The Light on Shadeland Drive

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PART ONE

“Hello, puppy! Oh my God, I want to pet your face!”   
  
The first time I saw her, it was in the blue-green light of a mercury vapor lamp—one of the last in the neighborhood.   
  
In the first twenty years I lived in Squirrel Hill, the place was haunted at night. After dark, the streets looked like a ghost ship graveyard infested with phytoplankton (the stuff that turns the ocean floor into spooky pea soup when you shine a flashlight on it). But over the years, the lamppost bulbs were replaced when they lost their supernatural luster. Across the Hill, I watched the eerie aquamarine wash away in the night, the light diminish to the point of almost-darkness.   
  
Every couple of months, I would see a truck on the street, a city worker behind the wheel and one in a bucket replacing a mercury bulb. I’d stop and talk to them sometimes. A maintenance man from the city once told me that mercury vapor is like the Bizarro Neil Young. “Merc won’t burn out,” he said. “It just fades away.” He said it has something to do with the lumens. I don’t know—I’m not a lightbulb guy.   
  
The mercury bulbs were installed in the mid-1980s when I was a kid. I actually remember that. It was right after my family bought a house on SouthFarthing Street. But in 2005, mercury vapor bulbs were banned because of, well, the evil mercury. And because if a bulb breaks, nightwalkers like me will be bathed in UV radiation.   
  
I moved to the other end of the neighborhood a few years back. Since then, I’ve watched the ghostly blue-green light fade away and disappear. These days, when the sun sets on a residential horizon of maples and pines, the pavement ignites—a warm, soft blaze spreads across the Hill, lamppost to lamppost, like fire passed between torches in the dark. The golden-orange glow of 1000K high-pressure sodium.   
  
There are a few exceptions. Like the lamppost that stands on the property line between 1108 and 1111 Shadeland Drive. The light from that post still makes people look like Appalachian zombies. And spotted skunks look like house cats.   
  
“Can I pet your face?! Can I pet your little, smashed face?!”   
  
The woman in the blue-green light. She was talking to me through my dog, Lennie Dumpling, a grey-and-white French bully.  
  
“Can I pet your face?! Can I pet your face?!”   
  
Beautiful women often do this. Lennie is my canine Ouija board.   
  
“All signs are pointing to yes,” I said. I couldn’t think of a Ouija board reference, so I clunkily quoted the Magic 8 Ball. Women make me so damn awkward.   
  
The lady in the ’80s tracksuit dropped to her knees and began massaging Lennie’s cheeks with all ten fingertips. She pursed her lips to Lennie’s nose and interrogated my dog in her best baby voice.  
  
“What’s your name? What’s your name, tiny, chunky baby?!”   
  
Lennie wagged her whole ass and tail like an adorable hostile witness. Bitch wasn’t talking. As usual, the situation called for a ventriloquist.   
  
“My name is Lenore!” I said in Lennie’s voice. My dog has a voice, and if yours doesn’t, I don’t trust you around animals. “Queen Lenore Dumplekins! The Pie Thief of Thistledown Lane. Also known as Lenore the Wiggle Butt and Lucky Lennie.”   
  
Despite her French breeding, Queen Lennie sounds like Queen Elizabeth II during the last ten years of her life. I do the voice often and loudly. Especially when I’m bagging Lennie’s shit in my neighbor’s yard. “Oh, look! I’ve had a proper ‘Betty Windsor!’ I’ll be gobsmacked and scrummy!” God save the monarchy.   
  
“You live on Thistledown? Me, too, pretty lady!” The baby-talking woman who was petting my dog began to pet her doubletime. “Me, too! Me, too! Me, too!”   
  
I have had entire conversations with women through Lennie. After the initial pleasantries, I try speaking directly to these women. Otherwise, things get *really*awkward. For me, anyway.   
  
“I live with the hairy guy holding the leash. He feeds me! His name is Dave.” And then in my Dave voice, I said: “My name is Dave. Hi.”   
  
Two things happened at once.   
  
One: She replied, “My name is Emily,” in her Emily voice.   
  
And two: She looked up at me suddenly. And despite the fact that her non-melanated eyes made her look like a zombie demon in the phantasmagorical light, I fell in love. Dumb and hard.   
  
And here’s the Hallmark twist: I think we zapped each other. When she was looking into Lennie’s soulful-sweet eyes, she said, “My name is—” and when her eyes caught mine, she said, “Emily.” And there was a pause in-between. And the pause said it all.  
  
