

THE LIGHT

Sera usually eats her lunch in the park on Mondays. Being trapped in an office all day is a dreadful shock to her system after the weekend has ended, and the only way she can breathe is to escape outdoors for a small sandwich and some sunshine. Sometimes she thinks she should eat her lunch at the park more often, but it seems too much to go there more than once a week, and after she's eased in with her normal Monday ritual, she no longer has the urge. So she stays in the lunchroom Tuesday through Friday, eating silently at a small table by the vending machine, hoping no one will try to sit with her, and usually getting her wish.

The girls in Sera's office are only a few years younger than she is, but they somehow seem decades her juniors, with tight black slacks clinging fearlessly to narrow hips, hugging thighs and calves all the way down to the tall slim heels nestled around their feet. Meticulous hair, nails and makeup. Ringing laughs and bright smiles. It seems natural to Sera to sit back and watch them from a distance, observing their behavior as chimps in a zoo. They are fascinating and odd, and when one smiles at her in passing, she quickly looks away, down to her sandwich, or over to the vending machine. She hopes they will see that she is contemplating things, nacho cheese Doritos and Hershey's candy bars. Things they cannot have.

Today, Terri, the tall red-haired receptionist from Mr. Myers office, approached Sera's desk at 11:45 and smiled at her so broadly that Sera felt sick and couldn't look up at her, so she just nodded and nodded until Terri walked away. Mr. Myers had asked Terri to ask Sera if she could spend her lunch hour with him today. Something important that had to do with a recent foreclosure, and an errand that must be completed

immediately. When Terri turned to walk away, Sera squeezed her eyes up into the top of her head so that she could watch her, the tight purple velvet skirt that outlined her shape swaying side to side with a soul crushing swish. Sera stopped breathing.

Of course it wasn't really a lunch, or a foreclosure, or anything real estate related that Mr. Myers wanted Sera for. One time in a moment of great clarity Sera had thought of something very poetic regarding the real estate of her body, and the current state of the crashing market, but then Mr. Myers had reached his fat hand between her thighs and pressed so hard that she had stopped thinking, and the idea was lost forever.

"You don't understand it at all Sera." He pushed words out between thrusts, grunting and gasping for breath. Sometimes he would leave her notes in her lunch bag in the fridge, a great risk considering so many lunch bags looked the same. But he always spelled her name *Sarah* and signed the notes *Sincerely*, so it didn't worry either of them very much.

The apartment where Sera lives is small, scattered with bits and pieces of other people's lives. A couch in the corner is covered in flowers, with colors reminiscent of the 1970s, dark and bleeding into each other around frizzy sparks of fabric escaping the original form. There is one lamp next to the couch, found in an ominous looking thrift store downtown, that is made of an old silver fire extinguisher, and only takes a certain kind of light bulb that Sera must drive forty-five minutes away to buy. She goes once every few months, purchases one bulb, then drives home. She thinks sometimes that she should buy more than one bulb at a time, but if she should happen to get rid of the lamp, she would have nothing to do with all those odd extra lights.

The carpet in her apartment is clean, but it is the color of split pea soup, and even though Sera doesn't own a vacuum cleaner, she manages to keep the dirt off the fibers by always removing her shoes before she walks inside. Should other people come over, she would ask them to remove their shoes as well, but no one ever visits her, so all the things in her apartment stay just how she leaves them, and never collect any more dirt than she can manage to create.

The phone is ringing Monday night when Sera walks in the door. Removing her shoes as quickly as possible, she makes quick small steps across the apartment. Her breath is coming in short gasps by the time her hand pulls the phone off its cradle.

"Hello?" Her voice, normally so full of whispered breath, comes out in a rushed sigh, marring the pronunciation of the word. There is a long pause at the other end of the line. Sera waits, panting.

"Um...hi. May I speak to Sera please?"

"Itssera." She blows her answer into the speaker.

