

Someone Else's Lights

Denise did not want to hear the complaints. *The light beamed directly through her bedroom window.* So? Close the damn curtains. Get blackout shades. It wasn't her problem.

Light was good. Neil got less angry when he drove up and all the floodlights were on. She would get home later, too late, from stocking the Kmart shelves, working the dead of the night shift so she could get to school next morning. The lights were welcoming, they made her feel safe.

In any case, he liked knowing she needed things to help her feel safe, like floodlights, and, in his mind, him. When that woman had come over from next door—Louise, her name was—he'd gotten angry at *her*, not at Denise, even when the lady was gone. And he'd been really good about keeping his anger inside while she was here, but in a way that it would be felt, anyways. When he did talk, his words were the above-the-surface part of the iceberg, the bright sunlit ice peaks visible; the magnitudes below were a dark, weightier blue ice pack that ballasted and anchored unfathomably. He always acted on the assumption that you could see the rest, but with plausible deniability. Generally most people couldn't; they might feel uneasy, but the waters were too murky for easy recognition. Denise could feel it to the deepest cold abyss.

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Louise gathered the dirty dishes from her mother's room, the breakfast of cream of wheat and sliced bananas almost untouched. She helped her mother to the bathroom, reaching under the older woman's nightgown to yank down her underpants before she sits. Her mobility had really deteriorated this winter. Last year, Louise's mother still thought she could go out and do things—run errands, make decisions, count change. Drive. Drive! One day she'd gotten herself to CVS, somehow, without hitting anything. She must have wandered the aisles, just randomly taking things off the shelves. The bag she brought home, or rather, was brought home with her, contained a package of erasable pens, three shades of hair coloring, Charms lollipops, Flintstones vitamins, nose hair clippers, and an Ace bandage.

The officer who brought her home explained to Louise that her mother had been sitting in the car next to theirs, a black BMW that did not at all resemble their beat up tan Corolla. The key wouldn't go into the ignition, of course, but she'd scratched up the dashboard trying to find the place where it would fit. The woman who owned the car found her there and called the police. She was kind and said that her insurance would pay for the damage and cleaning the seat, one box of dye having spilled out across the upholstery. Louise heard that after the work was done,

the woman traded in the car, that she was saying to everyone she'd never gotten into it again. People seemed to like telling her these things.

These days, her mother barely shuffled from one room to the next.

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Denise never knew what time Neil might get in, so the lights were always on. Just in case. They had a generator, not unusual in this rural area, houses mostly on an acre or more, self-reliance baked into the local DNA. Even a minor storm seemed to blow a transformer somewhere or knock a tree down. The local electric company was slow to make repairs. When the electric went out, the hum from gas-powered generators settled across the valley like a thrumming sonic fog.

The people next door didn't have one—Louise and her senile old mother. Not old, really, but senile anyway. You'd think they would be more careful about keeping the power on, especially in winter, but no. Instead, it's that complaining. The goddamn lights shown in the crazy old lady's window. The glare scared her. Well, too damn bad. Neil scared Denise when he got mad; you didn't see her going next door to whine about his issues with their lawn—too weedy, or the peeling paint of their walls, or their trees—needed trimming. All these things offended Neil. And who had to hear about it? Denise, that's who. So don't come over here complaining about lights.

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Too slow, too slow. Louise wasn't even sure what her mother understood anymore. They were her only words, for the last month. She'd utter them when Louise came to the room, hearing her mother awake, the look of covert terror on her face left over from what she'd been dreaming, or maybe seeing. When Louise walked her to the bathroom, carefully matching her mother's tiny, halting steps. "Too slow," her mom would say, dolefully, and Louise would have to grind her teeth not to say, "I know!" When her mother watched last year's dead leaves still hanging on the oak tree outside her window. "Too slow," she'd say, pointing at the small, needled branches. "Too slow." What did that mean? How was a tree slow? She was insistent. Louise felt her mother still knew what she meant. Even if these were her only words.

The tree was too slow.