Instant infatuation is a five-dollar lottery ticket—easy to come by and the odds of it paying out are astronomical. But when it’s reciprocated, it’s like winning a billion.   
  
“My name is Dave,” I said.   
  
“You already said that.”  
  
“I did, didn’t I?”   
  
“It’s nice to meet you, Dave.”  
  
“Nice to meet you, Emily.”  
  
“Call me Emmy.”   
  
We talked for twenty minutes. I don’t remember most of what was said. I stared at her like a grown-ass man stares at a real-life Easter Bunny. We talked like we were in a mutual trance. Opiate-induced. The kind of drugs that make you steal your mom’s TV.  
  
It probably wasn’t that intense. But Emmy smiled and blushed a few times, and she seemed to think my jokes were funny. She laughed. And she wasn’t just being polite.   
  
I hope to Christ she wasn’t just being polite.   
  
Her hair was gravity-defying. It was the biggest, the driest. The frizziest. It was Cher, Dolly Parton, Brooke Shields. A curly-all-over poodle perm. As blonde as honeycomb in the sun.

Her lipstick was fire-engine red.

Her eyeshadow was most likely blue. But in the light, of course, blue-green.

Her face was round and kind. She had a nose like Tinkerbell and a heavy lower lip. Her smile spread like wildflowers from the corners of her eyes. It was a summer smile. My favorite smile.

She looked close to my age. Mid-40s with the body of a yoga instructor. Or jazzerciser.

I’m not tall, but she was shorter than me. I’m surprisingly skinny. Narrow chest, narrow waist, narrow shoulders. I’m well-dressed for a mortgage broker. (I’m not a mortgage broker.) I’m handsome in my own way, and that way is awkward humor. Which sometimes borders on charming. I’m confident about three things, and when I’m talking about them, I seem quite masculine.

I tend to steer every conversation in one of three directions, but this evening was different. Emmy and I were waltzing up and down the block without setting foot outside the blue-green light. Literally and metaphorically. We bounced between topics like a festive game of ping pong, but we obviously didn’t want to talk in the dark, so we settled into our weird looking zombie skin. While not explicitly stated, I think we both found this arrangement preferable to a conversation between silhouettes. After all, we were still basically strangers. What if one of us had a knife? (Why do I think these things?)   
  
At one point, she asked which streets I like to walk.   
  
I asked if she had a little Lennie at home.   
  
She asked if I prefer sweet or savory.   
  
I asked if she had ever jumped out of a plane.   
  
Green Bay Drive and Paddock Circle. She used to, but her Lennie (a cat named Paul) crossed the Rainbow Bridge last summer. I hated salt. I loved sugar. She was afraid of heights. I was afraid of falling.   
  
At one point, I asked her where she lived.   
  
“67 Thistledown. You?”  
  
“138. A block and a half from you.” *Where the hell have you been all my life?*—I didn’t ask her that.  
  
I complimented her fashionwear. “I gotta say, turquoise nylon looks great on you. I imagine it’s turquoise—in this light, who the hell knows?”   
  
“Don’t you just love it?” she blurted and Bounced to the Beat. Step Touch, Step Touch, and then she did a Jazz Stretch. “I bought it at the mall!”   
  
“I’m a fan!” I said earnestly.   
  
That night, I was amicable. I was jovial. I was a shade shy of flirtatious!   
  
But still, I was woefully awkward.  
  
“My mom used to love jazzercise,” I said. “Look at you! You’ve got the stretchy headband *and* the purple sleeves. And the perm just ties it all together.”   
  
“It’s called world domination, baby! Nothin’ bigger but Domino’s Pizza!” Rock Clap, Rock Clap, Pelvic Push.  
  
“HAH!” I laughed like she hit my funny bone with a rubber mallet. “Straight outta 1984! I love a retro fit.”   
  
“Retro?” Emmy furrowed her brow and looked at me like I insulted her ancestors. “This getup just went on sale! New for the fall season. I saw it in the paper last week.”   
  
“‘The paper?’”   
  
“The Youngstown Vindicator, silly! In the Sears insert.”  
  
“Oh, wow! You still read the newspaper?” I couldn’t believe she still read the newspaper.  
  
“Well, how do you get the news?”  
  
“I get it on my phone,” I shrugged. My eyebrows went up, and the corners of my mouth dropped anchor. “Like everybody else.”   
  
“Ooo! Like, audiotex?”  
  
“I don’t think I have that app...”   
  