"Oh, Sera, hi!" The voice on the other end perks up, becoming deafening and sunny. "It's Terri. From work," she adds in a rush.

Sera says nothing. She stares at the yellow and rust colored flowers on her couch. She thinks they look like baby poop.

"Hello?" Terri's voice drops into soft and gentle tones. "Sera, are you there?"

Sera sighs. "Yes, Terri, sorry."

"Oh, ok." And when Terri's laugh rings out over the line, Sera hears nerves. She thinks that Terri must want to ask her for something. A favor perhaps.

“I just...” Terri begins, and then stops. Sera hears muffled whispering come over the receiver.

“Sorry,” Terri pauses. “Sera, I need to talk to you.”

“Um. Ok. What about?”

“Well...I just...”

“Terri, what?” And although Sera’s monotone is still there, her volume has risen uncharacteristically high, and she can feel Terri startle across their tenuous connection.

When Terri speaks again, her voice sounds firm and bold. “Sera, I know what’s going on between you and Bill.”

Although this shocks Sera, she finds that she doesn’t really care. “Ok.”

Terri carries on as if this is the exact reaction she had been expecting. “I really want to talk to you about it. There are things you need to know.”

“I don’t want to know anything at all.” Sera’s voice is smooth like marble, gliding toward Terri without hesitation.

“Even so...I was hoping you might allow me to come over and speak with you. Just very quickly. Tonight, if possible.”

Sera considers this. A visitor. She scans her meager surroundings and pale tan walls. Her lunch bag sits empty on the round white breakfast table. She remembers a bottle of rose wine in the fridge. Suddenly, it doesn’t matter to her why Terri wants to come over, or what she wants to talk about. The idea of Terri, in her apartment, puts electricity in her veins, and she feels heat creep up all over her body. She continues to stare at the sandpaper couch, and imagines the purple velvet of Terri’s skirt sticking to

the harsh fabric. She sees Terri immobilized against the gritty snare, and the idea makes her quake.

“My couch is very ugly,” Sera pauses as a small giggle escapes Terri, “But sure, come over whenever. I’m home all night.”

Relief and anxiety mingle in Terri’s acceptance. She doesn’t ask for Sera’s address.

It is just after eight o’clock when a soft knock at the door flies to Sera’s ears. She has drunk one glass of the wine by herself, and fumbled about her apartment for the past hour, needlessly moving things around with no real sense of purpose, hiding several tokens of love in her bedroom closet. No need for Terri to see those lying about. She has brushed her hair with inane vigor, struggling with the blunt thick mop of it. She hates how it drops down and encases her head like a heavy thick upholstery curtain. She hates brown. It is her least favorite color.

When she opens the door, the first thing Sera sees is the brilliant flash of red that is Terri’s hair, falling delicately around her face like a wispy veil. Against her smooth pale skin it reminds Sera of drops of blood, streaked across a white porcelain sink by delicate fingertips. She wants to touch it. Instead she says hi, and moves aside to allow Terri to enter.

Terri’s steps are so slow and quiet that Sera can hear the softness of her breathing. Terri doesn’t look at her, just gazes around the apartment, standing innocently near the door, a sincere look of awe brushed across her face. Her eyes glide over the entrance to the kitchen, the small eating table, the TV stand in the corner, the fire extinguisher lamp,

and finally settle on the couch. Her mouth pulses with amusement. At last she turns her head and openly smiles at Sera.

“I can’t believe I’ve never been to your apartment before.” Her eyes are wide, her breathing pounds into Sera’s ears.

“Well…” Sera begins, looking away from Terri’s stare, which is going deep, deep inside her. “Well, you never wanted to come here before.”

“Yes, that’s true.”

