infrared cameras so they can "see" in the dark. The headlights were for show.

As you walk away, downing every last drop of sweet corn juice, you hear voices from inside the truck's now emptied cargo space—people who've finally had it with waiting around for answers. Many have left in the truck, packing themselves in nearly as tightly as the stacked boxes of canned goods. They always say they will come back and tell everyone what they discover, but to your knowledge, no one has ever returned.

You stay.

It's not even a question. You know this place. You know where to find the payment and where to take the payment. Wherever it is the trucks go, you don't know that place.

You let your senses "propriocept" you to the business district. Dusky cubicles in dusty offices.

You once had a cubicle here. Can't do data entry with no electricity. Can't do anything else with no skills.

Before the sun never rose, you would have considered sex in the dark to be anonymous. But now, you know your hookup by the way they smell, by the oiliness or roughness of their skin. And you can feel their face to find out features: nose size, hair line, age. Or you could. But you've decided you like to envision everyone who you let fuck you as gym bunny beautiful. Sometimes you even imagine celebrities. Why the fuck not? Henry Cavill railing you from behind. It's hot. But most of the time, you just think of James.

* * *

You run your hands around your hookup's collar. Down his sleeves. Over his chest. He's thin, but not fit. Most are thin these days. Why work out when you have no one to impress and you need to conserve every calorie you can get?

He smells like cedar. His skin is soft and slightly doughy.

As you take his pants off, you feel it sewn into his jeans pocket: the hard, cylindrical shape of a battery.

When you're done, you get dressed first.

"Hey, I think you put on the wrong pants," he says.

But you're already out of there.

* * *

"Toooooe Beans!" you call out as you approach your front

door. “Toe Beans!”

You can’t imagine how an animal could survive in this. Nothing to eat, but each other.

In the early days, the sidewalks crunched with dead leaves. Now, they’ve been crushed to dust. The insects are as silent as winter. There might be rats living in some dump somewhere, but fuck if you know where garbage goes. You haven’t heard a bird in months. Either they all died or flew to where there wasn’t perpetual night. Maybe they were just sick of these fucking drums.

“James?” you call out as you enter. You knew there would be no answer, but still, that flutter of disappointment.

Deadbolt. *Click.*

Your reach finds the chairback of what used to be the sit-and-take-off-your-shoes chair, back when you cared about things like getting dirt on the new oriental rug. It is now the barricade-the-door-so-that-I’m-not-murdered-in-my-sleep-for-this-battery chair.

Scraaape. Clunk. You wedge it under the doorknob. Test it.

You turn towards what once was your living room but is now your barely-living room. The darkness here is empty despite the absurd quantity of decorative objects that James artfully assembled around the place. Empty of laughter. Empty of dreams. Empty even of arguments.

You count the steps as you walk upstairs—*one, two, three, four*—not that you need to anymore. Just habit—*eleven, twelve, thirteen*—

In the early days after the sun never rose, you spent most of your time in this house. Counting the steps from the bed to the toilet. From the bathroom to the couch. From the couch to the

closet, half of it empty of everything but hangers. Plenty of space to sit on the bare floor and wonder in what other closet James' tragic Carhart hoodies were now hanging.

You told yourself you were waiting to see if the cat would find his way home, but even you knew that was the ass end of a shit excuse. Sure, James had packed most of his clothes and his toiletries and his precious bookmark collection, but he'd said he'd be back for the rest. Separated didn't mean broken.

How perfectly pathetic—to have thought that the dark dark would somehow scare him back to you like a kid afraid of shadow monsters. Like he isn't more afraid of being hurt by you.

Even though you undress without light, you feel exposed. Naked.

Water still runs but it's *ice-cutting-cold*, and you shower as quickly as possible. The body wash has long since been used up but there's still a few drops of dish soap. You allow yourself one.

You shove the battery into the very bottom corner of your pillowcase for peace-of-mind. James' pillow you put over your head. It no longer smells like him. You wish you had paid more attention to how he smelled, but he was so fucking pretty you barely noticed anything else. You still hear the drumming, but at least it's muffled.

When you wake, you don't remember what you dreamed. If you remembered your dreams, maybe you wouldn't need to get lit so often. You have no idea what time it is, either. If you listened to the drums, maybe you would know. But why would you want to know how long you've been alone?

* * *

You wait in the alleyway until the woman arrives. It takes a while, but she always shows.

LIGHT JUNKIE

She inserts your battery into her tester. It glows orange.
Almost dead. *Fuck.*

Worth something, but not enough.

You head back to the office district. Sure to enter a different building. Watch out for the smell of cedar.

No batteries on this hookup. Even better. A flashlight—at first, you thought it was something else hard.

She tests it, the briefest burst.

You stick the syringe in.

A silver straw stirs. Sparkles on rippling water. Golden hair. Bright as a 10,000 lumen lightbulb.