She launched into an explanation. I nodded and pretended to understand what she was talking about. “It’s like you can hear the newspaper on your phone,” she said. “Just dial a number, and you get connected to a directory where you can listen to the news, the weather, and other neat features. Crazy, right?!”   
  
Some people ask questions when they don’t understand. Rather than risk looking openly stupid, I decided to change the subject. “I listen to NPR News Now,” I said.    
  
“NPR on the radio? WYSU, right?”   
  
“NPR on my computer,” I said. “Five-minute news updates.”   
  
“Oh, wow!” Emmy’s eyes were saucer plates, and she spoke like a child in church. Or like an adult who bears witness to an ungodly price tag. “I heard the Macintosh is expensive! You have one of those?”   
  
“A Mac? Yeah, I’m an Apple guy. And I’m sorry, did you say, ‘the Sears insert?’” Full stop. Squealing halt.   
  
“Sears? I think so...” Her eyes rolled up and to the left, and her expressive face took inventory. She was searching her brain for answers and finding fun things. An old sweater, possibly. Or a half-finished Rubik’s Cube. Her collection of state quarters. They were very blue, her eyes. But that could have been the light. “Yeah. I’m pretty sure it was Sears.”   
  
“It’s just... they went out of business, right? Like, a couple of years ago. I think that part of the mall was demolished.”   
  
“Sears Roebuck?” She asked like I was the crazy one.  
  
“Yeah, that Sears,” I said with conviction. “The only Sears.” Total conviction.  
  
“I sure don’t think so! I was there last week, Dave.”  
  
“Really?!” Less conviction. “Wow, okay... Really?” 93% conviction. “You went to Sears. Last week,” I said, still pretty convinced that Sears had gone extinct.   
  
“Yeah!”   
  
Total conviction. Emmy was nuts. But I still liked her, so I decided to abandon this course of conversation. We had a connection, but we weren’t quite ready for bickering madness. We weren’t married yet.   
  
Instead, I opted for whimsy. “Did you buy anything fun? A Kenmore product, perhaps?” She wasn’t smiling. Why did I think Kenmore would make her laugh? “Like a blender?” I panicked. “Kenmore makes blenders, right?”   
  
Smooth, Dave. Like PAM Cooking Spray on a Kenmore Non-Stick Electric Skillet.   
  
“I think so. Yeah. I have a blender for sauces, but I stay away from smoothies. I don’t like to drink my calories, so...”   
  
The conversation was winding down. I wanted to ask for her number. I wanted it so bad. I told myself if I didn’t ask, I was going to die.  
  
*You’ll die, you fool! Ask or you will kill yourself in the shower tonight! Death by Kenmore toaster oven! Ask the goddamned question!*  
  
“Welp! It’s getting late,” I said. “I’m sure I’ll see you around the neighborhood. Hopefully, in a *better light!*Ha ha! Ha...”   
  
*Oh, God... Was that a pun? Was I punning?*  
  
“You know, because the light is kinda harsh on this street... Kinda eerie. The blue and the green...”   
  
*Was I explaining the pun?!*  
  
“I mean, I like it. It’s a little bit ‘Halloween,’ you know? Makes you look like a zombie. I mean, not you! You look good. I mean, you look alive! Not... undead. Haaa...”   
  
*Suicide, it was.*  
  
As I mentally prepared myself for hari-kari, Emmy stood and bit her bottom lip. A moment later, I learned she was prepping for her own kamikaze mission.    
  
Suddenly, Emmy walked toward me with the confidence of a man who distributes church flyers on a busy city street corner.   
  
She was pulling something out of her pocket.   
  
I took a step back and reached for the pepper spray on my keychain, but Emmy didn’t seem to notice.   
  
“Here,” she said. “In case you’re ever hungry. And you want to spoil your dinner.”   
  
She handed me a card with two words printed on the front: BAD BATCHES. On the back: her telephone number and a few random desserts. And her name.   
  
“Emmy Lavelle,” I read aloud.

“I’m a baker,” she said. “I make my own chocolate. I drizzle it on strawberries, doughnuts—”   
  
“Pretzel rods!” I said, reading from the card. “The last meal I would eat if I were on death row.”   
  
“I like you, Dave.” Emmy returned my grin. “That’s a great last meal.” And then she looked at Lennie, and her eyes widened. “And you’re a great puppy girl!” Lennie, like every dog, has a tail that is voice-activated. And like every tail, Lennie’s little “rat whip” swings hardest for the   
voices in the octaves only women can achieve. (I call it a “rat-whip,” but it’s really more of a “garlic knot.” Frenchies have screwy, stumpy tails, but my dog doesn’t have a complex about it. Lennie shakes that thing like she just stepped out of a Polaroid photo booth.)   
  
