

## Lights

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All the lights in the school bus came on at once as the sun sank below the barren hills, a ritual that took place every Monday evening. A tremor ran down my spine as I saw the white glow emanating from the bulbs began its work in silence and flushed out all the colors from our complexions. The red in our cheeks and the black in our brows, previously vibrant and bright, were now subdued by the cold, silvery mask that was cast upon us. I was fiddling with the air-conditioner control knob that hung right behind my head when I, from my peripheral vision, saw Riley shuffling towards where I was sitting. She dropped her backpack on the aisle, producing a heavy thud that seemed to shake the air.

Riley sat on her seat with one leg propped against its leather surface. Her eyes shined and glittered under the oppressive lights.

“How was it? How did things go with the woman?” Riley asked with a grin that grew wider with each passing moment.

I opened my mouth, ready to give a reply, yet I was halted by the realization that I had no idea who or what she was insinuating. The way she framed her question with the secrecy of a spy made me stir and squirm. In what brief moments of quietness Riley had allowed me, I turned the cryptonym over in my mind. Every single line of thought led to the same wave of nausea. I turned in my seat, trying to suppress the discomfort. As the unease in me dissolved and faded away, the clarity of my mind returned and I found the answer laying bare in front of me, obvious and prominent: she was referring to the woman who we found out had texted my dad.

The discovery was made on my phone, an old Nokia that was formerly my father's. The outdatedness of the device had shown itself to be the perfect quality for a phone to have when it was to be owned by a fifth-grader who had short attention spans. Due to the discontinuation of the company's technical support, most of the functions inherent to the phone were no longer usable. The texting application, however, was not among them.

Riley's wavering voice protruded from the mess that my recollections had weaved themselves into. It was under the same lights, the same roof and the same rocking motion that she recited the message to me. Her strenuous enunciation resembled a reading not of a simple string of words, but rather of an academic essay whose writing was so complex that she needed to gather all her strength just to relay the information. The content in the message, however, had long since been buried in the depths of my

memory and was presently beyond my reach. Was it ‘What are you doing, my dear hubby?’ or ‘Where are you, my hubby?’ Or was it more of a plain statement, maybe something not as affectionate as I recalled?

As I attempted to respond to that question, Riley’s elbow jabbed at me and tore me away from my thoughts. The nanny must have turned up the lights since the interior of the vehicle was now completely submerged and bleached by whiteness. The little sparkles that were printed upon the floors of the aisle were gone, hidden away by the overpowering brightness. I remained still as Riley shifted in her seat, waiting for an answer.

“So?” Riley asked again, raising her eyebrows.

I sucked in a breath through my teeth and sighed, “It’s complicated. Let me just pull that message out from my phone.”

Slipping my hand down my backpack, I navigated through the layers of barricades laid down by my books and lunchbox. After about a minute, with beads of sweat forming on my forehead, I, at last, managed to fish out my phone. My fingers, which were stiff from exposure to the incessant cold air gushing from the air vents, dragged themselves across the screen in search of the messaging function. My efforts were soon proved to be futile since the application, whose logo was of vibrant green, appeared to evade my surveying gaze. Yet even when the tiny emerald square had, at last, revealed itself, I still struggled to find the text message. Its disappearance made little sense to me at the time, though the actual reason behind had become clearer and simpler as time went by.

Baffled as I was, my eyes did not deceive me. I sank into my seat and let out another sigh, refusing to believe that the message could just vanish without a trace as if it had never been there. Without it, I was certain that there was nothing that I could do or say without sounding ridiculous. Once again, my fingers started at the screen and threw themselves into a series of swiping motions so swift that my eyes grew sore from trying to catch up. The lines flickered and darted across the screen as I scouted for the word ‘hubby’, the shape of the word warping in my mind.

Indeed, it was the exact word of ‘hubby’ that my mother could not stand when I informed her that someone had taken the liberty to share the title of endearment with her. Understanding the gravity of the news, I had decided that the news was to be divulged during supper as I had learned from various television shows that matters discussed around a dining table were always of trivial nature. My breath had turned shallow and rapid as the imaginary solemnity tightened its grasp on me. My mom, oblivious to my panting, had gotten a table for the two of us and flashed me a smirk, a smug look characteristic of her whenever she recognized that she had achieved something, be it great or small. We ordered two mini

hotpots, one for the each of us, soon after we had sat down. Still wearing that smile like a medal, my mother began talking about her day - how her coworker would not leave her alone when she was working, how the job bored her and how she so desperately wanted something new to come into her life. The hotpots boiling in a frantic rage had given off a steady stream of steam that had obscured not only her face, but also her words. Her lips were moving in an organized, unhurried manner yet nothing more than jumbled sounds came pouring out from her mouth. Every indiscernible syllable and vowel she had produced pushed to stifle my body, whose sole focus was to hold itself from caving in to what I knew was to come, so when the food inside the pots were ready for consumption, I could hardly move my arms anymore. The urge to fight the rigidity of my hands had done nothing but further tautened the muscles in my limbs. With trembling hands next to immobile, I removed the lid from the cauldron, the red-hot handle eating at the skin on my fingertips. My mother, who had run out of frivolous subjects to continue her small talk on, dug into the bowl of rice placed right in front of her while I mirrored every movement of hers without any actual idea of what I was doing. The heavy thumping of my heart had penetrated the long stretch of silence between us. The pounding shook the stagnant air, wrenching me loose from the present moment and for a second, I felt as though I was surrounded by a sense of placidity, a sensation so peaceful that it felt horrid.

