

## Night Comes Later

Evan Rehill

SHE IS LOOKING FOR LORAIN. NOVEMBER AND THE DARKNESS coming and Madge is afraid of it and she is afraid of not finding Loraine. This is Seattle. 1986. Loraine had told her, *Come November we're gone*. She walks the streets downtown: south on Fourth, west on Spring. Eyes scanning doorways, alleys. There's a bus shelter up ahead, three kids huddled. CJ, Pearl Earring, Desmond.

*I got a fever I can't burn off*, Desmond says, smacking his pimpled forehead, *Think a rat bit me*.

CJ's got that sad look-away stare you're not supposed to have till you're older. He spits into the traffic, arms crossed over his jean jacket. The sky falling in gray sheets. Businessmen lower umbrellas, duck into strip clubs. Two women scream in their wheelchairs backwards-rolling down the sidewalk, clubbing one another.

It's 11:15 a.m.

Pearl Earring coughs, turns to Madge. That namesake ear looks infected. *Hear about Whats-his-face?* He slits his throat with a finger wrapped in a dirty band-aid.

Madge asks have they seen Loraine.

*Who?*

*Loretta*. Because sometimes Loraine was Loraine and other times she was Loretta.

*Two can run faster.*

She goes down to the water, watches the ferries come across the Sound and the sad old Indians fishing from the pier, listening to the gulls scream overhead.

Rewind six months. Madge hitchhiked to the city, took up with the kids in the park downtown they call Accidental not Occidental. The kids in Accidental: tenor-voiced panhandlers, tragic con men, teenage whores. Loraine said, *Don't turn tricks. Girls dropping like flies.* Loraine who took her to the rooftop overlooking the Sound. Madge was fourteen (freckle-faced, with pink lips she chewed white) and up there the whole world could go ahead and disappear. *Don't get too comfortable, never know who might show up.* Loraine. Fifteen, with night-dark skin, green eyes that cut to the stairwell door, *Always be ready to grab what you can and run run run!* Loraine charging across the rooftop and all the stars wheeling overhead. Madge chased after her, *But where? Where do we run?* Faster now; the Sound and sky coming close, quick, *Right over the edge!* Loraine skids in her boots, pebbles rushing into the dark, *Like flying! Away!*

Loraine cleaned her fingernails with a matchstick. Loraine sang Bessie Smith between drags on a Newport. Loraine palmed her eyes at night in the sleeping bag they shared. Loretta filed those nails sharp. Loretta cursed at sailors' serenades. Loretta elbowed Madge a black eye in the sleeping bag, slapping her own face.

She walks east on Marion. Nightlight reclines against a lamppost. Black hair plastered to her cheek. Nightlight's older brother Addison stands, hood of his sweatshirt pulled over his face, shaking a paper cup. A sound like two pennies and a dime. Between the raindrops and the passersby he keeps the cup safe, dry, crushed into his armpit. Later these two will go to a laundromat and splurge that dime on one of the big dryers. *Better warm than clean.* In will go their jackets, sweatshirts, their filthy socks. They will sit on the floor, curled into one another beneath the machine's tossing lull.

Addison shakes the paper cup at a crew of men in hard hats, orange parkas. His free hand a slow wave in the air at Madge. She can't see his

eyes inside the hood. Her feet keep walking, fists pumping. Addison hoists the cup into the air—a toast.

She turns a corner, heads south on Second, past black men holding rose-stamped plastic bags over their heads. Dice tossed from hands to a wall covered in graffiti tags (*Smokescreen, Last Dance, Neverever*). She ducks into a repair shop, blowing rotten breath over numbed hands. The floor is piled in dead television sets. One black and white model on the counter, its face full of static. Madge's bloodshot-blue eyes drawn there. She sees wasps swarming a bulb, rain in an unbusted headlight. Toward the back of the shop, behind an American flag hung as a curtain, faint music plays. An oldies station. A fat man in an untucked tropical shirt peeks out from behind the flag, a soldering iron in his hand.

First time she saw Loraine: on her knees, in an alley, petting a cat. Madge jumped from the second floor window of a condemned building, wincing at the sunlight as her body fell through the air. Trash bags exploded when they broke her fall, showering leftover spaghetti, emptied ashtrays, expired coupons, losing lottery tickets, a stained pillow. Madge crawled out of the dumpster, crossing the alley. Another kid leapt from the window, calling out her name as he dropped through the sunlight. That was Whats-his-face, the boy whose name nobody could remember. He'd arrived in Accidental just after Madge. Fifteen-year-old kid with his cardboard suitcase and that strange, unpronounceable name he said was Hungarian. Whats-his-face. He fell, calling *Madge! Madge!*, into the garbage. Her shadow eclipsed the cat on its back then the girl on her knees. Loraine, her tongue clicking at the cat, voice husky in the silhouette eclipsing her, *She's pretty but she won't last.*

Her eyes lift from the screen, feet backpedaling toward the door. A fat man walks through the American flag, tucking in a loud shirt. He's getting close, moving fast. *Looking for something?* A door opens behind and she leaps back, through, out; racing now along the drowned streets, dashing between the traffic lights.