“I’ll see you soon, baby girl! And I will pet you and give you treats and eat you up! You have the prettiest ocean-blue eyes!”   
  
“They really are that color,” I said. “It’s not just the light.”   
  
“Same as mine!”   
  
“That was my suspicion.”   
  
Lennie began barking and dancing on her hind legs. When shown attention, she expects immediate treats.   
  
“Goodnight, Dave. Your dog is very cute.” And then to my dog, she said, “Goodnight, Lennie Dumpling! Sweet, sweet dumpling baby!”  
  
I turned like a teacup on roller skates, a stupid grin spreading across my stupid face. I couldn’t believe what just happened. I was ready to float home.  
  
Lennie barked twice behind me. Apparently, she wanted more lavish affections. Emmy’s departure greatly displeased her.   
  
A thought.  
  
Because I always have a thought. Because my brain hates to see me happy.  
  
Was Emmy real? Did I just have a massive hallucination?   
  
I spun suddenly back to watch her walk away. I needed visual confirmation. I needed to see her ass.   
  
But outside the ring of blue-green light, there was nothing but darkness. If Emmy was out there, she was a ninja. Or a dream that escaped my hippocampus. Or a ghost from a bygone era jazzercising in the night. And I was supernaturally doomed.

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PART TWO

Three weeks later to the night, Lennie took me for a walk around the block—Chalmers to Higbee to Topaz. Cordelia to Fithian. Up Riegelsberger. Down Cadswilder-Sonk. I don’t know who named these streets, but I’m sure each one has a story. Possibly comical. Probably satire.   
  
Late October evenings are cold and dark in Youngstown, and the streets are slick black, punctuated with the deceptive warm glow of golden-orange spotlights.    
  
We worked our way from lamppost to lamppost, through an ocean of darkness to a buoy of light. Lennie made all the pit stops. Sniffing, circling. Tangling. Raising a leg to piss. (Not an uncommon practice for a lady dog. And the gentlemen have been known to squat.) I followed Lennie from yard to yard like Watson holding Sherlock’s hat. Lenore snorted the grass like she was searching for cocaine.   
  
Police dog. Party animal. Queen of the Hill. Victorian detective. Lennie has led many lives.   
  
Eventually, the pie thief and I found ourselves back in the blue-green light, and I had to squint at the street sign on the corner to determine which of the remaining mercury bulbs we were standing under.  
  
Shadeland Drive.   
  
*Our light.*

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I called. In case you’re wondering.  
  
I walked home in a stupor that night half questioning my whole reality. I forgot I had her business card in my hand until I reached out to grab the front doorknob. I looked down, and there it was.

BAD BATCHES.  
  
I turned the card over and looked at her name and number. Bold letters on recycled paper. Little cartoon cupcakes.   
  
I forced myself to wait three days, and then I called. (“Guy time.” Because we’re impossibly stupid.)   
  
When it was finally time to make the call, I did a lap around the house. I beat my chest and tossed a teeny basketball into a tiny hoop on my office door and missed. I ran to the kitchen and perched on a chair like Spider-Man on the ledge of a building.   
  
In one hand, my smartphone. Her card in the other.   
  
I let the phone ring nine times. The Cheshire Cat clock that sat on the spice rack ticked and tocked with antagonistic amusement. It was very demoralizing.   
  
To boost my confidence, I pictured myself on the 61st floor of the Chrysler Building... posing like a superhero on one of those shiny gargoyles. You know, the ones that look like Plymouth hood ornaments.   
  
I called again three hours later. 9:00 a.m. slid slowly into noon. And then, once again, I was Spider-Man sitting on a gargoyle. And once again, the phone rang... and rang. And then it rang some more.   
  
And then she picked up. “Hello?”   
  
Someone picked up. Her mother, maybe?  
  
“Who’s there? What do you want from me?” The voice hissed with the paranoia of senility. Her grandmother?  
  
“Why do you keep calling me?” The voice cracked like a dry wicker rocking chair. “Why won’t you leave me alone?”   
  
“Oh, I’m sorry, ma’am!” I said. “I was trying to reach your daughter. Or maybe your granddaughter?”   
  
“You think I have a granddaughter?! How old do you think I am?!”   
  
