

Light Pollution

"So, you're what, about thirty? You probably don't remember much from back then, huh?

"How old you think I am? I'll give you a hint: I'm definitely younger than I look. It's about a 50-50 split, though, between years before and years after, which... complicates things a bit for me.

"I guess I'm about fifty-seven now? Yeah, about that. Maybe fifty-eight?

"Here's something: I remember before everything happened you could look up and see maybe ten, fifteen stars at night. No bullshit.

"Ha! You don't believe me, I can tell.

"You'd see maybe the Big Dipper and Orion, the North Star over there, sometimes you could see Mars, a few other of the bright ones here and there, but that was it, really. The city was so bright with all the electric lights that you'd look up and the whole sky would have this kind of hazy glow, this canopy of dirty orange light, especially in the summer when all that light would filter through the humidity and just light it up. It would catch it all like a net so that you couldn't see anything except for those few really bright ones shining through. They used to call it 'light pollution.'

"That's the one thing I remember from the first night.

"You're lucky because you didn't really know anything anyway, you would have been so little. Probably didn't even know the difference. But I was twenty-nine. I was fucking terrified. *TER-i-FIED*. At least at first...

"But I remember when it got dark that first night and I looked up and saw all *this*, and for some reason it surprised me. I don't know if I just forgot they were there, or some part of me assumed that it would take all that city light longer to clear out of the sky—like it would just hang there for weeks or whatever, just stuck in the air— but I didn't expect to see *this*, and definitely not that first night. But I needed it, that's for damn sure.

"It's like sometimes, when someone is so upset that they can't think straight and you're trying so hard to just talk to them, to get them to hear just one thing you're saying to bring them back down to earth, but they're so lost in whatever it is, and you have to just grab their shoulders and you know, just give them a little shake so that they snap out of it and they're sort of forced to look at you, like they're waking up from a dream or something; it was like that. It was like I woke up from a dream when I saw all those stars—*these* stars—and I could think straight again.

"I think maybe it was because it was the only thing that changed in such a way that it was made to seem even *more* real than before, that changed without completely falling apart. Everything else just seemed... I don't know the word for it. I guess everything else just seemed like it was *exposed*...

"You have to understand how it was.

"Look out there; look at all those buildings. I don't really know what you think of when you see them, what they mean to you. I mean, you've never seen a construction crew putting one of them up, or been in one and walked around as you were passed by hundreds of people, all of whom seem to be on some kind of mission. All on task and wearing the most serious faces you can imagine, like the world would just fall to pieces if they took a goddamn *BREATH*. It's kind of funny to think about now. A little bit... A little bit...

"You see that one over there? The brick one by the park. Yeah. That's where I was going to school. That terrace is where I was standing when I saw all these stars for the first time. Twenty-nine years, and even on the clearest, driest nights—barely anything. A few little pinpricks in the '*dark*.' And then... *this*.

"We spent the first few nights in that building, eating pop-tarts from the vending machine and stuff. People were really in a state. A lot of people throwing up, weirdly. We weren't sick; we were just scared. It was like we were all

detoxing from something, all sweating profusely, hyperventilating, barely able to talk, puking. The body's funny like that: it seems like whatever the rest of the body can't handle the stomach gets stuck with. Ever been in so much pain you threw up? Don't really know why, doesn't make sense, but somehow it always feels better afterward, right? Your gut just seems to know what you need when the rest of you just can't take it. Just empties right out. I hate the lead up, but *god*, doesn't it just feel great to paint the room sometimes?

"Anyway, that first night. So, we're all puking and moaning and shaking, all kind of nervous types to begin with, totally in the throes of our respective panic attacks, and I decide to step outside, figuring it's probably relatively safe up that high. You can't understand how strange it was to see the city without its lights; before that all you could see if you were looking down on it from a place like up here or on that terrace were a million of them—the warm yellow squares of apartment building windows, the harsh white of the fluorescent-lit offices, what looked like rivers of red and yellow orbs passing each other moving in opposite directions along the highways—looking like a kind of pixilated version of *this*.

"Ha. '*pixel*...'