Sera nods, then gestures an awkward arm in the direction of the flowered abomination. Her eyes fall to Terri’s feet, wrapped in soft black leather and balanced on narrow long heels. Terri moves quickly and sits, her grape-colored velvet skirt swishing in rhythm with her breath. Sera stands, statue-like, near the front door, her bare feet nailed to the spot, the sound of purple velvet crushing into rough fabric ripping open her ear drums. Blackness closes in around the outside of her vision, and she feels as if she might vomit. Then just as soon as it came on, it goes, and she feels fine. Clear headed actually. A song comes to her, something she cannot place. *Seen it in my past, back in my home. But does it make sense to see her again?*

She sees that Terri is watching her, waiting, a perplexed smile crawling across her face. Escaping to the kitchen, Sera calls out into the stillness of the small space, “Wine?”

“No. I’m good.”

Sera resurfaces with two glasses of rose, holding one out to Terri, staring her boldly in the eyes until she takes it. Terri brings the glass to her mouth as if her arm is pulling through water, and Sera watches as the pink liquid touches the blush of her lips, imagining a river gliding down her throat, seeing her neck muscles contract as she

swallows. She wonders why it is that Terri is here, but remains calm and quiet, as if she has lured in a wild animal that she must not frighten away. She pulls one of the stiff-backed chairs away from the dining table and positions it opposite her, keeping a distance that is neither obvious nor unnoticeable. She sips her wine, making an effort at silence.

Terri is grinding her palm down into her thigh, scraping her skin against her skirt. To Sera, the sound is like the crashing of an ocean wave, a soothing and luscious melody. She closes her eyes. She hears things that Terri doesn't know about herself. The heartbeat that comes so quickly, and the slow steady deep breath of her normal life coming short as she braces her palm against her leg. The small swish of red hair caressing her shirt collar as she dips her head toward the wine glass. The whirring of her thoughts. Sera smells hesitation that is leaking out like the fear of a cow being led to slaughter. She hears Terri's blood as it vibrates in her veins. The warmth radiates toward her like a secret sun.

“I know why you're doing this.”

When Terri speaks, it shakes Sera awake as if from a deep and wonderful dream, and she gazes on her with eyes that are doleful when she finally opens them. She wishes the dream didn't have to end.

Sera offers a half-smile, “Ok. So tell me then.”

The look of loss on Sera's face reflects in Terri's eyes for a mere moment before she looks away, sucking her wine in a reflexive gesture.

“I don't know what you see in him Sera.”

This comment strikes Sera and she laughs without thought. Terri frowns. Sera thinks the frown makes her look even more beautiful.

“Well Terri...” Sera can’t stop laughing. She laughs and laughs until her sides begin to cry out, and it makes her feel gutted and open. She chokes on her wine and begins to cough, a great barking sound that causes Terri to jump up from her seat in a panic.

“Sera, are you okay? Are you choking?” She thumps her palm on Sera’s back, rubs, up and down, repeatedly. It occurs to Sera, as she catches her breath, that it is the same palm that Terri had been dragging across her velvet covered thigh. She stands up with a snap and brushes Terri away.

“Yes, yes,” she coughs. “I’m fucking fine. Stop touching me.”

Terri rolls her eyes and takes a giant step back.

“I don’t see anything in him,” Sera calmly spits across the distance between them. “That’s the point. I just feel a lot of things that don’t mean much past the point when I feel them.”

As the final words fall out of Sera’s mouth, a loud pop sizzles through the living room. Like the crack of a lion tamer’s whip it comes on sharp and without notice, then dies out, leaving nothing but darkness in the small apartment. Terri’s reaction to her words, the twisted look of sadness and disgust on her face, stay imprinted on Sera’s brain, melded there by the extreme darkness that had immediately followed.

In the black, Sera hears small soft footsteps and gentle breath coming closer. A whisper so soft it is barely a sigh blows into Sera’s face. It smells of sweet rose wine.

“You only had that one bulb, didn’t you?”

Sera can only smile, and then Terri’s lips are on hers.

