

PETER ABRAHAMS LIBBA BRAY DAVID LEVITHAN
PATRICIA McCORMICK SARAH WEEKS GENE LUEN YANG

UP ALL NIGHT



Six sunsets; six stories

Up All Night

A Short Story Collection

Peter Abrahams

Libba Bray

David Levithan

Patricia McCormick

Sarah Weeks

Gene Luen Yang

**With an Introduction by
Laura Geringer**

 HarperCollins e-books

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Introduction

Dear Reader,

When I was a teen, my favorite short stories often had to do with moments of wonder and amazement, when a single revelation transformed a character literally overnight. The tales were as varied as their tellers, but the theme that drew me was the same: Something kept the hero or heroine up all night; and at the end of the vigil that individual (for better or for worse) was never the same again.

In some cases a soul had been lost, in others found. Or innocence had been lost or perhaps regained. Or the power of speech had been sacrificed. Or a shift of perception had offered salvation when it was least expected. Always, something had irrevocably changed, between sunset and sunrise during the quiet hours when most mortals were fast asleep.

Those stories I loved—by Oscar Wilde, Edgar Allan Poe, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Hans Christian Andersen, Lafcadio Hearn, E.T.A. Hoffman, and Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm—linger still in my mind and heart. If you too tend to be nocturnal by nature, or even if you don't, I recommend them to you.

I also recommend to you one of the greatest of all insomniac writers, Loren Eiseley, whose essay "The Judgement of the Birds" tells of his experience one night on the twentieth floor of a midtown hotel in New York City when, alone in the dark, he grew restless and on an impulse, opened the curtains: "I...peered out. It was the hour just before dawn, the hour when men sigh in their sleep, or, if awake, strive to focus their wavering eyesight upon a world emerging from the shadows.... The light was being reflected from the wings of pigeons who, in utter silence, were beginning to float outward upon the city. In and out... passed the white-winged birds on their mysterious errands. At this hour the city was theirs, and quietly, without the brush of a single wing tip against stone in that high, eerie place, they were taking over the spires of Manhattan.... As I crouched half asleep across the sill, I had a moment's illusion that the world had changed in the night, as in some immense snowfall.... To and fro went the white wings, to and fro. There were no sounds from any of them. They knew man was asleep and this light for a little while was theirs. Or perhaps I had only dreamed about man in this city of wings.... Perhaps I, myself, was one of these birds, dreaming...."

Each of the stories in this collection presents in its own way what Loren Eiseley described so beautifully in that passage from *The Immense Journey*—a moment of vision from an inverted angle, a time when, by chance or intention, a human stood sleepless upon the border of two worlds at an hour when others were unconscious, and miraculously caught a brief transformative glimpse into the depths.

In Peter Abrahams's "Phase 2," a brush with the supernatural works in mysterious ways as an agent of change in the lives of two children who have lost their father. In Libba Bray's

“Not Just for Breakfast Anymore,” a rock concert evening of breathless misadventure and an underwater revelation bring unexpected rewards. In David Levithan’s “The Vulnerable Hours,” the simple question “What’s up?” paves a winding road to a reciprocal moment between two lonely seekers of truth. In “Orange Alert,” by Patricia McCormick, going too far cuts both ways in a sudden and highly satisfying reversal of power. In Sarah Weeks’s “Superman Is Dead,” the impact of the death of a pet, a divorce, the birth of a stepbrother, and an imagined murder come together in a loss of innocence that is all too poignantly real. In Gene Luen Yang’s “The Motherless One,” the age-old question “Why was I born?” becomes Monkey’s quest and obsession, ironically causing the legendary character to ignore the signposts nature offers all around him and come dangerously close to losing the very life he is seeking to understand.

It gives me the greatest pleasure to have the masterful storytellers represented here gathered in one volume. Inspired by their narratives of a single night that matters, I invite you to write your own short story.

I hope you enjoy these unusual tales, as I have, and that whatever you select to take from them stays with you for many days and nights to come, waking and dreaming.



Laura Geringer

Publisher, Laura Geringer Books

STORIES THAT MAY KEEP YOU UP ALL NIGHT:

Isaac Asimov’s “Nightfall”

Richard Connell’s “The Most Dangerous Game”

Nathaniel Hawthorne’s “Young Goodman Brown”

Ernest Hemingway’s “A Clean, Well-Lighted Place”

James Joyce’s “The Dead”

Guy de Maupassant’s “Night: A Nightmare”

Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Tell-Tale Heart”

Peter Abrahams

Counting the hours,” my dad wrote in his last email. “Exactly forty-six more and I’m out of this godforsaken place. Phase Two begins! Love you all.” *All* meaning Mom, my eleven-year-old brother,

Neddy, and me, Lara.