She goes to the arcade full of cigarette smoke and the racket of pinball machines. The too-loud noise of Ms. Pac Man, Galaga. Zeke and Ajax are there, wool hats pulled over their ears, trading looks. They work the room together: Zeke fingers the machines' slots while Ajax watches for the coin attendant, an ex-con with smeared tattoos, an apron filled with silver. Madge's hands buried in the pockets of her army jacket. She watches two other boys with long hair and leather jackets racking a game of pool. Eyes a stack of quarters at the table's edge, where one boy catches her. In his palm an eight ball, spinning. *Get lost.* She steals a crushed-out Old Gold from a plastic ashtray and walks out into the blurred neon.

They learned to pickpocket from a scrawny sixteen-year-old named Jack of Diamonds. Jack of Diamonds, in his pegged pants and dented hat, he told them, *Lose your hands.* Practicing on one another in Accidental, Madge partnered with a thirteen-year-old lisping girl, Michaela, who wore a beret, said she was French but everyone knew she was from Tacoma. You'd see her standing on a downtown street corner at night smoking a clove cigarette, tattered dress clinging to her skeletal frame, poised with an outthrust hip toward the oncoming traffic. Madge tried to forget her hands, let them go out to Michaela, who flinched, lisping, *I'm not ready.*

It was summer when they lost their hands, released the fingers that went out, brought back wallets holding photographs (wedding portraits, school pictures) they tore to shreds. And all the useless keys, flung into the Sound. *Never come back!* Everything after brought to Jack of Diamonds, who'd go off to splurge, return with a jug of blush wine or a dime bag of laughing grass. Jack of Diamonds, a little in love with Loraine he called Loretta. Got loaded one night on horse tranquilizers he crushed up and snorted off a cardboard sign, over the words *Anything Helps*, tracing the curve of a backwards S. Tried putting the hands he remembered on Loraine. His dented hat flying into the air. Her nails tearing at his cheeks. Jack of Diamonds hit the ground spilling tears and blood. Loretta spitting at the felled body, *Thief! Phony! Dead man!*

Loraine said she'd do it for her. If they tried to get their filthy hands on Madge she'd claw their eyes out. Fleeing Accidental, Loraine smearing Jack of Diamonds' blood onto her blue jeans, they ran into the shadows of downtown alleys. Madge's feet sore in her boots hammering the cobblestones. Loraine rushed past a restaurant's back door propped open with a cinder block where Madge paused, tying up a shoelace. Music and voices floated out, along with the smell of oil, rosemary, fish frying in a pan. Lemons and salt water. Madge's stomach moaning. She stared into the doorway, listening to the sound of Loraine's boots running—down an alley, across a rooftop, into the dark.

Madge backtracks north along First. Tourists' umbrellas are sucked inside-out by the wind. She halts before a barroom full of sailors and transvestites, head swiveling left to right, right to left, straight ahead: the open door. There's a popcorn machine inside she has to reach, overflowing in the orange glow of its plastic cage. Two uniformed men arm wrestle at the bar. A group of others growl sea chanteys at the end of the room, pitchers of black beer waving through the smoke. Pretend girls wrap long painted fingernails around straws sunk into their gin and tonics, fake eyelashes batting at Madge—too young to be in here. Madge is at the popcorn machine, opening its plastic door. In a white vinyl booth looking loaded, half-asleep, is What's-his-face. Her stomach folds over itself and she gags, then walks to the kid in the booth. He's pulling a cherry pierced by a tiny red plastic sword out of his glass of Coca Cola. The maraschino's shine in the pulsed neon of an Olympia beer sign. He slides the cherry from blade to mouth, turns to Madge, chewing, eyes all out of focus. It's then she remembers his name.

*I heard you were dead,* she says.

*I heard YOU were dead.*

She pinches her forearm, doesn't feel a thing.

*Maybe I am.*

*Maybe we all are.*

Sailors slow dancing transvestites across the room, Glen Miller on the jukebox.



## OPEN CITY

*I'm looking for Loraine.*

The boy rolls his eyes into the back of his head, crossing himself with the sword, forces a laugh sounds like he's choking, *Maybe we all are.*

Halloween Loraine disappeared through the rooftop door. Descended to the streets below full of masks, monsters, ghosts. The sky had gone all the way into the Sound. *Blue plus blue makes black.* Madge sat on the roof's edge watching the scene below: princesses, ninjas, clowns, pirates running through the streets, *Trick or treat! Trick or treat!* Madge spat over the edge, heard the stairwell door slam, whispered, *It's a trick.*

November. 1986. Seattle. Darkness coming. Madge has been alone on the rooftop over a week. No word from Loraine. She is afraid of the dark, the stairwell door opening in the middle of the night, having to gather the sleeping bag and *Run run run!*

She dreams of leaving the edge. In the air she looks back. Loraine in the doorway, waving.

She lies on the rooftop and hears the stairwell door opening and closing, all night long. Clenches her fists and gets ready. The wetness falling drenches her eyelashes. She remembers Loraine relighting a half-smoked Newport under the burn of a July moon, blowing plumes of smoke gone spiraling into what she called evening, not night. *Night comes later.* The stairwell door opens, closes. Loraine said, *Evening the stars come out, but night, that's November, when it goes dark. Run off the edge right into a shadow—they never find your body.* Flicking her cigarette over the edge. Red-orange sailing blue-black. Still talking as she crawls inside the sleeping bag with Madge, *Easy to go into the dark, that's not what I worry about.* Arms holding her close, tight. Curled inside her fist the red plastic sword. Just a whisper now in Madge's ear, *What I worry about, it's coming back.*