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There was a blizzard coming, Neil said. No he didn't need to watch the weatherman or check online; he could feel it. He liked saying things like that, like he was some old-timer on a general store porch somewhere last century. He was going out to get some work in before it hit. Denise didn't need to worry about him; he knew the roads and where he needed to go. She never asked him what he

was doing in particular. She knew he checked out houses for all the people who left for the winter, and shoveled and sometimes dropped off firewood for the ones who stayed. There was a sort of dance going on. The retired people were here all summer, then flew down south all winter. The college professors stayed on all winter, then left for less obscure, more fashionable haunts in the summer—Neil mowed their lawns if they had lawns, and surreptitiously drew off lumber from their woods if they didn't. Then he sold the wood back to them in the winter.

If there was going to be a storm, she hoped it didn't hit before she got home from Kmart. And that classes at the community college would be canceled early, so that at least she could sleep when she got home.

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In the middle of the night, when the light from those floodlights next door crashed through the open curtains, her mother would cower against her pillows. Wordless cries waking Louise, hours of calming her down again. If she closed the curtains, her mother would also cry, gesturing toward the window. No sleeping until Louise opened the curtains. And then the cycle started again. Closed, crying. Light through the opened drapes waking her, crying.

Last week, her mother stretched out a hand to her daughter's wide forehead, drawing a line down to her narrow chin. Louise's face didn't so much taper as pinch in, halfway down, like an upside-down gourd. Her eyes were large and round, her lips thin and short. She had wispy shoulder length dark brown hair, and bangs that never quite covered the dome of her forehead. She'd always felt like she looked like a badly drawn Tim Burton character. Her mother's gesture seemed to accentuate the odd shape. And then her mother drew her hand back and down her own skull-hollow cheek. Louise grabbed her hand and pulled it down.

"Stop it, Mom!"

If her mother thought she was making a connection, Louise wasn't having any part of it. The older woman began to cry, thin tears creeping down her papery skin. Then she pointed to the drapes again. Louise sighed and got up to close them.

"Damn it mom, I'm sorry." She reflected that she'd get reported if the home aide had seen that yank, her mother's skin so frail that even a gesture like that could leave a mark. The county sent her twenty hours a week of home respite care, and she spent most of those hours sleeping, venturing out only to stock up on groceries.

She was beginning to hate those lights.

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Denise decided to call in sick to work. Neil's going to be right about the weather. He always is. Life was easier when she remembered this.

The year she left school, the first time she tried to attend regular four-year college—a room in the dorm, a real plan to get a degree in audiology and work

with deaf kids—it was Neil who stepped in and showed her where she'd made mistakes, why things happened the way they did. It was Neil who followed her and the guy who'd spiked her drink out to the that fire lane behind the frat house, who'd decked the guy and then helped her get back to her dorm.

Who had convinced her she'd chosen badly—drunk too much, hung out with the wrong sort of guys, not been careful.

Neil believed in carefulness.

He'd been taking care of her since. Convincing her his house out in the country was safe. Convincing her a job at Kmart would be more comfortable than a career, her being so vulnerable after what he always referred to as her “near-attack.” Other people were a problem, and choosing not to get involved with them was the answer. Except him; she was lucky she had him. He was teaching her to be careful.

So, calling in sick made sense, was showing carefulness. He'd like that.

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Louise was worried about a lot of things. Probably going next door to ask about those lights had not been a good idea, but they'd been having a bad week, and she was exhausted. It didn't help that the home aide had canceled the afternoon and for the next day, on account of the possible storm. She could understand tomorrow, but today? It was overcast and cold, but there was no suggestion of snow until late in the night. “Just being practical” the aide had said, a friendly woman with an Eastern European accent. Her mother seemed to like the woman well enough, so Louise didn't want to get into a fight with her.

Last summer, the fight had been about the chain link fence. She wasn't a fan of it, particularly, but it came with the house. Sort of surprising someone would stretch a fence around a yard that large, when there was so much space anyway. And not just around the back yard. It enclosed the whole property. At one point there'd been a gate across the driveway, too. It was still there, but permanently pulled back and rusted into place against the front fence, roped by weedy vines.