“Hey Mom,” I said. “An email from Dad.”

“Is everything all right?” Mom said, hurrying over from whatever she was doing, the laundry maybe—laundry, I remembered at that moment, that I’d promised to take care of before school. For some reason, Mom just couldn’t get used to these emails coming in real time from a war zone, got alarmed whenever one turned up in the in-box. She leaned over my shoulder for a closer look at the screen, a bottle of spot remover in her hand. I was aware of her eyes tracking the words, could feel her concentration, so intense.

“What’s the time difference again?” Mom said.

“Thirteen hours?” I said. “Or maybe with turning back the clocks it’s—”

“Why can’t you guys get this?” said Neddy, doing his homework at the kitchen table. He glanced at his watch. “It’s eight thirty-five A.M. over there, A.M. tomorrow.”

“That’s good,” said Mom.

“What is?” I said.

“That it’s already tomorrow,” Mom said.

“For God’s sake,” said Neddy. “Forty-six hours is forty-six hours.” Probably the very words Dad would have said, but they wouldn’t have sounded so annoying coming from him. Dad had a real gentle voice, deep but soft. Neddy’s voice had a grating undertone even when he was in a good mood. But Neddy and Dad both had that precise way about them, a precision you could see in Dad’s email, how the grammar was always right and all the letters that should have been capitalized were. That precision was what made him such a great pilot. Nobody had told me that—I just knew. Once, when I was really little and we still lived on the base, Dad took me up in an old World War Two P-39, let me sit on his lap while he flew. Somehow his hands on the controls looked intelligent, as though each contained a tiny brain, thinking about every movement. I felt so safe, like the sky was my natural element. He even did a few barrel rolls, just to hear me laugh. Dad liked my laugh, for some reason. “Where’d Lara get a laugh like that?” he’d say.

Mom went to the calendar on the fridge door. “So forty-six hours from now means Thursday at six thirty-five P.M.?”

“Duh,” said Neddy.

Mom took a red marker and made a big! in Thursday’s square. That didn’t mean Dad was coming home on Thursday; they always flew to the Ramstein base in Germany first. But he’d be back by Sunday or Monday and then there’d be big changes, what Dad called Phase Two of our lives. Phase Two started with Dad resigning from the service and taking a piloting job with Executive Air, a charter company. Mom and Dad were real happy about it. He’d be home three or four nights a week and most weekends, and the pay was good. They’d already put down a deposit on a house in almost the

nicest part of town. A house with a pool! Plus Neddy and I were going to have our own bedrooms for the first time, instead of sharing. Even the address sounded great: 88 Hickory Lane. I'd already written it on all my schoolbooks, scratching out "3712 Baseline Road, Apt. 19."

Mom went to the beauty parlor and had highlights put in her hair. Once or twice I heard her singing to herself. Mom had a beautiful singing voice, had even made a demo for some record producer when she was a teenager. She cleaned the apartment from top to bottom and rearranged the furniture. Thursday night she made a special dinner—pork roast with orange sauce and pecan pie for dessert. Mom kept glancing at the clock. At six thirty-five she went to the fridge and took out a bottle of wine. Mom didn't drink wine, didn't drink at all. "Who wants a little sip?" she said.

"Bring it on," said Neddy.

Mom gave him a look. "Just this once, buster," she said.

I took three glasses from the cupboard and set them on the table. Mom was unscrewing the cap off the wine when the buzzer went. She pressed the intercom button and said, "Yes?"

Then came some static, followed by a man's voice. "Mrs. Byron?"

"Yes?"

"First Lieutenant Kevin Skype and Chaplain Ferrarra to see you, ma'am. May we come up?"

Mom went white, the color of a corpse in the movies. The bottle of wine slipped from her hand and smashed on the floor, but while it was still in midair I noticed a soaring eagle on the label, rising in a pure blue sky, the image so clear. I remembered that eagle way better than anything that happened in the next few days.

