

LIGHTS OUT

by Lowry Pei

It was beyond hot, as far as Claire was concerned. Supposedly Cambridge, Massachusetts was as much New England as Maine was, but for the last two weeks of July, in her opinion, it couldn't have been worse in New Orleans. Muggy, sweltering, steamy, sizzling – the dog days – subtropical – the weathermen had to acknowledge that every phrase they used to describe hot weather was worn out. And she lived on the back side of an old apartment building twenty feet or so from the back of another just like it – the bricks had been storing up heat all summer, and they reflected it back and forth, amplifying it like the voices that came out of the perpetually open apartment windows or the sound of the air conditioners that ground away the hours in rooms whose windows were closed.

Well, she didn't wish she was back in Jonesport – nothing could make her wish that, now that she had gotten out – but she couldn't make her body get used to what it hadn't grown up with. Cambridge wasn't far from the ocean on a map, but living in it she felt the way she imagined she'd feel in Indianapolis – landlocked, cut off from the space and cold light of the sea which was the one thing she truly missed. Meanwhile Jimmy, who was from, of all places, Delaware, grew more and more smug the worse the heat wave got. He went around with a look of “No problem” on his face that drove her nuts. He had even worn a vest – an *extra layer* – one day when the temperature had been in the high 80's, as if on purpose to make her hotter with the thought of that unnecessary cloth suffocating her torso. He finally gave that up when it took to topping 95 every day.

Yet though the days were beyond belief, the nights, though not as hot, were worse. It hadn't gone below 78 for a week –not for one minute. And her apartment faced only on the back, so it had no cross-ventilation. But it was rent-controlled, and who could complain? The one good thing she could say for its situation now was the same thing she didn't like most of the time: because the next building was so close, she hardly ever got direct sun. The only way her window fan made a difference on an 80-degree night was if she lay right in front of it, and she couldn't stand that wind blowing on her constantly even if it did make her almost cool. Jimmy wanted to turn it on, plunk her down in front of it, take off her clothes and while he was in her, lick the cooling sweat off her neck and face – he loved to lick her, which excited her because it let her know how much he wanted her, but when she thought back on the experience she found it a little weird.

Anyway, he had already had his way, and was asleep. Out for the night. She knew, because this was the second night in a row he had slept at her place, and the fifth or sixth overall; something was up between them but she wasn't sure what – except the obvious. She had had plenty of time to observe his sleeping habits, while she wasn't sleeping herself, in the heat. There wasn't much to see; he turned over a lot, he sometimes snored, and around five a.m. he tended to get a hard-on. Sometimes he pronged the bed with it a little bit and she wondered if it would wake him up, but it didn't. How strange it must be to have a thing like that, she always thought. What would it be like always looking for someplace to put it, like a parking space for your car?

The fan was blowing on her, and through the sound of it she could hear all the other fan-sounds coming from both buildings, moving in and out of tune with each other as their owners tried to find the key to sleep. Those fans had been on for at least a couple of weeks now, night and day, and the people who lived on the backs of the two buildings had grown aware of each other's presence. You couldn't pull a shade over a turning fan – that was one thing – and then the sounds inside apartments seemed to be blown out into the bricked-in space between buildings, along with the hot air. Like it or not, these people in their separate compartments were neighbors, though she still felt as alone as ever. One night, when someone in her building played a stereo so loud that you could hear the needle in the groove before the record started, three people, from three different directions, yelled "Turn it down!" between cuts. On the weekend someone's phone had rung for hours, and no one could do anything about it, short of breaking in and ripping it out of the wall. She had felt the desire to do that mounting in both buildings. And the night before she had caught Jimmy watching a

woman undress across the way, through the blurred blades of her window fan. He claimed he wasn't, but of course he was; if she could see her, so could he.

The clock's lighted dial said it was just before midnight. She had to look over Jimmy to see it – he was sleeping farther away from the fan, as a favor to her, but hot air in motion was not her idea of relief. What she wanted to do was to find herself, by magic, in a tub of cool water up to her neck, but she didn't have the energy to make it happen, and in her tiredness she felt as though she might drown if she did run herself a bath. It was perfectly clear, though, that she wasn't falling asleep, and Jimmy next to her was radiating heat. She had to get out of bed.

