



IN THE DARK

WHEN THE GIRL WHO LIVED IN THE ROOM BELOW MINE disappeared into the darkness, she gave no warning, she showed no twitch of fear. She had her back to me, but I sensed her eyes were open, the city skyline bristling with attention, five stories above the street. It was how I imagined Catherine de Barra herself once stood at this edge almost a hundred years ago, when the smog was suffocating and the lights much more dim, when only one girl ever slept inside these walls of stacked red brick.

I was with my friend, if she could be called a friend, on the rooftop that night, close enough to pull her away or slip a word into her ear, close enough to push. I saw how far the gate was, how long the jump would be to reach it. I was there to witness how she flew.

It was dark, and I blamed the darkness. For those few moments, when she was midair and not even kicking, I

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practically became her. I grew her long legs and longer eye-lashes, I lost the jumble of knots in my hair, I let the mistakes spill out of my suitcase and scatter without a care into the wind. I was falling, and falling fast. There was a hum in my ears like a song leaking through floorboards. The windows on the way down were all lit up, every one, people I didn't know living their private lives inside as if no one could see. The skyline above sparkled the way stars used to at home, and I didn't want to ever hit ground. I was someone here. I was someone.

Maybe that was what she saw, what she felt, what this house turned her into. She was out there beyond the ledge with nothing beneath her feet. She was high enough to clear the gate many times over. I swore she was out there. I swore the air had her, the night had her, the lights cast a ring all around her, and then the patch of darkness was empty.

I could see past where she'd been, as if I were sailing straight over buildings, beyond spires and scaffolding, past roof gardens and water towers, down through Lower Manhattan to the southern tip of the island, where the gleaming black bay took over. I saw the whole city spread out before me, sinister and strange and perfect. The air was clear, and she wasn't in it. No girl was falling or flying. Every window was dark. And how oddly quiet it became, like a patch of forest where no person had set foot for what felt like days upon days.

When I remembered where I was, I crept closer to the edge, gripping the bricks to stay steady, and I did what I knew she wanted.

A ROOM AWAY FROM THE WOLVES

I leaned out into the vacant night—the air boundless, feathery gray, and blooming with possibility—and I looked down.



SOLID GROUND

MONET MATHIS, MY DOWNSTAIRS NEIGHBOR AND THE FIRST person on this patch of crowded earth who knew who I was and not who I tried to be, didn't disappear into thin air, not exactly. The night I lost her was clear and gray, hot and only faintly harsh-smelling. I couldn't tell where the tangles began and the stories took over, but I spotted her as soon as I looked down. She'd made it to the sidewalk. It was past midnight, and she was on the other side of the gate, on hard ground, beyond the limits of where I could even hope to reach her.

The story became that she fell out of the night sky without warning. According to some witnesses on the street, she came out of nowhere, dropping like debris from a passing plane. Others said they saw a figure on the rooftop, a figure flirting dangerously with the edge, and assumed she must have sent herself sailing. There were those who said she hurtled down from the sky howling, fighting the wind. Then there

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were those who said she dropped like a stone, knocked unconscious by the fall, that she didn't make a sound until the crack of impact when her body met sidewalk.

They didn't know a thing.

It was true Monet landed just outside the gated entry to Catherine House, where she had a room that faced east on the fourth floor. Passing strangers couldn't have known that this was a boardinghouse for young women, first opened in 1919 after a personal tragedy, and that it was the last remaining boardinghouse of its kind in Manhattan. In the gate's webbing of wrought iron, the words CATHERINE HOUSE could be made out, but the house's namesake was long gone and the gate itself secured for the night, as it was solidly past curfew. No girl was getting in or out, even if she banged on the bars. We all agreed to that rule when we moved in.

The girl who appeared from the sky—they didn't know her name, they didn't know her way of feeding on secrets while never offering any authentic ones of her own—narrowly avoided being skewered by one of the spiked posts gaping up at the darkness. The sidewalk fractured beneath her, hairlines skittering in all directions as if from a lightning strike. Belly down, arms reaching, cheek to pavement, she was the center. The sound of her landing practically popped eardrums. Then quiet, so much quiet the streetlights could be heard letting out their hum. The M20 bus could be made out careening along the nearest avenue, heading downtown through the Village, all the way to South Ferry. A car alarm bleated in the distance.

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Though it was late, a small sleepless crowd gathered around to help, and to do a little gawking. A few people from the block came down from stoops, gripping house keys, searching out the source of the noise. The old lady in the basement apartment across the street came out clutching a squirming cat. The lady was threatening to call in another complaint to 311. A gaggle of tourists, who'd gotten turned around where Waverly Place met, somehow, impossibly, Waverly Place, paused to point. A man walking his tiny dog on a studded leather leash glanced at the body, then doubled back and took a detour around the block. They were all strangers to us. The house may have seemed like a magnet to tragedy, a patch of shrieking static in the otherwise calm. What went on inside they would never know.