There's a crazy thing I've thought about a lot of times and still don't understand. After someone dies—someone close to you, I mean, like a father—why should it be so important to get the body back and bury it? They're dead, right? That's the big thing. So what difference should it make? All I can tell you is that it does. It makes a big difference. I know, because we never got to bury my dad. Chaplain Ferrarra said there was nothing to recover after the crash, nothing human to bury. We had the funeral—packed church, trumpeter playing Taps, buddies of Dad's who called him a hero. They were all so gentle, big guys kind of trying to make themselves smaller, if you know what I mean, so they wouldn't be towering over the three of us. Something strange happened to me in the church: I

suddenly felt so alive, more alive than I'd ever been, just glowing with it, hyperconscious of my beating heart, the blood flowing through my veins, the oxygen filling my lungs. That shamed me, but there was nothing I could do about it. Anyway, the full-of-life feeling didn't last long. Soon the three of us were back in Apartment 19 at 3712 Baseline Road and I was all hollowed out. Going through the motions: an everyday saying that I now understood through and through.

We got the \$6,000 death gratuity from the Army in three days, and the next week Mom returned to work. We were going to be all right for money, she said.

"I'm sorry about 88 Hickory Lane," she said.

“Oh, Mom,” I told her. “Don’t even think about it.” Neddy and I went back to school. At first everyone made a big effort to be nice to us. Then they slipped back to normal. Normal was better. From time to time, just for a moment or two, shooting hoops in P.E., say, I felt normal too. Not normal like before, back in Phase One, but a new kind of normal. Neddy, too—after a couple weeks, even heard him laughing on the phone.

But Mom cried at night. She tried to muffle the sound, but the wall between the bedrooms was thin. And she wasn’t eating. Her clothes started hanging loosely on her body, and when I hugged her good-bye in the mornings, I could feel all the ribs in her back. Then she got the idea that maybe Dad had survived the crash, was a prisoner somewhere in the desert, or injured and holed up in a cave. Neddy’s face got all hopeful the first time she offered up this new theory.

“Mom?” I said. “You really think so?”

Her voice sharpened. “Why not? There’s no body. And who’s more resourceful than Dad?”

“Nobody, Mom, it’s just...”

She wrote a letter to the Army, asking them to send out search parties. When no answer came after three or four days, she started calling. Chaplain Ferrarra came to the apartment again, this time with a major. The major had pictures of the crash site.

“Sure you want to see these, ma’am?” he said.

“Absolutely,” said Mom. “Kids—go to your room.”

Neddy and I shook our heads. Not that we wanted to see, exactly, more like we had to. Mom glared at us for a moment or two; then her look softened a little.

“All right,” she said.

The major spread color photos on the kitchen table. We looked at blackened metal scraps twisted and scattered across a desert floor, not the beautiful kind of desert I’d come to know a little the two years we were posted to the base in Tucson, but just a stark and empty ugly nothing. Those scraps, so small and deformed, didn’t add up to a plane or anything else.

The major’s eyes were on Mom, just waiting patiently.

Mom met his gaze. “He could have bailed out,” she said. “Maybe into those hills in the background.”

“Problem is, ma’am,” said the major, “there wasn’t time. Surface-to-air missile—eyewitnesses saw the hit. Direct on the nose. The aircraft broke up in midair.”

Mom’s brow furrowed. I could see how hard she was thinking. “What if he saw it coming and hit the ejection button at the last second?” she said.

The major gazed at her and said nothing.

“The major gazed at her and said nothing.”

Mom pressed on. "He had great vision," she said. "Twenty-ten in his right eye."

The major shifted one of those horrible pictures around in case Mom wasn't seeing it properly.

"Ma'am," said the chaplain, very quiet. I noticed a tiny shaving cut under his chin, still seeping drop or two of red.

Mom stopped calling the Army, wrote no more letters. But she still wasn't eating, and now, instead of crying in the night, she was up till all hours on the computer. Mom had never shown any interest in online things before.

"Mom?" I asked one morning. "What are you doing on the computer?"

"Research," she said, deep dark depressions under her eyes.

"Into what?"

"Just research."

That night she didn't come home till real late. I was awake. In this new normality I didn't sleep quite as well as in the old one. She went into the bathroom, her footsteps quicker than they'd been for a while, like she wasn't dragging herself around. Water ran. Then I heard the squeak of her bedspring. After that, silence. No crying.

"Lara?" said Neddy, very softly.

"Yeah?"

"You awake?"

"Yeah."

"I think I know where she's been."

"Where?"

"To a seense."

"Huh?"