“Not—not old, ma’am! Not old at all!” She sounded older than Methuselah.   
  
“And who are you calling ‘ma’am?’” She began to sob. “You call a lady and tell her she has a granddaughter, and then you say she’s a MA’AM. A MA’AM! And then you say she’s not old? Which is it?!”   
  
“Oh, God! I just want to buy some cookies!”   
  
“EVERYBODY WANTS COOKIES!” She roared. “Why does everyone think I make delicious cookies? I don’t! And if I did, I wouldn’t sell them to you!”   
  
“It’s just... I got your number from a card. And I was hoping...”   
  
“I remember when people knocked on doors,” she crooned. “That’s the decent thing! Imagine... calling an old woman on the telephone! The brass! The brass on you!” She scolded me like a nun before Vatican II.   
  
“I didn’t say you’re old!” I pleaded like a drowning man. “You said you’re old! You’re not old! Would it be okay if I stop by and talk to the other lady who lives there and sells chocolate? I’d like to buy some.”   
  
“I BID YOU GOOD DAY,” she said, “AND GOOD RIDDANCE!”   
  
She slammed down the phone so hard I felt it in my teeth. 

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The queen and I had returned many times since that first festive evening in October. And every time, I held my breath like I was passing by a cemetery. (Call it a superstition. Or a sensorimotor obsession.) But when we stepped out of the blue-green and into the black, we were still one man and one dog. There were no blonde women dressed for jazzercise.  
  
This evening, Lennie decided it was time for a plot twist. Halfway through the blue-green light, she popped a squat. (I couldn’t begin to tell you why, but for dog reasons, Lennie doesn’t pee on Shadeland.)   
  
I usually encourage my dog when she’s voiding (bowels or bladder). I say things like, “Yass, queen! Do numbers! Take that number one! Drop a number two!”   
  
Lennie didn’t just pee on the lamppost. She did all her numbers like a good, little monarch. Then she kicked her back feet in the blue-green grass.   
  
I pulled a plastic shopping bag from a random jacket pocket and prepared to pick up my dog’s shit. “Yass, queen! You did your royal duty!” I bent down and pulled two tiny logs from the grass with the dexterity and grace of an arcade claw machine. “Took a proper shite, you did! Dismissed two ministers. Not bad for a night’s work, my liege lady.”   
  
Lennie began to bark and wag the back half of her body. Her head went low, and her ass went high. She was feeling feisty.    
  
“Not yet, my lady! I beseech thee to—shit! I dropped the shit. Ha ha! Cease thy onslaught! Desist! No, don’t jump on me! You’ll jump in the shit! Ahhh! I love you, Lennie. Oh, God! Don’t run between my... Wait until I tie off the bag... Ahhh! Nooo...!”   
  
“You only say nice things to your dog.”   
  
I spun around, and there she was.   
  
Emmy Lavelle.   
  
She was wearing a one-piece purple romper, lavender leg warmers, and a teal belt. (I think her belt was teal. In the blue-green light, it was extra teal, so that seems like the logical deduction.) Her headband matched her romper, and she was sporting new laces, but her sneakers looked like they had done a lot of jazzercise. There was a twinkle in her eye and a grin on her face, a halo of blue-green light around her frizzy blonde mane.   
  
Emmy smiled at me like the brightest sunshine. “Even when she strings you up like Christmas ham... and you’re holding warm poop. You never lose patience with her. I like that about you, Dave.”  
  
“I use a lot of positive affirmations when I’m picking up shit,” I said. “Most of them are fake British.” 

“What did you call them?” Emmy laughed.   
  
“Fake British. Imposter English. I’ve never even been to the U.K.”   
  
“No!” she laughed, “What was the other thing you said? You called them ‘positive...’”   
  
“Affirmations. For motivation. You know, to psych myself up?” I held up the bag. (Why would I do that?) “Keeps the mood light. And Lennie loves it.”   
  
“Lennie loves you,” Emmy said with a degree of admiration.   
  
I was so uncomfortable.   
  
Emmy smiled bigger somehow.   
  
In answer to the question I didn’t ask, Emmy said, “We meet again,” and grinned a fantastic grin. “You, me, and Lennie Dumpling. Beneath the zombie light.”

“It is!” I said. “It’s a zombie light!” I felt so affirmed. I exhaled for the first time since she didn’t respond to my bad pun about the blue-green light three weeks ago.   
  
Tonight, she was more than responsive. Emmy was indignant. “Can you believe they installed these godawful things? Electric Kool-Aid blue! That’s what I call them.” Emmy was exasperated.   
  