The next day at work, Sera finds a *Sarah* note in her lunch bag in the fridge, except this one is signed *Love*. She immediately throws it in the trash and writes a new note in small cursive on a yellow sticky pad. *Sorry, I can't. Tonight I have to go buy a new light bulb. There's no light in my apartment. Sincerely, SERA.* She slips the note under Mr. Myers office door during lunch hour while everyone else is away. He doesn't speak to her the rest of the day, but when they pass once in the hallway on her way to a meeting, he pours a look upon her that makes her think for a moment about the differences between the words *Sincere* and *Love*.

Sera's light bulb drive, although long, is peaceful and full of beauty. She enjoys the silence and great stretches of brightly colored wildflowers lining the highway. All this unrestrained growth, happening without any manmade interference. More beautiful than anything she'd ever made with her own two hands, the retreating sun laying red and gold and orange streaks of light across her path. She rarely sees more than a handful of cars if she makes the drive at this time, and to Sera it seems her own private trail, the world opening up and drawing her in, a woman lost only to her destination. The glow is external, all around her, touching and warming her skin. Sera knows she is only an observer. What she wants is to create the light, to make the glow. To harbor warmth from within.

At the hardware store, Sera sees a sign above the light bulbs urging her to buy one, get one free. The advertisement boasts: *You can never have too much light in your life!* The bold words sheltering a man who smiles with adoration at a glowing woman and a bright-eyed child. Sera thinks that whoever made up this sign is making a lot of intrusive assumptions about what she wants in her life, but in any case, she will not turn

down a free light bulb. She purchases two, sticks them in her purse, and drives home through the darkness.

Back at her apartment, Sera dismantles the crooked tan shade on the fire extinguisher lamp out in the breezeway, using the hallway lights to study what goes where, screwing the bulb into the socket with slow and deliberate force. Her fingertips flinch, feeling an electrical shock could come at any moment, even though she is outside and the lamp is unplugged. Mosquitos and moths flutter frantically into the light above her, smacking their little bug heads with loud clicks that sound like a single fingernail rapping on a metal door. When at last she has reassembled everything, Sera brings the lamp back inside, leaving her apartment door open so that she has some light to travel by. She places the lamp in its spot and plugs it into the wall. Nothing. The darkness remains. Sera frowns.

“Buy one, get one free, my ass.” Sera mutters to herself, getting down on her knees to spy behind the end table, making sure she has pushed the plug in all the way. It is nestled snugly into the wall. She crawls to the dining table, dragging down her purse and holding it to the light to fumble for the second bulb. As she is dumping out the contents onto the pea green carpeting, Sera begins to hear heavy footsteps and labored breath, then her light is lost as something large eclipses her entryway. Her head springs up, and she blinks rapidly against the silhouetted figure just inside her front door.

The body shape becomes familiar before the face does. A dark brown suit encases a stocky frame and sprouts a round balding head from the tight collar like someone blowing a bubble from their lips.

“Sera!” The deep voice is tight and strange, “Oh, Sera.” He tumbles onto the carpeting in front of her, falling into the pile of purse contents lining the floor. His palm barely misses the extra light bulb. Sera grabs it out of the way.

“Bill, you’re here?” Sera begins, staring into the dark bald spot pointing at her face, tiny hairs erupting from the surface like the bristles on a hog’s snout. She catches her breath in her throat as the strained odor of liquor assaults her, carried across the small distance between them on Bill’s thick breath. There is a loud slam as the door falls shut behind him, knocked loose from its restraint.

Sera hears herself gasp, the sound coming from far away, as the darkness falls over them both. Then her voice, again, a deep moan escaping her gut as all the wind is knocked from her lungs. Bill’s body is weighting her down, pressing her bones deep into the fibers of the carpet, her arms and legs making an impression of a life, like forming an angel in the snow. She lay motionless under the great heft of him, struggling to breath over the rattle of belt buckles and the feel of hard hands. *Oh, Sera, oh, Sera.* The words, a fumbling mantra, fall on her ears through a tunnel of darkness. Again, again. Here we are again. Her eyes open to see nothing but a deep and endless void. Sera is still. Still, waiting. Still waiting, for it to be over.