"That's what she's been checking out online. I followed her tracks."

Not nice, but that didn't seem important right now. "What's a seense?" I said.

"You know," said Neddy. "Where you sit around the table in the dark and try to talk to spirits."

"Oh," I said. "A séance."

"That's how you pronounce it?"

“SAY-ahnse.”

“Séance,” Neddy said.

We lay in the darkness, not speaking. I closed my eyes but couldn't sleep. A siren sounded far away.

After a while Neddy spoke, even quieter than before. “Spirits means spirits of the dead, right?”

“Right.”

Mom came back late the next night. And the next and the next and the next. Her footsteps slowed down. The muffled crying started up again. She missed a couple days' work—a Thursday and Friday—maybe not even calling in the second time, because her boss phoned and I heard Mom saying how sorry she was and that it would never happen again. That wasn't quite enough for her boss, because after listening for a few moments, she said, “Please give me one more chance.” And then: “Thank you.”

Mom stayed home that night. Saturday morning she was up early, already making waffles when Neddy and I went into the kitchen. She sat down at the table with us, rubbing her hands in an enthusiastic way; but all that darkness around her eyes was even worse than before.

“How are the waffles?” she said.

“Good, Mom,” I said. “Thanks.”

Neddy mumbled something, totally incomprehensible with his mouth full.

“Aren't you having any?” I said.

“I'm not hungry,” Mom said. “I had a big dinner.” Which wasn't true; she'd hardly touched her food last night. She spooned a little sugar into her coffee, took a sip. “I've met this interesting woman,” she said.

“Yeah?” I said.

Neddy poured more syrup on his waffles, globs of it. Dad would have said, “Son?” And Neddy would have stopped. Mom didn't seem to notice.

“Her name's Mrs. Foxe,” Mom said. “With an e. She's lived all over the world.”

“An Army brat like us?” I said, although we really hadn't lived too many places—just here, Tucson, and San Diego.

“No, nothing like that,” Mom said. “She's...different.”

“How?” I said.

Mom stirred her coffee again, gazed into the tiny black whirlpool she'd made, spinning round and round, very fast. "There's more to life than just the everyday things," she said. "That's one of Mrs. Foxe's beliefs."

"More to life such as?" I said.

Mom's eyes met mine for a moment, looked away. "I'm talking about beyond the material world," she said.

"Outer space?" Neddy said, syrup dripping down his chin.

"Beyond outer space, too," Mom said.

"There's nothing beyond outer space," said Neddy. "It goes on and on. That's why they call it outer space."

"This isn't about space," Mom said. "Or science, or any of that. It's about..."

"About what, Mom?" I said.

"The spiritual world, I guess you'd say."

"You mean religion?" I said.

"Not exactly," said Mom. "What Mrs. Foxe says is that the life force is so strong, it leaves an undying imprint. Those are her exact words."

"An undying imprint where?" I said.

Mom gave me a long look. "That's the question."

"What is?" said Neddy.

"Where the undying imprints go," I told him.

"Undying imprints of what?" he said.

I turned to Mom.

"Of the living," she said. "After they're gone."

"So it is about space," Neddy said.

One of Mom's eyelids twitched; I'd never seen that happen to her before. "I don't understand," she said.

"You said these imprints or whatever go somewhere," Neddy explained. "All somewheres are in space." That last part could have been spoken by Dad, word for word. But it would have sounded nice.

Mom rubbed her face; her skin looked tired, took a moment or two to resume its tautness. "Mrs. Foxe says that the undying imprints go somewhere."

Foxe says that these undying imprints go where souls go.”

“Souls?” I said.

“Just another word for undying imprints,” Mom said. “She says.”

“Souls of the dead,” I said.

Mom’s voice was quiet. “The undying part.” She stared into her coffee. “Mrs. Foxe believes...in fact, she has actually experienced...that under certain circumstances some extrasensitive people are able...” She went silent. I heard the bus going by down on the street; we were on the route for the number 7 bus, heading downtown. Mom looked up. “Do you kids know what a séance is?”

We nodded.

“Mrs. Foxe is one of those extrasensitive people,” Mom said.

“You’ve been trying to communicate with...with Dad?” I said.

“Mrs. Foxe thinks we’re very close to making contact,” Mom said. “She can feel it. There’s just one last roadblock in the way.”

“What’s that?” I said.

“The venue.”

“Huh?” said Neddy.

“The place where we’ve been having the séances. She says here would be better. So...”