The drums are still beating.

Suuuck plop. You know it's black beans before you pop and peel the can open.

The answer to "James?" is still no.

The water in the shower is still cold.

You imagine Timothée Chalamet this time.

Golden hair. Bright as a 10,000 lumen lightbulb.

Today's menu features a cold can of waxy green beans.

Still no James.

Still no hot water.

Still the drumbeat. Maybe if you just *threaten* to break their hands.

You catch a whiff of cedar and decide that today isn't a good day for the business district.

You walk your old neighborhood instead. Past the basement apartment you once fondly called "the spunk bunker." Where you brought James home from that party after you bonded over both being from North Dakota, only a town and a hundred miles of wheat fields over from each other. Back when all your plates were disposable and you didn't know to use fabric softener. You've already searched there, but the nostalgic in you still likes to pass by.

Even though there are no lights in the windows, you know which houses aren't occupied by the silence. Homes of those who left on the truck or who felt safer living communally in the old mall. And if you're not sure, you just test the door — every house has been broken into at this point unless someone inside has barricaded it shut. If it opens, no one's home.

You walk up the garden path and feel dead plants brush past. Someone landscaped this once. What a waste of effort.

Something else brushes your legs. A tail curls around your calf. "Toe Beans?" you ask stupidly.

The cat meows pitifully in reply—not a meow you know. How this cat is still alive—

"Peter? Erin?" comes a young woman's voice from somewhere further up the path ahead of you.

You're startled by her presence. Cat must have distracted you.

"No," you reply. "James?"

"I know a James."

The flutter in your gut feels like a butterfly trying to beat its way off a spider web. "James Haart?"

"I'm not sure. We can ask him. He's inside."

You have to be careful not to trip over the cat as you follow the sound of the young woman's steps up the path.

Key in lock, and she *scrapes* the door open.

The smell hits you like a bag of cat litter in the stomach, and you almost puke. Cat piss. Old cat food cans. Cat dander. You wretch. Breathe in a cat hair, or few. Gag. Too many cats to count circle your feet.

You're about to turn heel when she says to the room, "James?"

This is the sort of lost cause he'd get caught up in. Saving all the fucking cats in town.

But then, you think how the stench would cause his sinuses to fill, and then he'd get that inner ear thing that caused the vertigo he was always being a drama queen about. No way he could handle—

A gust of rank air rushes towards you. Your head smashes to the side in a bright flash of pain.

The rush of air again. Even though you know what's coming, there's no time to duck.

"Wait!" you yell.

Too late. What feels like a shovel makes contact with your skull again.

"I'm sorry but they're starving! And it's not their fault."

A third blow. You stagger. There's a warmth on the side of your head. You wouldn't be surprised if it's cracked open.

"I have a cat!" you call out.

No blow comes.

You use the opportunity to fumble behind you for the doorknob. "Toe Beans. He'll starve, too, if I don't make it home."

Your palm cups smooth, domed metal . . .

"I'm sorry for Toe Beans, but he's just one cat and there are so

many—”

... and you fucking *bolt*.

Your footfalls sync with the drum beat as they pound out your surroundings: Post box. Dead tree. More self-important streetlamps.

Crazy Cat Lady’s strides are slightly off-beat as she pursues—probably hoping you’ll collapse from the concussion so she can finish you off. They echo off the houses that line the block.

She’s calling out to you. What sounds like, “Just one cat!”

You hear the distant rumblings of a motor. Veer towards it. See the glow of moth people. *Reeeeep kunk cla-clunk*. Hear the doors close.

“One more!” you shout as you sprint to the truck, stitch in your side.

Reeeeep. For once, you’re thankful for whatever do-gooder is on door duty.

You slide in.

Kunk. Cla-clunk. The trailer doors close you safely inside.

The vibrations of the truck reverberate through you. It lurches forward, and you bump into another body. Haven’t done that in a while.

“Sorry,” you wheeze as you find an unoccupied spot to sit against the trailer wall.

You wipe the sweat from your forehead on the sleeve of your jacket, or could it be blood? You sniff it. Rust. You can only hope the wound isn’t too deep.

There are fourteen other bodies in the cargo space with you. You know them by their distinct breath. Breath that smells like

lima beans. That smells like Listerine. Breath that is shallow. That is trembling. That is steady and almost meditative. Your own: breath ragged and irregular and tasting a little like cat feces. Such diversity.

What you all had to go through to choose this truck on this day would be quite the story. If you had it in you to care.

“Erin? Oliver?” asks a woman’s tearful voice. She sounds middle-aged. No one replies.

“Amy?” asks a younger-sounding man sitting beside the crying woman.

There’s a pause. Then it continues around the circle of bodies.

When it’s your turn, you think, *There’s no point. What would be the chances?* But everyone is waiting for you to ask it, so you do. “James?”