“It’s brutal,” I winced. “Shit’s brutal.”   
  
“Someone’s got to make a prettier color,” she said, “at some point in our lives!”   
  
She was being sarcastic. Of course, she was being sarcastic! 90% of Squirrel Hill was orange now. 40 years ago, it was bluer than Eiffel 65. Bluer than Smurf Village. Bluer than Gargamel when he didn’t get to eat the goddamned Smurfs. Emmy was being extra sarcastic. Knowingly. *Obviously.*  
  
Obvious sarcasm, I could do. “Have you seen the orange ones?”   
  
“Orange?!”  
  
“Yeah!” I said to match her energy. “Big, orange light bulbs. Golden-orange! There might be one or two of ’em around here. Don’t laugh! They’re gonna catch on, I think.”   
  
“Orange??”   
  
“Before you know it, the whole neighborhood will look like Charlie Brown’s electric Kool-Aid pumpkin patch.”   
  
She laughed with her whole diaphragm.   
  
“They’ll be sprouting up everywhere!” I grinned. Sarcastic quips are the currency of the awkward mind. They’re like Sacagawea dollars.   
  
“Orange...” she said. “Wow. If I see one, I’ll have to take a Polaroid!”   
  
A laugh slipped out of my body like a fart. One loud one. I excused myself and said, “Polaroid! Now, there’s a brand you don’t forget... that everyone forgot. Are they still in business? I’ll have to call audi-text—”   
  
“Audiotex!”   
  
“Yeah, I’ll have to call them later and find out.” I began to unwind Lennie’s leash. While Emmy and I were talking, Lennie Dumpling had circled my leg like a maypole.   
  
“It wasn’t Charlie Brown’s pumpkin patch,” Emmy said. “It belonged to Linus. He was the one who believed in the Great Pumpkin.”  
  
Emmy was sizing me up. Her eyes were boring a hole into the top of my head. I looked up from my hopeless task, and our eyes locked. We were both statues for one-point-five seconds. Then I smiled brightly like a five-year-old who forgot he’s forty-three.   
  
And then she split the silence wide open with an atom bomb.  
  
“You never called,” she said. “Don’t you like free chocolate?”   
  
My heart crawled into my esophagus. “Free?” I said. “I don’t recall that detail.”   
  
“The first bite is always free, Dave. That’s how you hook ’em.”  
  
“Emmy, I didn’t know you were a crack dealer.”  
  
I’m hesitant to make “Vesuvius” a verb, but that’s how a belly laugh erupted from her body. “Chocolate is crack! I can’t deny it!” She Vesuviused again.   
  
I took a moment to admire her beauty. I’m a sucker for a woman with a great laugh. A laugh that brings tears and speechlessness and even a runny nose—it’s the only kind of laughter that’s infectious. You piss yourselves like a couple of kids, and by the time you wipe your eyes and clean yourselves up, your brains have dumped a shit-ton of endorphins, and you feel ten years younger.   
  
Communicable laughter is a crafty devil. I almost didn’t notice the small, curious smile that had begun to spread across my face, the chuckle that crept up my throat. I was on my way to giggling lunacy, but I had to compose myself. I really wanted to answer her question.   
  
I ran a hand through my hair and rubbed the back of my head. “I did call you!” I said. “I wanted to order some chocolate-covered pretzels for the office.”   
  
“Did you really? Maybe I missed it...” She was looking up and wiping her eyes with the cuffs of her sleeves (careful to avoid her eyeliner). Her face was flush. She had tears in her throat, and her voice fluttered like a drunken butterfly.   
  
In that moment, my heart did a thing.   
  
“But you didn’t leave me a message!” she proclaimed. Then her voice dropped a dozen decibels, and to herself, she said, “Did you leave me a message?” And then to me, she proclaimed, “You didn’t leave me a message!” And finally, to us both, she said, “Maybe I need to check my machine again. Oh, God...” And then she started laughing again.   
  
Her laughter had reached the point of perpetual motion. It fueled itself.   
  
“No!” I said, “No message. But I talked to your mom, I think. Or maybe... your grandma?”  
  
But Emmy was still laughing. “What... What do you mean? Mom is with Dad in Boca Raton. Grandma is in Park Vista. She said she’s going to outlive the orderlies! I live by myself.”  
  
“But... an older woman answered,” I said. “She said I was harassing her.”   
  
“Are *you*on crack, Dave?”   
  