“So?”

“So we’re going to try tonight. After midnight is best, when you kids are in bed anyway.”

“No,” I said.

“No?” said Mom.

“Us too,” said Neddy.

“I don’t...”

Mrs. Foxe smelled like flowers, lots of them. She had huge liquid eyes and a high forehead, very smooth although the part of her neck showing above the ruffled collar of her silk blouse looked wrinkled.

“What lovely children!” she said. She glanced around the kitchen, lit only by three big candles burning on the round table—red, white, and blue—took a deep breath of the air, full of the smell of burning incense, raised her hands slightly, and went still. “Yes,” she said, holding the pose for a moment or two. “This will do. You’ve done well, Julia.”

"Oh," said Mom. "Thanks."

"So if we'll just get the donation out of the way, we can start."

Mom went into the bedroom. Mrs. Foxe looked at Neddy, then at me. "I understand you'll be accompanying us on our journey," she said.

"Where to?" said Neddy.

Mrs. Foxe just smiled. Mom came back with her purse, took out her checkbook.

"Cash works so much better," said Mrs. Foxe.

Mom handed her some bills. I didn't see how much, but there were at least two twenties. Mrs. Foxe stuffed the money down the front of her blouse with a smooth quick movement, like one of those close-up magicians. Her hands were soft and plump, with crimson nails.

"The longest journey begins with a single step," she said.

None of us knew what to make of that.

"So let us take that step," said Mrs. Foxe. "Time and tide et cetera. Places, everybody."

We all moved toward our regular chairs.

"Whoa!" said Mrs. Foxe.

We froze. The candlelight gleamed in her eyes. "Where does *he* sit?"

Mom rocked back a little. "Where he used to—?"

"His chair, dear," said Mrs. Foxe.

Mom pointed to Dad's chair.

"That chair stays empty," said Mrs. Foxe. "I will sit here, the children there and there, and Julie like so. And in front of *his* place, we require something personal."

"Something personal?" Mom said.

"Something he used when he walked on this side," said Mrs. Foxe. "It needn't be important—in fact, a little everyday object is often best, especially if a deport is in the offing."

"A deport?" said Mom.

"I'll explain later," said Mrs. Foxe, glancing at her watch.

Mom hadn't gotten around to packing up Dad's things, although she'd started once or twice. She left the room, returned with a baseball trophy, a framed letter from the secretary of defense, Dad's

laptop, and a safety razor.

“Ah, perfect,” said Mrs. Foxe, selecting the razor and setting it on the table in front of the empty chair. “Now we may sit.”

Mom put the trophy, letter, and laptop on the sideboard and we sat, Mrs. Foxe removing her embroidered coat and hanging it on the back of her chair. She gazed at the white candle. It made a low sizzling noise.

“The travelers will hold hands,” she said.

That had to mean us. I held hands with Mrs. Foxe and with Mom, just able to reach her across Dad’s empty place; and Neddy did the same. Mrs. Foxe’s hand was warm, Mom’s icy cold. Mrs. Foxe’s eyes closed. For some reason, so did mine. It got very quiet.

“Breathe,” said Mrs. Foxe. She took in a deep breath, slowly let it out. “Breathe as one.” We took in deep breaths, let them out slow, breathing as one. “Now,” said Mrs. Foxe, “let each of us picture in our minds the strongest, clearest image of...of...”

“Richard,” said Mom.

“Right,” said Mrs. Foxe. “The strongest, clearest image of Richard-slash-Dad that we can.”

I tried to see Dad in my mind and drew a complete blank. Mom, Neddy, my teachers and friends—I could picture them all without effort, but not Dad. I opened my eyes. Everyone else’s eyes were closed. Mrs. Foxe spoke, her voice now soft but very deep. “We haven’t lost you, Richard. We know where you are.”

I could feel the pulse strengthen in Mom’s hand. And her skin seemed to be growing warmer.

“Are we all now projecting a strong mental image?” said Mrs. Foxe. “A mental image powerful enough to reach the beloved?”

“Yes,” said Mom, eyes closed tight, voice trancelike.

“Kind of,” said Neddy.

I gazed at that razor, and suddenly a vision of Dad shaving swam into my mind, a clear vision of him tilting up his chin to get at the stubble underneath. Was it powerful? I don’t know, but I felt chill. “Yes,” I said, and closed my eyes.