Claire scooted herself down to the end of the bed and sat there for a moment; the bottoms of her feet tingled, not in a sexy way, like after making love, but as if expressing reluctance to be stood on. All day at the cosmetic counter was enough. She got up anyhow and picked up her thin cotton nightgown from the floor where Jimmy had dropped it after taking it off her. As she wandered into the living room she let the nightgown snake down over her; thin as it was, it made her think she was hotter.

She went into the bathroom and splashed cold water on her face without turning the light on; it helped some, but not for long. Nothing in the apartment, that she could think of, would help much. What she needed to do was get outside, but it seemed impossible – even if she did take the trouble to get dressed, she couldn't just go and sit on the front steps – not at midnight. It wouldn't be safe. Walking through her three rooms, she felt herself inside a box like a knickknack in its niche. And the apartment was just the first box: then there was the building, and the building next door that closed in the space outside the windows, and the block they both stood on, and the grid of streets, and Greater Boston . . . how did you get out of all that?

Outside the fans were still turning, a couple of radios playing; she could see the gray glare of somebody's TV on an apartment ceiling on the fourth floor next door. The fire escape made bars over the lower half of the living room windows – that was the answer, wasn't it. She pulled the foam pad off what she called the couch – foam rubber on plywood on concrete blocks – raised the screen in one of the living room windows, and wrestled the long cushion out onto the fire escape, not caring if it got striped with dirt. Gingerly she climbed out after it, testing to see if the iron bars would press too uncomfortably through the foam rubber. It was thick enough; she lay down at full length, trying not to imagine falling off, three stories, to the concrete below. The building

was old: what if the fire escape were just about to pull away from the old bricks, and her weight – it was not a good idea to think about that.

She lay and tried to calm down, wondering if anyone would see her out there in nothing but her nightgown. Could someone sneak up and get at her? At that she had to sit up and peer over the edge. But no – the bottom rung of the final ladder was so high off the ground she wondered how she would get down if she really were escaping from a fire. Did a fireman have to stand under it and catch you?

She felt daring to be out there, lying down, a thin layer away from naked. If she told Jimmy what she had done, he'd want to fuck her out there – she knew what excited him. He was just that much of a showoff. Most men wouldn't have had the nerve to hang around the cosmetic counter and flirt, the way he had three Saturdays in a row before she had said she'd go out with him. But that was Jimmy. It was like the counter had a sign over it that said "Pretty Women" and that was what he'd come into the store to look for. Shopping. But he was such a change from the women whose faces she painted, with his stories about the people who came into the croissant-sandwich-and-gourmet-pizza place he ran, that she couldn't resist; he could imitate a shopped-out fifty-year-old matron or a bag lady or a college student so well that she thought he could probably do that for a living. And all the while he seemed to say that if she let him into her life everything would change. Not a minute too soon; those women looked at themselves so solemnly Claire wanted to laugh or throw something – didn't they know she saw how silly they looked? She saw it from six inches away – closer than she wanted to – and it was hard for her not to draw clown faces on them sometimes, just to see if they'd notice. If she drew one on herself first, they'd come and ask for the same treatment, she was certain.

That was the trouble with seeing those women come and hold out their faces to be made into somebody else – she was no different. The first woman whose face she made up each day was herself, and she made sure to do a good job; she was an ad. It worked. Women wandering by looked at her and thought, Youth, prettiness, I want that. Even though Claire didn't feel very much of either one. But at least she wasn't still in Jonesport and on her third pregnancy, married to a fisherman who drove a battered pickup with a gun rack in the back window and didn't even like himself very much, let alone her. That was about what had become of most of the girls who had graduated from Clamdigger High, as they called it, the same year she did. How many of them, by now, had had the nerve to leave town, leave Maine, move to a city and try to find a toehold? A few of them got killed in car wrecks

with their boyfriends, and almost all of them got pregnant, but she wasn't sure that took any nerve at all.

Across the way not many lights were still on. Motown played from somebody's stereo. It was a whole different sensation to lie suspended in space beside the building instead of flopped on a bed inside it. Somehow she didn't weigh half as much out on the fire escape. Maybe if she could get rid of her body completely she would be even better off – then there'd be no face to make up, no reason to be scared to go outside at night alone – nothing to pay rent or buy groceries for; she wouldn't have to wish she had a car because she could travel by astral projection . . .