"Instead when I looked out all I saw were these huge buildings towering over me on all sides, blacker than black like they were gathering the dark to themselves, totally featureless... utterly dark. And now, set against a sky with enough stars that I could make out their edges against it.

I know it sounds crazy, but I felt like they were alive. Or at least that they used to be. Like they were these slumped over titans that were casualties of a war waged between demigods, and here we all were just sitting in the wreckage—afterthoughts, collateral damage. I actually felt something like pity for them. Millions of stars hung low over my head, now seeming closer than ever, and I stood in the middle of a graveyard of gods. The very building I stood on was one of them. Its purpose had just... *evaporated*. Like a soul leaving a body. It had become a hollow mointain. A kneeling colossus.

"And it was exactly at that moment that I realized that the knot in my chest was gone. One that I had forgotten was even there.

"I realized that for at least a decade leading up to that moment I had felt, without interruption, a sensation that can only be described as the somatization of utter *dread*, resting at the very center of my chest, in that exact place that your palm would land when indicating yourself. The place where you feel your breath. The place that fizzes with carbonation when you find yourself unguardedly hoping. The only place where you can feel a belief. And I had to ask—'Why now?' The sense of relief seemed to me to be a bit... *incongruous* with the broader context of the moment, to say the least.

"And don't get me wrong—I was still totally terrified, absolutely—but I guess the thing that really changed was the quality of my fear, or maybe its direction. Because before that moment, despite the fact that I'd been feeling that knot in my chest long enough to forget it was even there, I had still yet to place it; I still had absolutely no idea where it came from or what it was attached to. It was... tonal... ubiquitous... vague... and now, gone somehow.

"Okay, so, imagine walking through those streets down there, in the middle of a throng of pedestrians all impatiently waiting for a light to change or something, the sounds of construction, car horns, sirens, helicopters, voices completely drowning out whatever little thoughts your mind was trying to have, surrounded on all sides by these giant buildings which you know are all teeming with the same kind of activity: phones ringing off the hook, people scuttling around with their grave faces on, yelling at each other, talking to themselves etc., and you're now caught in the current of this perpetual motion machine. It creates a powerful illusion.

"You start to think that there's something true at the center of it all, that there's maybe even something like an end goal that all that commotion is working toward, a real '*unity of purpose*.' Sense. Rationale. And this, of course, isn't really a conscious thought; it's not a conclusion you come to after careful consideration. It becomes assumed. Just seems to make sense.

"And of course, subsequently, you start to question yourself.

"You might, for example, take note of how efficiently everyone seems to be moving, of how little hesitation you can detect in them, which might cause you to think about how directionless you might feel by contrast, about how

arbitrary the decisions you've been making have felt to you—decisions that, mind you, will largely determine the trajectory of your whole existence—about the fact that there is no sense of true conviction that underlies those decisions, but that they are, rather, made in response to fears: less expressions of real desire than defenses against the ultimate ruin that chronic indecision promises.

"You might start to get the idea that you've been excepted from some rule about the clarity of self-determination. That maybe for most people, the question of what to do is always easier than the question of how to do it, that answering the question of how is the *real* work, and you're behind the eight. You have no *WHAT*.

"And so you might make it a point to walk faster, to become part of the blurred motion in someone else's periphery, to move with that same efficiency that caused you to doubt.

"You see now?

"Or you might scan the hundreds of faces passing you by and notice the tension in most brows, how the eyes stare off into some distant place as if searching for an answer to a question. And you might start to think that they have a question in mind, and maybe even that it's the *same* question. That they aren't, in fact, rather, searching for the right one to ask, like you. And again, it might seem like the real work, as far as everyone but you is concerned, is in the answering, in the *how*. But slowly you suspect—maybe not exactly realize—but suspect that there is no question behind all those wrinkled foreheads, that maybe the only question being asked in any strict sense is 'What is the question I should be asking? *What. Is. The. QUES-tion?*' And that's the question.

"*Unless...* unless it can change... when enough outside it does. Or even disappear altogether...

"Looks like the sun's coming up. We'd better get moving."