“Richard,” said Mrs. Foxe. “Four faithful travelers are trying with all their power to reach you. If you can hear us, or see us, or sense us, please give a sign.”

In my mind, the image of Dad shaving under his chin began to fade, replaced by nothing. One of the candles sizzled again. Could that be a sign? I took a peek. The flame of the white candle wavered, the others were still, burning straight up.

“Look,” I said.

Everyone opened their eyes. Mrs. Foxe saw what was happening. She turned to me and smiled a little smile. “Hush, child—haste is the enemy,” she said. Now her hand felt positively hot.

“But is it a sign?” I said. “The candle flickering like that?”

Mrs. Foxe didn’t answer. We watched the flame. All at once it stopped wavering, stood straight like the others.

Mrs. Foxe sucked in her breath. “I can feel your presence, Richard,” she said. “Very near.” She leaned forward slightly. “Give us a sign, we beg you.”

I felt prickles on the back of my neck. Mom’s eyes were huge and dark, her face tilted up, like a figure in an old religious painting. Neddy’s eyes, on the other hand, were narrow, almost as though—

The razor wobbled.

Beyond a shadow of a doubt. No way to miss that movement—the razor lay all by itself on the table, gleaming in a circle of candlelight. It had wobbled. But even though there was no doubt, I began to doubt almost right away. At that precise moment, the moment of reawakening doubt, the razor wobbled again, and then, as though to crush any doubt for all time, it shifted, sliding a good two inches across the table and then rotating in a full circle.

“Oh my God,” Mom said. “Richard.” A tear spilled out of each dark eye, slid slowly down her cheeks, leaving golden tracks.

“Welcome to the circle, Richard,” said Mrs. Foxe. She paused, almost as if to allow time for Dad to say something polite in return. Then she said, “Have you anything to tell us?”

Silence. The razor lay on the table, motionless now. The flame of the white candle burned straight, unwavering.

“Do you have a message for your family?” Mrs. Foxe said. “Are you happy? Are there any wishes you’d like to—”

Suddenly Mrs. Foxe’s right shoulder sagged, as though someone behind her had leaned on it, someone with a heavy hand. Mrs. Foxe glanced behind her, looked a bit pained. “Oh, dear,” she said. “I’m afraid you don’t know your own strength.”

Mom rose, slowly, as though pulled by some force, her eyes on the shadows behind Mrs. Foxe. “Oh, Rich,” she said, tears flowing freely now, “I miss you so much.”

“Julie?” said Mrs. Foxe, straightening up and maybe a bit alarmed. “Really much better form to remain seated. We can’t always predict—”

But Mom didn’t hear. She was moving around the table, toward whatever stood behind Mrs. Foxe. “Did it hurt, Rich?” she said. “I hope it didn’t hurt. You’re not hurting now, are you?” Mom reached the space behind Mrs. Foxe, raised her arms, encircled them around what appeared to be nothing, hugged my invisible dad. “I love you, Rich,” Mom said. Her voice sounded calm, as calm as I’d ever heard it, serene. “I loved you from the moment I laid eyes on you, and I always will.” She

wasn't crying anymore, just stood there, gently rubbing a back no one could see.

But I was crying. "Can you feel him, Mom?" I said.

Mom nodded to me, the way you'd nod over someone's shoulder. I rose. Was that Neddy getting up too? I wanted to touch Dad, so much. But Mrs. Foxe grabbed my arm—she turned out to be very strong—and sat me back down. Then she got up, took Mom's arm more gently, and said, "Best not to pressure visitors from the spirit world too much, at least not at first. Wouldn't want to scare them off, would we?"

"Oh, no," said Mom. She let Mrs. Foxe lead her back to her seat.

We sat around the table. The air tingled now. I felt Dad's presence, no question.

"Thank you, Richard," said Mrs. Foxe. "We thank you for appearing among us. I sense you are fading now, and hope you will see fit to come again."

"He's not fading," Mom said. "I don't sense him fading."

"Perhaps not," said Mrs. Foxe. "But we don't want to demand too much the very first—"

The flame of the white candle wavered and then rose straight again.

"Richard?" said Mrs. Foxe. "Richard?"

The room was silent. The silence went on and on. Mom watched the white candle, burning in an ordinary way now, like the other two. I stopped sensing Dad's presence.

Mrs. Foxe pushed back her chair. "Well," she said. "For a first attempt, quite successful, *n'est-ce pas?*"

"Maybe it's not over," Mom said. "Let's give him a chance to—"

"It's over," said Mrs. Foxe. She pointed to the table. The razor was gone.