The light behind a set of windows across from her turned off, and the next pair of windows lit up. Through a window fan she could see a piece of a bedroom – the one where Jimmy had watched that woman undress. She had to admit it was hard not to look; at first no one came into the part of the room she could see, where the bed and night table stood looking as ordinary as anything could. Then the woman sat down on the bed and bent over as if she were looking at her toes. Were her shoes too tight? Claire knew how that felt – but she forgot about it in an instant when a man with his shirt off sat down next to the woman in the window, moved her hair away from the back of her neck, and kissed her there. Claire thought he did it tenderly, as if he knew how it felt to the woman he kissed; if only she could see better, she would be sure. If it had been a movie she would have seen them from close up, as close as the women she made up during the day, and not through the blades of a fan; but it wasn't a movie. There was no script, those were real people. The woman turned to him and kissed him back, without hurry or hesitation; he touched her neck for a moment when she kissed him and then started to unbutton her shirt, pausing between buttons to caress her breasts. Claire knew she wasn't supposed to watch but she couldn't stop. She had to know . . . something – she couldn't find a word for it.

They kissed, in the yellow, old-fashioned-looking light of the bedroom (was he her husband? her boyfriend?), and while they kissed Claire watched the woman's hand spreading out and moving down his back, her other hand on his leg, his fingers undoing her buttons and pulling the tail of her shirt out of her jeans. It wasn't a bit like a movie, really; it was much more matter-of-fact, and more exciting. She thought they touched as though they knew each other's secrets. But she could tell she was missing an awful lot of what was going on between them; she leaned forward, but what difference could a few inches make?

Then the lights went out. Not just theirs but everybody's. The fans stopped turning; the air conditioners were silent. Someone yelled a word she didn't catch. It took a moment for her to realize that no streetlight was outlining the end of the alleyway. The power was out. She realized her face was burning in the darkness, her heart beating in a way she could feel, not out of fear but because of what she had seen. Real lovers. She had actually wanted to watch them undress and have each other. It was indecent, but when would she have another chance to see – not some movie about it but the real thing?

It was no use looking any more, though in her head she kept seeing the couple across the way, trying to be them, to know what was in their hearts. Maybe she was kidding herself, but she was sure that things were different across the way.

A rush of sound brought her back to the fire escape; she realized with a start that she had been sleeping. Opening her eyes on the stars frightened her with strangeness and too much space, and when she looked away, the feeling that she could have rolled off and fallen into the alleyway swept over her and made her suck in her stomach. The air conditioners were grinding again, the fans blowing – and across the way the light in the bedroom was on. In an instant she knew what had happened: they had never bothered to turn the light switch off, because the blackout had come as they were going to bed. And now, through the fan blades, she saw them naked and asleep, not even a sheet over them because of the heat. They were not far apart; the man lay on his back with an arm flung out, looking unprotected, and the woman slept where, if he bent his elbow, his arm would be around her; her leg was thrown over his, and her hand rested next to his side, unconsciously touching. Sleeping together. Claire had never seen two people do that, and maybe never would again. She began to think she saw why people did: it was because they trusted each other. Let themselves go together all the way down into defenseless sleep. She wasn't sure why she saw that in them; whenever she slept with someone she had always felt she went into sleep alone – it had never seemed possible to go there any other way.

Under the light, the man stirred first, threw his forearm over his eyes; then the woman looked up, squinting. Claire thought that she spoke. He got up, rubbing his eyes, crossed in front of the fan, and went out of her field of vision; then the light went off. It was like being left by someone, as if the possibility of beauty and freedom had been snatched from what had not been, in the first place, her grasp. Crazy, she was as hurt, for an instant, as if some promise had been betrayed.

There was so much more she needed to know; and yet wasn't it as though she had always known this, but somehow, carelessly, forgot?

She felt she owed them something, and she tried to send them a blessing of sorts by imagining them in bed together again, adjusting themselves to each other, falling back to sleep, at peace.

The air she hung in, between the backs of the buildings, was so dark that the slice of night sky over her head looked bright just because it had stars in it. The darkness was like a window opening on those stars, and gradually the cushion under her seemed to be lifting her up; or else she was being pulled toward the sky. Or maybe the alley beneath her dropped away like an elevator going down its shaft. She remembered how it had felt in high school to go swimming in the opaque green water of a quarry and then be told it was six hundred feet deep – if she had known she was paddling on the surface of that! The thought had given her bad dreams, made her grab the edges of the bed at night, but now it came back differently, not falling but flying, six hundred feet in the sky. Away. And far below her, through her own window, she could just make out Jimmy sleeping, not knowing that it was his last night in her bed.