Always that disappointment.

“Todd?”

“Randy?”

“SinJuan?”

“Cathy?”

“Lilly?”

“Um, I’m Lilly,” responds a voice. Every single body inhales. It’s like all of the oxygen has been sucked out of the cabin. “Brian?”

“Lilly, oh my god! Oh my *God!* I looked for you everywhere! I didn’t want to leave, but I thought by now—”

“I looked for you, too! I was on my run. Then all the street-lights went out. I got turned around. I was so lost.” Lily starts to sob.

“I *told* you those late-night runs—”

“I know, I know, I’m sorry! I’m so sorry!”

You have to endure a great deal of kissing and slobbering as the truck drives on. Everyone else is silent. Probably imagining the reunions they will never have. Your head is throbbing too much to think about anything else. Feels as if the drums have moved inside your skull. You don't know if it's the blows to the brain or the withdrawal setting in.

After what seems like hours, the emoting calms down.

"Does anyone else have to pee?" asks a timid voice.

"Hold it," says another.

"I don't know if I can anymore."

The trailer smells like a public urinal by the time you start to see the light leaking through the seams in the door. It's subtle. A dull black against the black black, but it's enough to send your travel companions speculating excitedly. *Maybe there's still power. Maybe it's moonlight. Maybe we'll be able to see the stars!*

When the door finally opens, you see light pollution in tiny pockets on the horizon.

"Exit the truck now," says the voice of someone who has repeated this a hundred times before. "Follow my voice now."

Since you were last to enter, you are one of the first to get out.

"Excuse me," you hear someone behind you ask. "Is it night?"

"No," says the voice.

So, the dark dark is here, too. Yes, you feel it. Pressing in on you, as if you've stepped out of the truck into a thick fog.

"Follow my voice. This way now."

Your fellow passengers stick together in a huddled clump. Something familiar. Though, until several hours ago, they had all been strangers. Well, except Lily and Brian.

As instructed, the clump follows. But you've never been a rule

follower. And who knows where this bureaucratic drone of a voice wants to take you. Wherever it is, you doubt they have what your unabating headache and itching skin are nagging you for.

So, you slip away. Head toward the distant glow. Probably just another moth flying into a flame.

* * *

All you have to do is follow the stream of light particles to its source. If only there weren't so many more obstacles between you and it. Street vendor stalls, newspaper racks, bus stops, fire hydrants, trash bins, traffic light posts, telephone poles, signs that once gave important information about handicap parking and where there was permit-only parking and where was absolutely NO PARKING and which days were street cleaning days and what would happen to you if you dared park there on a street cleaning day . . .

And more people. The tone of the greeting here is less "Could you please tell me if you are or have heard of a James?" and more "You better tell me where James is or I'll fucking cut you."

You feel like you've been walking for hours. You find a street bench and sit down beside what feels like a wad of blanket and some soggy cardboard. Your feet are begging to breathe, but you don't dare unshoe them should the owner of said wad return. You rest only as long as you need and then get on with it.

Sometimes headlights pass—it seems a number of the streets have been cleared of crashes—but they'll mow down anyone who tries to capture their flux. No walking down the middle of the street here.

The light is getting brighter as you move towards it. You begin to distinguish mud black from the dull black.

You unclip your flux box from your belt where you always keep it in case you pass by a lost photon. Run your thumb across its surface, slick with solar panels.

When you get to the source, there are moth people six deep along the perimeter of a fence, flux boxes lifted high, trying to collect what they can from the beam of light that lured them there. It radiates up from a central skylight—a beacon of wealth—that casts a sooty glow over the surrounding darkness so that you can just make out the form of the massive mansion from which it emanates. The thump of music from behind its blacked-out windows calls to an old desire inside of you.

An armored vehicle appears.

It inches up to the gate, parting people like a plow through a landfill.

You try to squeeze yourself through the press of bodies so that you can get close enough to climb on and ride it inside the fence. Then stop yourself, mid-shove. Wonder why no one closer is trying to do just that? Freeze. They must know something you don't.

You close your eyes to block out the visual distractions. Let the sounds of the crowd echo off your surroundings. That's when you perceive the heavy presence of the towers.

A thousand centipedes creep across your skin.

When you open your eyes and look up, you see the black black silhouette of the guard tower looming.

The gunshot hits your ears, and you look over just in time to see a body slide off the armored vehicle and back into the crowd of trash people.

You will need to be invited in.

Life in the city takes getting used to. There are more objects to navigate around. People are more aggressive. More suspicious. The lines for the canned goods are longer. The shaken innards always sound like mushrooms. The drugs are more expensive. They're also stronger. More tempting. And you can earn flux by exercising for a light ration. Whole gyms retrofitted. Human-generated power. There's also talk of work just outside the city that earns you more, but you have to hand yourself over to a drone voice to get that gig. No thank you. Besides, your flux box fills faster. Days instead of weeks. But these weeks, you've been using less. Exchanging photons for information. On how to get into that palace of luminescence with its ever-present fluxbeam glow.