The guy next door—Neil—hated the fence. He'd come by last July to ask her to take it down; it ruined the aesthetic of his yard. He didn't offer to pay to dismantle it or haul it away. Louise certainly didn't have the money. At this point they were living off her mother's social security. Her last savings had gone into buying this house. A place she thought they could live in in peace, a place where her mother could die. In peace, Louise hoped. Someone needed peace here.

Neil had gotten belligerent and Louise had dug her feet in.

“I might get a dog,” she said. “I'll need the fence then.” He'd pointed to the huge, old maple tree between the two houses, on the edge of his yard right by the fence.

“If that comes down, your fence is toast. Just saying.” He paused and pantomimed gazing up at the height of the tree, shading his eyes from the sun. “Your house might be, too.” He was wearing a faded Superman t-shirt, baggy

denim shorts. Dark blonde hair in a messy ponytail. Wispy brown beard. He looked to Louise like the caricature of a threat.

“I should probably take it down. Got the equipment to, if I decide to. Pretty sure the center of it is rotten. Limbs keep falling.”

“So take it down, then.”

“I don’t think so. Maybe next year. I imagine it’ll make it through the winter. Anyway, it blocks the view of your white trash house and fence. And your crazy mother. Heard about her little car-stealing episode. You should take better care of her.”

Louise turned without a word, which is when she realized her mother had come out of the house and was standing right behind her. That was before she stopped walking, for all intents and purposes. Louise wondered how much she heard, how much she understood.

“C’mon, Mom. Let’s get back inside. The heat’s bad for you.” Her mother had stood, planted. She’d stared at Neil and pointed. “Go away.” She said it very clearly. Neil laughed and turned back to his house. Louise could hear his door slam from inside hers. She could hear his voice raised. He was not laughing when he talked to his wife, Denise, who Louise barely knew. She always seemed to be working or at school. She rarely came out when she was home.

Since that incident, Louise had avoided both of them, especially Neil. She couldn’t understand why a woman like Denise, who seemed nice enough, would stay with a guy that looked that dangerous. But she reflected that that might be her prejudice. She had a habit of questioning her own perceptions. Sureness was a stance she’d lost a long time ago. Till this morning, when for a crazy moment, she’d been sure that anyone might understand the trouble with the lights, the request to just turn them downward a little, away from her windows. And she’d been wrong again.

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The snow shows suddenly. No first minutes of light gentle sprinkles. Huge snowflakes drop more than fall. There’s not much wind, so Denise is hoping the electricity will hold out. Neil of course has filled the generator’s gas tank, so she knows it will flip on and power the essentials—the furnace, the refrigerator, the lights. Her laptop and phone are charged, just in case. The less she’ll need to draw, the longer the generator will last. The longer the lights will stay on.

Then the winds start to whip up, sometime after midnight. She worries about Neil, out there in this stuff. He’s a survivor, but this is a night no one should be out. She’s tried calling his cell, but gotten no answer.

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Her mother is kept up by the snow. Of course. Strangely, though, she seems calmed by it, not the agitation Louise has expected. She has gotten herself out of

bed and shuffled to the chair by the window. Now she's watching the snow glove the branches of the small tree by the window. At one point, she makes an almost clapping motion with her hands, a silent gesture, palms not actually touching.

Louise pulls up a chair next to her. They're still watching when the lights behind them go out. The sudden dark draws out the beauty of the scene, and Louise feels like they could sit there all night. Maybe all the next day. Until it starts to get cold. That's when she notices the deep thrum of the generator next door.

"Well, mom. Looks like the joke's on us. They've got all the light. AND the heat." Her mother doesn't seem to register her words. But then she gets up and slowly creeps back to the bed, pulling the quilt up around her neck. Her mouth works, for a moment. She ekes out words. "Too cold" or maybe, still, "too slow."

