

The Lights Below Us

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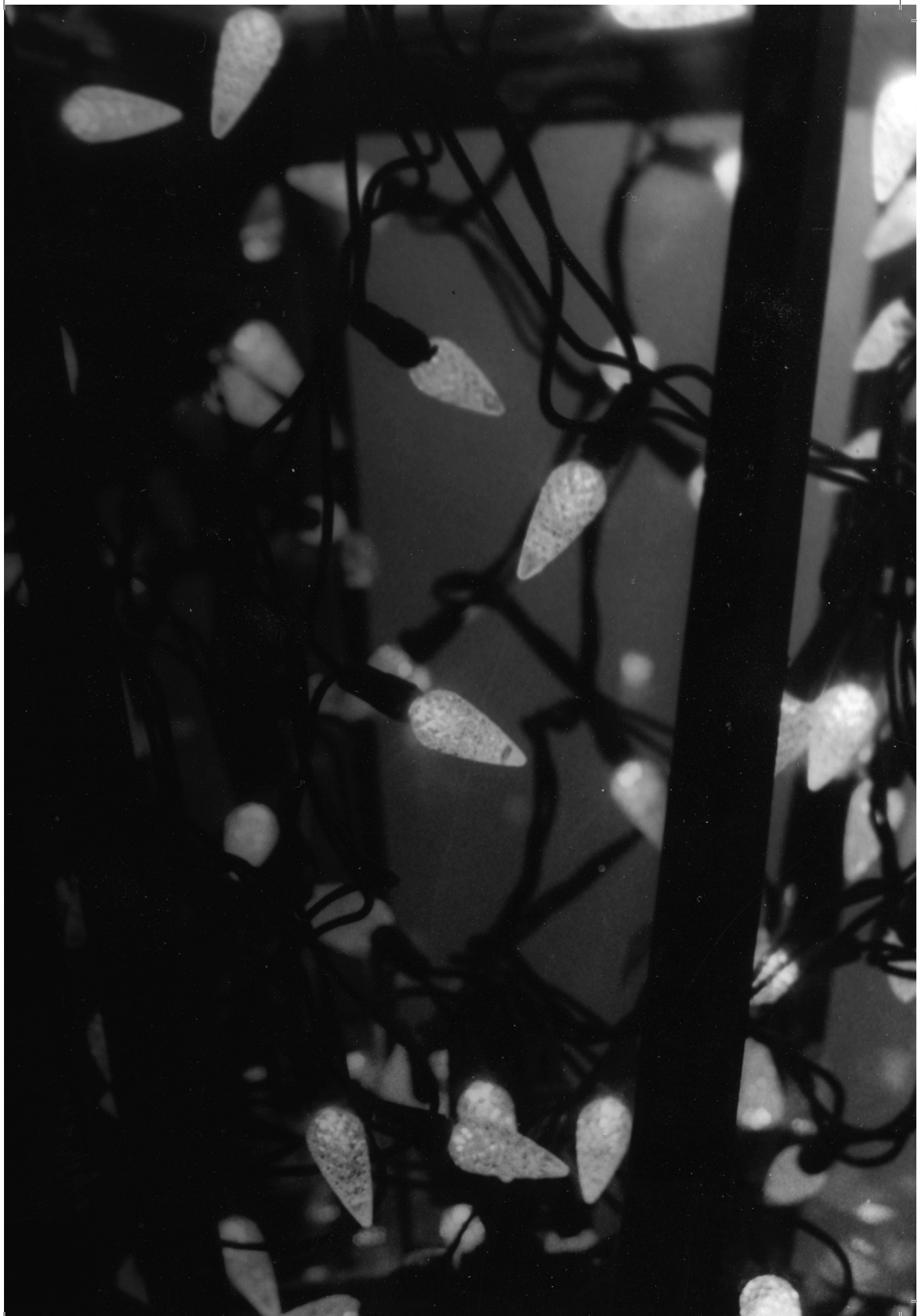
There she stood in the black of the yard, drifting away to the gravitational pull of the night, her footsteps imprinted in the grey snow like scars. I watched her at the door of her aunt's house, age seven, seeing my only sibling fade as if she were a chilling wind. My voice broke the lull of the wind and snow, but she didn't hear it. She shuffled barefoot in the ice, arms spread like wings. Enveloped in darkness, she was like something out of my imagination. I followed her in a panicked daze. We sat, there in the frozen air for what seemed like hours, becoming statues of rock tethered to the lingering onyx of the night sky. The moon's luminescence was hidden in the wisps drifting above.

I'm still not sure what about that place fascinated her. It really didn't seem like a place; more like a glitch or something to be ignored. Still I found myself following her night after night to the same spot overlooking the narrow drop of the cliff. *What was she thinking?* I'd ask myself. *What was she looking at?* I now feel a better question would have been: *What was looking back?*

My aunt's house had always been a spectacle; with delicate rose framing on each of her luxurious bay windows, a colorful arrangement of lilac bushes, and a roof that kissed the sky. It was never the place I wished it to be, though. The demeanor was

horrible, to say the least. Peregrine falcons perched about each of the sickly, grotesque trees, which surrounded the majority of the property. The noises of nature were completely absent. My sister was mesmerized by its flaws. She would wander around the hallways, where the ceilings caved in and the walls pressed upon you. She'd climb the outstretched arms of the trees, no matter how many sprains or gashes it cost her. However, when morning was approaching, I'd hear the disturbing creak of her bones as she trudged down the stairs. I'd peer from one of the many windows to catch the glint of her blonde curls as she sprinted to her spot, where grass withered and burnt leaves danced in the winter breeze. My sister would then settle on the edge to stare down into the drop of the cliff, cloaked in a veil of dark smog. "I'm watching the lightning!" she'd say profoundly when I once commented on her strange behavior.