It's not easy. Resisting the lure of the needle.

You finally find your ticket in: she likes to show up to the mansion soirees with fresh arm candy. But it's a one-off. Her bodyguard will make sure you stay superglued to her side, and you'd have to be a very special lay for her to take you more than once.

When you finally locate her house (almost a mansion in its own right), the gatekeeper does not seem surprised at what you ask.

Click of a flashlight, and you're blinded. You used to have a face that got you into clubs for free, but you haven't looked in a mirror in a long time. Haven't shaved in a long time, either. You hope the drugs haven't made you look like a meth-head.

You meet the criteria, whatever they may be, and a security guard takes you through a pitch-dark gate straight to a pitch-dark pool house. The help isn't important enough to waste light on, apparently.

"Wash up. Suits are in the closet. You'll find one your size," the

guard instructs. “And don’t forget to floss.”

“Can I shave?” you ask.

“No. She prefers facial hair.”

* * *

You’ve been made to sit up front with the driver and bodyguard. There are only two seats. You’re practically penetration distance from the bodyguard’s lap. And he smells—greasy hair follicles and pomade.

It’s surreal to be inside the car as it pushes through the mass of light junkies surrounding the mansion gates. Every pale face is turned toward the headlights, hapless guppies mesmerized by an angler fish’s luminescent lure. So many faces that they all blur together into a sea of desperation.

You hear a bang. And another. The sea parts for you. The gates open.

You can’t help but feel important.

* * *

You can now feel the thump of the music in your chest. Makes you giddy.

There’s not enough ambient fluxbeam glow in the unlit vestibule to see your ticket in, but by the air that flows around her you sense someone that doesn’t take up much space. Slender. Frail. She smells like linen and lavender. Screwing an old lady; not exactly something on your bucket list.

“Mrs. Witherow,” acknowledges the bouncer. “And?”

Click. Another flashlight in the face.

“Guest,” she says, hooking her arm around yours. Voice is girlier than expected.

Another *click* and you’re dropped back down the mineshaft.

Something is pressed into your hand—pair of sunglasses. You slip them in your jacket pocket. Might as well ask a starving man to portion control.

The hooked arm tugs, and you follow it through a heavy velvet curtain. The clouds part. The long dark tunnel ends. And you step into white.

You hear yourself gasp. The body beside you giggles.

There is movement. Blurry shapes swimming through the milky light. You squint. The shapes move to the rhythm of the music. You realize they must be dancing.

The arm pulls again, and you are led toward Nirvana.

As your eyes adjust, you start to see colors emerge. A figure in cobalt blue, another in lipstick red. Beside you; iridescent lilac. *Color without a needle in the eye!* Silver trays float by carrying cocktails. Liquid amber and grapefruit pink and apple green. The waiters wear gold stripper-skimpy uniforms instead of tuxes. Others entertain on the dance floor. One, lathered in glitter with slicked-back blonde hair . . .

There he is, sparkling like a disco ball, spectacular to behold. Your estranged husband. James.

You blink. Make sure you're not light-hallucinating.

He stops dancing and just stares at you. You wonder if he looks so shocked because he's surprised to see you or if you really look that shit.

He slides through the gyrating bodies until he is standing only an arm's length away.

You want to say how you wandered the streets thinking of no one but him. How sorry you are for not appreciating him before. How you only exist for the drugs that let you relive that day by the

lake where the sun shone off his golden hair and you realized you wanted to marry him. But all you say is, “The cat is gone.”

“He’s here,” James says.

“Toe Beans? You took him?”

“I didn’t want him to starve.”

A slight tug on your elbow—Witherow has turned to speak with someone on her other side. You see her in focus for the first time. Do a double-take. Her hair is styled in a sweeping bob similar to that of the mature woman she’s in conversation with, only it’s strawberry blonde. She’s wearing a full face of make-up but doesn’t need it. Lilac ball gown is classy but slightly too big. And too formal for someone her age. Twenty-something? Makes you question how accurate your assumptions were in the business district . . .

“So, you’re with the Witherow heiress.”

“I didn’t know her before today,” you answer truthfully.

You can see in his eyes that James doesn’t believe you, but even in the dark, you would know. You lost his trust long before any of this.

You notice Agent Pomade—stance wide, hands clasped at his groin—eying you from his proper station several paces behind. Angle your body more in the direction of your ticket’s conversation.

James gets the hint. “I have to get back. I’ll find you later. You can see Toe Beans if you want.”

“I would have fed the cat,” you say as he dances away. You’ve never seen him dance a day in your life, before.

You keep having to remind yourself that you’re not