In her hands, she holds the fibers of the carpet, so clean and soft. She thinks of Terri’s soft purple skirt, the smooth velvet, closes her eyes and puts purple velvet under her fingertips. She rubs and rubs, feels that surge of heat, the electricity dancing under her flesh. Her right arm floats off the floor, pushes off the earth with a slow force that Sera feels deep, deep inside of herself. The arm is heavy and light at the same time, and she squeezes her head to the right, trying to watch it in the darkness, trying to see what it will

do. Her right hand opens, closes softly around a smooth egg. It is large and fragile and she must not break the shell. She turns the egg in her hand, feels the cool metal that grows from its base, cups the metal in her fist, squeezes it softly down into her fleshy palm, tries to absorb it into her hand. There is pain in her skin, a sharp tingle across her flesh, the warm wet trickle of a small stream of blood wriggling through the creases in her fingers. And then there is light. It starts as a dull glow, illuminating only her hand. Suddenly, Terri sees colors. A bright green meadow under her body, lush, cradling her. Rich creamy butter pecan skies, sunshine, heating everything it reaches. Flowers, pulsing off the couch and into the air, free flowing reds and oranges and yellows, everything so sharp and bright that Sera begins to squint, unable to shut her eyes to the beauty all around her.

So light is Sera that she had forgotten Bill, and as she turns her eyes back to him, her light begins to dim, and she sees only brown, closing in around her vision, a dark tunnel that she has been squeezed inside of, only she does not fit, and she cannot breath. She is lying in a dark brown box, narrow and shrinking smaller by the second. And in that moment she realizes, something the beautiful family at the hardware store must have known all along, that she really does need more light in her life.

“Bill...” She chokes his name out in a whisper. “Bill please. Please stop.”

He yanks his head up and looks down, his eyes digging into hers, his face a confused snarl. He is a demon, a ghost, a monster, burrowing into her; he presses huge fingers across her mouth and nose and holds her head, squeezing her down, mashing her skull into the floor. Sera begins to flail. Arms, legs, body fighting against him. The dark tunnel narrowing, the light fading away.

“Hold on,” he gasps, “hold on.” The hand presses harder into her face until Sera thinks her nose might break. Her lungs begin to ache and she tastes a sharp warm hint of blood. It is a warning. Her right hand gripping desperately, the light about to expire, a haze falling over all her senses, Sera thinks someone will surely die here in the darkness. Someone will die with the light.

Sera outstretches her right arm fully, feeling the flow of blood coming down her forearm into her sweater, the streaks of red marring the bright white sleeve. She holds the bulb tighter, her hand crying out in pain, and with all the force in her failing muscles snaps her arm up and into the air, crushing her hand into the side of Bill’s neck, mashing her palm into the sweet nook between his chin and his throat, feeling the gushing shower of hot liquid rain down upon her.

Not a sound comes from his lips, but from his throat Sera hears small sputters and gurgles as his body falls from hers, his hand releasing her face. She sucks in a giant gasp of air and, choking and coughing, rolls to her side, pushing herself up. Leaving bloody hand prints across the carpeting that look like a child’s finger painting, she scrambles on hands and knees toward the front door, reaching up to open it, smearing an electric red across the white wooden surface.

The outside light falls across her apartment. It covers Bill’s body, the couch, the lamp, the walls. Everything is brown in the diluted shadowy glow. Sera notices something on the opposite wall. She rises up with a gentle sway and walks over to the end table, stepping with great precision across Bill’s broad body, being careful not to set her bare feet in the deep pool of brown blood.

She had forgotten about this. Pressing a messy finger against the button on the wall, she watches as the living room is bathed in a magnificent glow. Brightness appears, again, all around her. The light bulb was working just fine. She had simply needed to flip the switch.