Mom gasped. So did I. Neddy? Maybe not.

"A deport, my dear," said Mrs. Foxe. "An object borne away into the spirit world." She got up, flicked a switch, turning on the overhead light.

Mom rose too, blinking in light that now seemed much too harsh. "When can we do it again?"

"Soon, if you like," said Mrs. Foxe, donning her embroidered coat. "You've got my cell?"

Mrs. Foxe left. Mom turned from the door, wrapped me and Neddy in her arms, held us for a long, long time. No one said anything. We were all wiped out from emotion.

After a while. Mom said. "Let's get some sleep." She went into her bedroom. Neddy and I went

After a while, Mom said, "Let's get some sleep." She went into her bedroom. Neddy and I went into ours. I sank down on my bed. Neddy walked over to his and punched his pillow, real hard.

"Huh?" I said.

He turned, came closer, spoke in a low, angry voice, his face all red. "She's a fake."

"Mrs. Foxxe?" I said. "What the hell are you—" Neddy reached into his pocket and took out the razor. He held it on the palm of his hand. I actually had to touch it to make sure it was real.

"You took it off the table?" I said. "I don't understand."

"*She* took it off the table," Neddy said. "Remember when she got Mom to sit back down?"

"Yeah."

"She scooped up the razor at the same time, without even looking, real smooth, and dropped it in the pocket of that coat of hers."

"Oh my God. Are you sure?"

"Course I'm sure," said Neddy. "I took it out the next second, while her back was turned. And you know what else?"

"What?"

"The way it moved on the table, spinning around and all that?"

"Oh no."

"Oh yeah. She had a magnet between her knees, under the table. I peeked. She didn't see me—her eyes were on Mom the whole time."

I felt sick. "What about the flame?"

"She has this real sneaky way of blowing out through her nose," Neddy said.

"So none of it was real?"

Neddy shook his head. He looked like he was about to start crying, and Neddy wasn't a crier.

"But I felt him there," I said. I wasn't a crier either, but I was crying now. Then I got angry, real angry, and the crying stopped. I wiped my face on my sleeve, pulled myself together. "This is bad," I said.

"What are we going to do?" said Neddy. "Tell Mom?"

I thought about that, picturing how Mom had hugged empty space and told Dad how she'd always loved him. Dropping the truth on her? No way. But Mrs. Foxxe would be back, again and again, getting her hooks deeper and deeper into Mom, taking every cent we had.

“What happens when she discovers she doesn’t have the razor?” I said.

“She’ll just figure it fell out, getting into her car or something like that,” Neddy said. “A little thing like that won’t stop her.”

He was right. But how could we let this go on? Over on the desk, the green button on the computer we shared was blinking slowly in sleep mode. That reminded me of the four objects, one in particular. I went over to the computer and woke it up. I wasn’t a great computer person, but Neddy was.

“Got an idea,” I said.

Neddy came closer. “Using our Wi-Fi?” he said.

“Yeah,” I said. We were turning out to be a team. Neddy sat in front of the computer, started tapping away. He figured everything out real fast, was almost done when we heard a sound from the kitchen, maybe a chair scraping on the floor. I opened the bedroom door, went to look.

Mom was at the table, standing behind Dad’s empty chair. She wore a nightgown now, and her hair was kind of wild. The candles were burning again, the only light in the room. Mom was facing in my direction, but she didn’t seem to see me.

“Mom?”

She jumped, startled. “Lara? What are you doing up?”

“I couldn’t sleep.”

“Me either,” Mom said. She put a hand on Dad’s chair. “I’ve been kicking myself.”

“Why?” Had she figured out that Mrs. Foxe was a fraud, problem solved?

Far from it. “There was so much more I wanted to say to Dad,” Mom said. “And *he* never really got a chance to say anything.”

“What do you mean?”

“They speak sometimes, these...these souls. Mrs. Foxe has seen it happen. I’m going to call her first thing in the morning, get her to come back tomorrow night.” Mom bit her lip. “What if she’s booked?”

I heard our bedroom door open, glanced over, saw Neddy in the doorway. Things were moving faster than we’d anticipated, but why not? I raised my eyebrows. He gave a little nod.

“Mom?” I said. “Why don’t we try right now?”

“Oh, I don’t think Mrs. Foxe would...”

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