To them, Monet was of another world, there on the sidewalk, caught and pinned to the page like a winged bug. She was illuminated in the glow of the streetlamp. Her short hair made an upward swoop at the back of her neck. She wore white, but the night turned it gray—the way ghosts are gray when they dissipate and can't be made out from the shadows. She was perfectly still, one foot shoeless, her mouth open. It wasn't clear if she was breathing.

Photographs were taken, filtered, captioned, shared. People shuffled around, waiting for an ambulance to arrive. A yellow cab screeched to a stop on the corner. The driver emerged and stepped out into the street, vacancy light still on so he could catch a fare. Someone poked the body. Someone

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said, “Don’t move her, wait for the ambulance.” Someone, out of sorts, hunched over and started to sob.

Stories swirled on the street about her possible motivations. Some were saying she jumped—she had the look of a jumper. Some assumed drunken accident or foul play. These were hunches. Guesses. Dangerous, dangling insinuations.

They were acting like they knew her, had seen her up close. But they weren’t there. I was there.

I leaned out over the edge, but not one person noticed me up on the rooftop. The darkness, and a protruding drainpipe, shielded me from sight.

My bird’s-eye view showed her on the sidewalk, a chalk outline all filled up. Her back was to me, as if she’d walked permanently out of the last known room. She wasn’t moving.

Behind the drainpipe, in the deepest shadow I’d managed to find, I held my breath until I couldn’t. What had she done? The sky was thick with dim haze. The wind was fierce. Why had she done it? She’d taken something from me, looted it right from my hands, and now I wouldn’t get it back. Or her.

There was too much I didn’t understand—it formed a curtain all around me, crawling with dust mites and reeking with near a century’s worth of secrets. The curtain tightened, an uncomfortable cocoon, but I could stay there inside it so I wouldn’t have to know.

I got to my feet. I was ready to go downstairs and return to the room I rented, which had been mine now for near an entire month. I was about to leave it be, to mourn her in private and

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wish things had gone another way, when I stopped. I felt the tug, as if she still had a part of me on a string. I went back and peered over, propelled to give it one last look.

And there.

Down on the sidewalk in the shadow of the tall iron gate that said CATHERINE.

Her foot was twitching.

At first it was a movement so subtle I might have missed it. Then the movement gained strength, traveling up her left leg and running through to the end of her right arm, where her five fingers spread open, clasping ground. She rolled over, curling up against the gate for a moment and then straightening, rising into a sitting position. She lunged forward, lifting herself to her feet, balancing her weight on both legs. She wobbled a bit. She held her hands to her head. As far as I could tell from this distance, she hadn't broken any bones.

She'd made it. She really had.

People down in the street were gasping, flinching, flinging themselves backward as if her miracle might infect them. They were so ordinary. No one seemed to know what to do. I could guess what they were all thinking: *Had she come plunging out of the sky at all?* Maybe they'd imagined it or got themselves fooled. Maybe I had along with them.

Monet gave no answers or excuses. She stood, wearing the one shoe, wavering in ghost gray on the other side of the gate.

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I stayed locked in place. The ledge was narrow, and there was no guardrail to keep the night at bay—just a great wide emptiness that always got my legs shaking. Now, a rush of air prickled my arms as if a summer storm were coming through, but this was no weather.

She must have felt me looking.

That was when her chin angled for the rooftop. She put a hand above her eyes to see better, her gaze aimed right at me.

A few lurkers on the street were starting to follow her stare and lift their heads, and now I ducked down to avoid them, peeking out again from behind a small chimney.

I wondered what she was feeling, what she knew, what she saw from where she was standing. If there were colorful butterflies crowding through her brain right now, pulses of warm light rearranging the canals of her heart. If the darkness had a taste, if the impact unspooled every wrong thing inside her. All I knew was that her life would be forever different now. She wasn't here with us anymore. So what was she waiting for?

My ears filled with a dense, rumbling hum.

Down below, some onlookers were staring at her, shaking their heads.

“Hey, are you okay, sweetie?” some guy called.

She ignored him, as she'd ignore any man who called her “sweetie.”

She searched the night, but the city sky was starless and the windows on the highest floors were black and I wasn't budging. An ambulance was on its way, but she wouldn't wait.

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She headed for the gate, and I thought at first she was trying to get inside the house, but she came back carrying something. A suitcase. She'd had it waiting. She must have seen the glow of the taxi's light, because next she headed straight for it, and no one tried to stop her. The cabdriver didn't kick her from his back seat when she climbed in, throwing the suitcase in first and then herself. He only shrugged and got in to drive. The few remaining witnesses stood back. The noise hushed. The city went quiet in the way I was used to, as if instead of a maze of asphalt, concrete, and brick, all around me was a thick, tangled wood.

From up above on the rooftop, I watched. For a long moment, it felt like the night itself had swallowed Monet again, the way it seemed to when she'd tumbled into the darkness, but then the taxi swerved into the street, taking the first turn, and with a snap of taillights she was gone.