“No, because you won’t sell me any!” I was almost genuinely exasperated. “Your elderly bodyguard hung up on me!”   
  
And we both cracked up like idiots in high school.   
  
She swooned and leaned into me for support and squeezed my nonexistent bicep. Lennie yipped and jumped up and pawed at our pant legs.   
  
“Call me again, you idiot! Leave me a message!”   
  
“What, are you screening your calls now?”   
  
“Nooo! I mean if I don’t answer!”   
  
“Don’t you want to answer for me?”   
  
“If I can’t make it to the phone!”   
  
“Fair enough,” I said. “But just in case...” I thumbed a business card out of my wallet. “Let me give you my card.”  
  
“Ooo! You have a card, too? Fun!”   
  
“Look at us,” I said. “A couple of kids with our own businesses.”   
  
“What do you do?” she asked. “WHOOPS!”   
  
Before I could answer, Emmy dropped my card. It floated away from her on the night breeze and landed on the perimeter of the blue-green light. On the line between the light and the blackness beyond.   
  
“Buttery fingers!” she said.   
  
“Don’t you mean, ‘butterfingers?’”  
  
“Not when you bake for a living!” And then she said, “I’ll get it. I want to know your last name. And what you do for a living...”  
  
“It’s an exciting profession,” I said. I glanced at my wallet to make sure nothing would fall out as I tucked it into my inner breast pocket. “More provocative than making chocolate? Hardly. You’re the one with the really fun...” I looked back up again. “... job.”   
  
Emmy was gone.   
  
“EMMY?”  
  
No Emmy.  
  
I spun around like a top with a bad hip.   
  
“EMMY!”   
  
Not even a little Emmy.   
  
The street was empty. Or there could have been a hoard of zombies lumbering through the darkness. I don’t know.  
  
“Lennie,” I said, staring wide-eyed into the night. “I think Emmy is a ghost.”   
  
I looked at Lennie.   
  
Then the darkness.  
  
Back to Lennie.   
  
The darkness again.   
  
“From the 1980s!”   
  
Lennie cocked her head to one side and raised an ear. She licked her nose and said, “Hrmm?”   
  
“Do ghosts time travel?” The words were little more than a whisper from my lips.   
  
I looked up at the mercury light. For the first time, I noticed it was emitting a buzzing noise. And the buzzing seemed to grow louder…   
  
“Say, Lennie!” I snapped out of my trance and casually spoke to my best friend. As I often do when gravity stops working or I stumble upon a rip in space-time. *When I see a mushroom cloud on the horizon, the last thing I say will be calm and ludicrous. And the person I say it to will be my dog.*“You don’t suppose this light is a nexus point between 1984 and 2023, do you? I’m approximating here because I’m not sure what year Emmy is from, exactly. She seemed like a pretty big fan of Olivia Newton-John…” I began to lose myself in that thought, and then I snapped back again. “She was so pretty. But hey, we can always walk over to 67 Thistledown. We’ll just see… a slightly older version of her. One that forgets she used to make her own chocolate. And bake delicious cookies.”

My mind wandered down the block and forty years into the past. This time, I let it go.

“She’s gone,” I said. “Our Emmy. Mine. Possibly for good.” And then to Jesus and three pagan gods, I cried out like a man who had just won the lottery—“*SHE WAS SO PRETTY!*”—and lost the winning ticket.

And then I unballed my fists and straightened my hair. And to my perfect dog, I said: “What are the chances that lightning will strike a third time and bring us together under this creepy lamppost again?”  
  
“You think I’m pretty?”  
  
“JESUS CHRIST ON A CROUTON!” My skeleton jumped out of my soul.   
  
I turned around, and there she was. Emmy Lavelle. Standing before me in all her blue-green glory.   
  
“I hope I didn’t worry you!” Emmy tucked her hair behind one ear. Her cheeks were bluer than usual, which meant they were probably red. “Couldn’t you hear me?”  
  
“I can hear you now,” I said. “Can you take me to a hospital?” I held two fingers to my carotid artery and looked at the watch on my wrist.   
  
“Sorry for scaring you,” she laughed and squeezed my hand. My heart got a goddamned workout around this woman.   
  
“I went to get your card,” she explained, “and the wind blew it across the street before I could grab it!” She held up my business card. It looked like Santa tossed it down a chimney. “It’s got a little ‘street spice’ on it, but I can still read it. I’ll call you, Mr… Williams!” She read from my card. “Since you can’t seem to dial my number correctly…”   
  
*Maybe I didn’t see her in the dark. Maybe I dialed the wrong number. Maybe Emmy is just a crazy lady who likes to dress like it’s the 1980s.*  
  
I reached into my back pocket and pulled out my iPhone.   
  