There was no hiding it, I had known that from the start. I first took merely a few sips from the complimentary cup of green tea. Then, remembering what I was about to break to my mother, I gulped down every single drop of liquid within the container, almost choking in the process. Upon touching my lips, the beverage worked its miracle and freed my lips from the dryness that had formerly sealed them shut.

“You know, something weird happened today,” I said in a voice that was barely audible to myself as I churned out my phone from my pocket. “There’s this person who texted dad.”

I retracted my quivering hand as soon as I could tell my mom had a firm grip on the phone. A sharp pain stabbed at my stomach right after. The steam rising from the two pots had neither dissipated nor drifted off. Instead, it lingered like a bird determined to guard its fledglings from all harm and danger. A few seconds later, she handed back to me my phone.

“You’re gonna talk this out with Dad, right?” I was trying to sound as reasonable and calm as I could. “You’re not going to be mad?”

At times I would imagine the color draining from her face when I showed her the message or her breaking down into desperate sobs upon learning of the betrayal, yet truth be told, there was nothing about her reaction that I could recount with certainty. It could be because my head was turned to the side,

indubitably, but just as how a hen would stand firm in front of its fragile nest against possible predators, the white veil that rose between us had also protected her expressions from my prying eyes. I had not the slightest idea that I was, in fact, anticipating something, that I was in horrible need of knowing whether my relief came at the price of an impending doom.

“No, of course. I’m not going to freak out. You don’t have to worry about that,” she said.

I had taken in those words of promise like how a patient took in sleeping gas. My arms and legs, just now tense from what I then dismissed as nothing more than invented fear, were beginning to regain part of their flexibility. Through the whirling steam tinted by the white lights hanging overhead, I thought I saw the corner of her mouth twitch for a bit and relax. Flustered by all that had spun out from the situation, I had believed that jerking motion to be a smile, a line of thought that now appeared to me somewhat foolish but also hilarious.

My mom and I were sitting in front of the television when my dad came home with the smell of alcohol still on his breath. While my father tried to kick off his shoes, my mother, who had not uttered a word since we got back, stood up and retreated into her room. She had moved in such a way that both my father and I could not observe her face. Moments later, she reappeared holding a gadget of muted gray. Her slim fingers, which were usually graceful in their gestures, were displaying the same rigor that my body had felt down at the restaurant in the shopping arcade. It had taken me a few seconds to recognize that the item in her hand was my phone, which she must have whisked away when I had left it on the table without much thought.

A series of spasms ran across my mother’s face as she shoved the phone in my dad’s face, “So much for loyalty and fidelity. Care to explain?”

He had taken a momentary glance at the message. His eyes grew wide as he opened his mouth to speak, but was stopped before he could put a word in.

“You know what? Just shut your babbling mouth! I don’t want to hear any of it,” my mother’s voice turned harsh and cacophonous.

The crimson in my father’s face brightened. His stifled words, mingled with the beer in his system, came out jumbled, “You have to listen, yes. I can explain. I mean, I can’t explain. I don’t know who this person is!”

My grandmother, witnessing the fight unfold, snatched me up and brought me into her room. I did not know what I was expecting. The various fights the two had in the past should serve as incontrovertible evidence that peace talks and negotiations had no place in the house. Where did the

notion of reconciliation come from then, I had asked myself. Why make a fleeting promise when, at the end of the day, everything was going to return to its erstwhile state? I had found the conclusion to this quandary impossible to reach since every now and then, a muffled, sullen shout would come from outside the door and pierce my mind like a sharp blade. The constant screaming and hollering had left me no choice but to stay put and lie in my grandmother's bed, my eyes fixated on the bright white light bulb on the ceiling.

When the yelling had ceased, I was, once again, allowed into the living room. I could see faint trails of tears running down my mother's complexion. Her hands swung and swayed at her sides the same way a ragdoll's did.

"It's not going to happen again, I can assure you that." my father said as he placed his hand on my mother's shoulder, his lips trembling from perhaps fear or rage.

Both my mother and my father had never spoken of that night again. I had asked them in the days following the fight what had happened and how the debate transpired yet they always gave me the same answer: there was no fight. I remembered my mother explaining to me that I was kicking and wailing in my sleep. If it were indeed a nightmare that had slipped into my slumber that night, then it must have taken its inspiration and its fuel from quarrels of similar nature that had scattered themselves throughout the past years.

"We turned on the lights and tried to wake you up but you simply wouldn't lift your eyelids. I guess no light could be shed." She would say as she laughed at her own wittiness.

Riley, who had probably gotten frustrated from my petrification, snapped her fingers at me to get my attention, "But did your dad really cheat on your mom?"

My wandering gaze fell on Riley, whose countenance was not drained of any color and was still fixed on that grin, and replied, "I don't know."

"Well, that's lame, but do tell me what happened."

"I will if I can find that darn message. The lights are too bright. I can't see anything!"

"It's alright if you can't find it."

"No, surely I can find it," I muttered as my shaking fingers raced across the screen.

"Forget about it. Is your family okay though?"

"I'm fine. No, no. We're fine."