Sarah had always had a vast imagination, but not like this. Her thoughts only expanded to what she could hear or see, especially considering her more mature age, but here she was, playing pretend like she was young again. Night arrived, and I arrived with her, to the place with the charred tree and sewage pipe overlooking the expansive ebony that lay before us in the valley of the cliff. Her demeanor was quiet,





The Lantern, Jesse Case, photography

very unusual in comparison to her usual clamorous personality. There they were: lights, lights in the pitch black, illuminating far away shadows that gazed upon the two children directly above.

The lights would flare, then disappear only to flare more: tiny, yet bright, as if they were competing with the moon. Smoke rose, along with the rank stench of fear and exhaustion. We would gather there, staring at the perpetual lightning of the vast canyon until morning beckoned us back to the warmth of our quilted beds.

We had visited my aunt for the last time, just to rest and watch her house; moldy and dank, encasing her. My sister and I saw her relax in the worn, velvet chair recollecting her past life, as we hid our muddy sneakers beneath the dusty rug, giddily excited to

watch the lights one last time. We waited for one of her stories, yet her pale, milky eyes appeared focused on what lay outside one of her luxurious bay windows.

“So, have you heard any new stories?” I questioned in childlike curiosity, but she stayed silent. I watched as my sister began to speak, hoping Aunty would hear her.

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“Aunty, what is your favorite spot in the whole world?”

The lady sat, delicate and pale, for what seemed to be hours on end, her gaze never

wavering and eyes never blinking. My sister tore herself away to wait for the lights, but I paused, hearing my aunt's gravelly voice claw at the air for the first time in a long time.

"I-I used to have marvelous picnics at this statue. Some glorious statue of man on a horse . . . Jackson, I think it was General Jackson." She chuckled. "Around and around we'd go, none of us tall enough to climb up on the stone horse he sat on. There was that, then the other place."

"What other place?" Her fascination with General Jackson was her favorite memory to talk about, yet she had never mentioned another place.

"Oh, y'know," she giggled, hiding her mouth with a blue-veined hand, the morphine beginning to take effect. "With the charred tree and sewage pipe."

"It doesn't sound too nice." I regretted not following my sister to the porch, yet my interest was piqued at her love of the spot.

"Oh, it doesn't at first and certainly not at last. It's a secret . . . secret buried deep in the ground." She rested her hands on her lap and closed her eyelids. "He was twelve years old, stupid as ever, but he had a good heart so it didn't matter. Got in a hell of an accident." She waved her palms in the air, as if wishing to once again admire the home with repaired eyes. "Just chucked him under some rocks. Disgusting."

Her hands trembled as she retrieved her bag, digging ferociously in it until she pulled out a lighter and a cigar between her talon-like nails. I lit it in her demand, hoping for the tale to continue. She took an agonizingly slow inhale, pursing her lips, then stopped, resting it between her skeletal digits.

"They moved, proly to 'nother part of town, but their boy didn't go with them. They're mad." She shook her head. "Mad at what? Me? I simply want my property to stay my property."

Two snakes of disgust slithered and twisted in my gut. "Aunt, where are they?"

"They jus' stand and watch, stand and watch, waiting for their boy to be returned to them. I said firmly, I said, 'No, I won't!' yet there they are standin' and watchin' all night. M'sure they're getting' pretty old now, guess they'll see him one way or another."

This was just one of her ramblings. It had to be. Then, horrified, I thought of those rocks, and the wind that filled with tobacco, sweat, and the noise of many voices talking in unison, deprived of air and choking on words. Fear held me in its grip, my stomach full of bile, but I swallowed thickly, remembering my sister sitting alone on that cliff.

"And where is the boy?"

"Sh, he's sleeping." She put her finger to her thin, purple lips and jagged teeth. "Right beneath the willow tree."

I raced out to the cliff where the night air rose, putrid with the stench of cigarettes, and fear, and anguish. I didn't watch the lights that night. This exact spot, right under the nose of the house, was not as important to me as it was to my sister, yet due to our lack of experience of the outside world, this strange community under our mortal, rotting castle on a hill, was the only harsh reality we could glimpse. I bonded with my sister as we discussed what those mysterious lights could be, as our childish minds enjoyed distorting simplicity and horror. After all the years, the house, along with the hill, sank and collapsed into part of the canyon. There is no more of the past we clung to once. Where the charred tree stood in agony against the wind, and pipes twisted like roots in the ground. It was not a beautiful place. What made it so significant was my sister, who weaved the smog into bright colors and painted the image of our dark little area into a shining memory of the things we used to be. ||