*And maybe, just maybe, I’m a superstitious idiot.*   
  
I unlocked it with my face and held it up so she could see her phone number entered correctly on the screen.   
  
*So many maybes. But she was gone. I* know *she was gone. And now, she’s back again. And my “Spidey-sense” is tingling hard enough to give me a stroke. And I’m lucky enough for this meet-cute to have a massive supernatural catch.   
  
And I’ve got a reeeal easy way to confirm my theory.*  
  
“I’ve got you in my contacts,” I said.  
  
*And if I’m wrong, nobody will ever know what a dumbass I am. Except Lennie.*  
  
Emmy looked at me like I cast a spell on her.   
  
“What is that?!” I could see my screen reflected in her blue-green eyes.   
  
*Ladies and gentlemen, buckle the fuck up*. I felt like the world had just lost cabin pressure.   
  
“How did you get my number on there?” She reached out with one finger and poked the screen. An extra digit appeared at the end of her phone number. I think it was a 5. “Ahh!” She recoiled at the sound of the key tone, and her eyes darted between my face and the phone at least six times.

*She could be insane*, my mind reasoned. *She doesn’t have to be from the past. Maybe she escaped from a loony bin*. As though mental illness would be preferable to the impossible truth.

“Ah-haha! What did I just do?! What does that thing *do*, Dave?” Emmy’s eyes were heavily caffeinated. In her very ’80s romper and leg warmers, she looked like she just ate a bottle of Dexatrim. “Did you buy it at RadioShack?”   
  
“It does a lot of things,” I explained. “It’s like a Swiss Army Knife. I can use it to make phone calls, surf the Internet—”  
  
“What’s the Internet?”   
  
I blinked a long blink. I wanted to laugh. I wanted to cry.   
  
“Right now,” I said, “it’s a music box. What’s your favorite song?” 

I wanted her to remember this moment.

“Um…” She had to think about it for a second, but only a second. “I like ‘Shout!’ By Tears for Fears. You know that one?”   
  
“I’ve heard it a few times.” I pulled up Spotify and keyed in “Everybody Wants to Rule the World.” *First released in 1985.*  
  
I turned up the volume, slid my phone into the outer breast pocket of my coat, and held out my hand. “May I?”   
  
Emmy beamed with the most bashful smile. She took my hand, and we began to slow dance.

*All for freedom and for pleasure*  
*Nothing ever lasts forever*  
*Everybody wants to rule the world…*

“I’ve never heard this song before, Dave!”   
  
“I don’t think anyone has,” I said. “Where you’re from.” *It was released a year after ‘Shout,’ Emmy. A year in your future.*—I didn’t say that.   
  
“That’s a silly thing to say,” she laughed. “We’re from the same town!”   
  
I smiled at her. “Same neighborhood,” I said. “Just a few houses apart. But we won’t let that stand between us, right?”   
  
She sensed something in my tone. Or maybe she didn’t.   
  
“Can you play another song on your… what did you call that thing?”  
  
“My iPhone.”   
  
“Play me another one, Dave,” she grinned, “on your ‘You Phone!’”   
  
I laughed loudly in her face, and then immediately apologized. Then I pulled out my phone and searched for Berlin. “Take My Breath Away.” *1986.*   
  
“How many songs can you fit in there,” she asked.   
  
“More than you might believe,” I said while typing.   
  
“I want to hear every song on your ‘You Phone.’ Play the whole tape for me!”  
  
“I’ll make you a deal,” I said. “We’ll stay right here and dance all night. Or until we hear every song on my iPhone. Or the battery dies.” I wiped my eyes and looked up from my phone and flashed her a smile. “Deal?”   
  
“Deal!” She laughed and offered her hand.   
  
And we danced under a private spotlight.   
  
And Lennie danced in circles around us.

*\* \* \**

After a time, the queen was ready for a royal siesta. She took a nap in the grass nearby while Hall & Oates played from my pocket.  
  
Emmy and I sat down on the curb.

*You’re out of touch*  
*I’m out of time (time)*  
*But I’m out of my head when you’re not around…*

“I know this one,” she said dreamily.   
  
Emmy rested her head on my shoulder as I stared into the darkness beyond the edge of the blue-green light.