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Denise finds herself, against her better judgment, thinking about Louise and her mother in the dark house next door. There really isn't any question about it; she can't just let them freeze. Neil won't like her bringing them over here, but really, what choice does she have? And here's the thing—she wants to blame them for not having a generator, but she just doesn't have the will to. That's something she'll need to hide from Neil. He'd be disappointed in her. Not angry—just resigned, again, to her regrettable lack of strength.

They've never exchanged numbers, and so Denise bundles into coat, scarf, even boots for the walk across the lawns, around that annoying fence, and up to Louise's front door. Somehow she knows that Louise won't be knocking at her door without an invitation. Not after the dispute about the lights.

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When Louise gets to the door after hearing the crash, she's not sure which is more startling, the mass of limbs and branches trellising across the front walk, or her neighbor, standing outside on the stoop, a look of astonishment on her face. It's a miracle that the tree has neither punched through the roof nor hit Denise, standing at their front door. It is momentarily stuck on the stoop roof, over Denise's head—who had been about to knock just as the crack and crash happened—but at the moment Louise opens the door it glances off the eaves falls across the walkway behind Denise.

Louise pulls Denise in, in case there's any more falling happening.

"Well, I guess your husband won't have to cut it down this spring." She looks out across the space between the two houses. The tree has snapped part-way up. The broken portion is suspended above the fence, the length of the trunk slanting across the yard, the crown now blocking Louise's door. "And hey, look, the fence is okay."

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Denise looks at Louise, wondering if she's crazy, like Neil says she is. The fence—why is she talking about the fence? Snow is dripping off Denise's coat and boots, flakes melting in the still warm air. She's surprised it isn't colder than it is. Then she sees a soft glow coming from the next room. The old lady is standing in the doorway, wreathed by light.

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Two hours later, the two younger women sit by the old woman's bed. The heat from the kerosene radiator Louise had pulled out of the closet earlier keeps them just warm enough to be comfortable. A kerosene lantern is perched on the bureau, the source of the glow. A slash of light falls across the bed. Denise's floodlights, bright even in this howling storm.

The old woman is bundled up in quilts, tucked in, one younger woman on each side of the bed. They are playing cards across the top quilt, and her eyes dart back and forth, like she's almost following the game. Denise is trying to conserve the battery on her phone, but she does check periodically for messages from Neil. None have shown up yet.

She looks out the window. She could easily climb out and get back home, but there's no way Louise could get her mother out. Somehow in the last two hours she has decided that Louise is not crazy, if a little strange. But the room is warm, and despite the huge tree that almost killed her, she feels safe. Or maybe *because* of the tree. Neil can come by tomorrow with his chainsaw and cut through the limbs blocking the door. She doesn't know why he's not answering, but she has no doubt he's safe at some friend's house, someone she doesn't know and doesn't want to know. He has a habit of letting his battery run down and leaving the charger home. Or just not answering.

Or maybe he's not. Maybe he's stuck somewhere, battery dead. Tree across the road. Truck cab growing colder and colder. Waiting for the authorities to get out on the roads, looking for stranded travelers—people who watch the weather, but don't heed it.

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Or in another scenario: the phone battery is still dead. The tree that falls across the road, this time, hits the cab of the truck, instead of the road in front of it, on a path parallel to the tree that has fallen across their neighbor's front door. Neil can just make it out through the gap in the window, the old tree between the two yards, balanced above the ugly chain link fence, blocking the front door of the crazy women. In this iteration, Neil is half-conscious in the truck, the door smashed shut, trying to start the engine again, and get the heater going, and he can see his own house, the generator humming, the lights garish and bright in the halos of snow, just like he means them to be, but then oddly, weirdly, a faint, warm glow

emanating from the house next door, on the other side of the fence.

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Denise looks up from the game from time to time, out the window to that harsh splash of light. The generator is barely audible over the wind. Louise's mother looks out the window, too. Out at the bright, frightening light. Out at the merciless fence of snow.

"Too slow," she says, and neither of the younger women is sure about what she is referring to. "Too slow." Or maybe "too cold."

Denise picks up a card and, after looking at it a moment, rearranges the cards in her hand. "Gin," she announces, and lays her hand down, right beside the knob of the old woman's knee.