

We knew exactly how cunning and metaphysical they could be. We lacked still the tools to reciprocate their ventures, but by their very nature, they could and were curious enough to interact with us. An undetectable sort of people, like bacteria prior to microscopes. They had a single hour beyond midnight, during which they touched and left imprints. We did not witness these events, too holy or too diabolical, but we remembered their results. Hiding between the atoms, not quite ghosts.

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I had attracted one of these Not-Quites. My radiator broke down, and these modern winters are storms of damaging holds. My landlord wouldn't respond to my messages, nor would she open the door when I banged for any help. I was freezing, so she slid a box of matches. Six left. I went to work that night, long shifts around scary people in a nightclub where I was meat. I came back in the morning, matchless, expecting my toes to freeze off within the hour. It was pleasantly warm.

*Did you fix it?*

I asked my landlord. No response, so it was obvious she didn't – landlords tend to revel and gloat about all the things they'll do for you, amidst what they won't. I approached the heater. I noticed I couldn't. My body gave off a signal as if passing someone in a narrow corridor. My smallest nerves giving off a spark to veer around a particular spot. It was alarming, to feel the air dense up as I reached into this zone, clingfilm around a halibut.

Too tired and too underpaid to deal with spirits, I elected to sit down next to it. Within me flowered a sense of company. Gardens speak for themselves, a simple story of life whose conclusion is death or upkeep. In my warmth, my mouth was blossoms, a plum smile. I was treated like a meihua tree, meticulously maintained by a gardener hiding within the reeds.

There was a national panic about 'shifts' – people reported that after midnight, inexplicable things had happened. Furniture moved, walls repainted, cabinets dusted, dishes done, clothing repaired, gutters cleaned – chores were seemingly fixing themselves. The confusion never settled in me, but I understood that innocuousness should at least make itself known. Superstition, a point of cultural pride, makes it hard, though, to see the paranormal as benign.

I remember hearing on the radio one of those spiritual grifters who for the first time ever could have been right about something. She said, "imagine how long they've been watching us for, to understand our rituals, before moving to replicate them themselves? Are they helping us, or do they mean to replace us?"

I settled on 'coexistence' for my personal answer.

Every homecoming, something that I'd procrastinated on, loathed to do, or was physically incapable of without help, had been completed. On day two, my windows had been cleaned, and I could actually see my snow-touched city through the blur. It wasn't a very remarkable sight, but it beat looking at lights through smudges. The next day, an incense stick on my mother's altar. My fingers were never flexible enough, couldn't even hold a pen properly. After that, my pill box had been refilled and rearranged.

I started announcing that I'm home to an empty apartment; the neighbours must have thought strangely of me. The walls are paper thin, every sound must be squelched or it is eavesdropped on (the neighbours are organising a tenant union in secret).

But I was grateful, and I was curious. The more there is in a room, the fuller the sounds are. With every act of service, the gaps of air within loneliness' diffusion shrunk. It became second nature to me to feel where they 'stood' – it had a special interest in my bed.

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The nightclub where I worked had become a restaurant, and the shifts switched to during the day. The Not-Quite (as I've begun calling the presence) stopped asserting themselves for a while then. Perhaps, as a being of pure, paracausal effect, there was a fear of alienating me. Had the shifts occurred while I was there to witness them, I would pray more and even call an exorcist, rather than smile at the discovered convenience.

I found out later that the Not-Quite had wanted to help me out at my job. Anatomically-diverging handprints appeared on the dusty tablecovers and on the whited windowsill. It ended up breaking in three nights in a row, believing I was still on the nightshift.

The grifter's words echoed in my head, 'they're learning our behaviours'. They excited me, made fucking myself much more thrilling. I actually began staying up until midnight (it was worth being cranky the next day), in the hope that they could see me. Maybe even join me. I didn't think of it in terms of remuneration or payment – I was careful not to treat them as a cleaner, a helper, a worker. Their paranormal existence forewent transaction, had no use for cause and effect, or even exchange.

A plant does not grow for the gardener that feeds him. Both are required for the bloom.

The heat flushed over me like summer had come early, and my petals blossomed. My cock throbbed uncontrollably, fully erect at the mere thought of this indulgence, this transdimensional voyeurism. The oil I bought (was I being thoughtful?) cascaded down the shaft, splashing on my stomach and between my legs. It was ample, excessive even, but thoughts about bed sheets and laundry costs aside, I wanted to put on a performance. There was an irrepressible curiosity in me. My lamp, aimed at me like a camera, made me shine in a lubricated bliss; I showed and posed myself like a personal prize.

I was a soft gold and I could not stop moaning. I made myself sound like sex, neighbours weren't a priority. My hands glided up and down my cock, slowly at first, to get used to the warm, wet, loud sensations. It would be over too soon otherwise, and I needed to reach midnight. Just as much as I needed to reach an orgasm. A tugjob of war. These were the first times I had actually taken the time to thoroughly please myself. Newfound attention to myself to give a floor show to a being that does not (could not?) exist, at least according to the theories of intra-atomic space. But, my legs spread instinctively, I knew they do.

Two fingers of my left hand massaged the base of my shaft, holding down delight itself on top of a pressure point. With my right, I palmed the head of my cock with the movements of mortar into pestle. I ground my hips against myself, as if resisting the intentions of my

pleasure-led phantom limbs. There was no shame in my ecstasy; my tongue left my mouth and would not go back in. I needed more, wished I had more hands. I gripped my dick with both my hands and began pumping, frantically bucking my pelvis to establish rhythm, control that would become lost to the desperation.

My orgasm rumbled in me, attempting to escape through every single pore in my body. I saw the clock strike midnight – 00:00. From that second to the next, I felt a tropical world of exorbitant sensations plunge itself on me. An instance containing the movements, intentions, and stimulations of a full, complete hour. I was suspended in a harness of time and the dom defied the universe to give me astronomical pleasure. I whited out, I cried out, every cell in my body joined in the chorus. Cum flew, literally, everywhere. I hadn't jerked off in a while (abrupt schedule changes will kill a libido) and it showed: it had landed on my stomach, forming slipshod paths to my nipples, dabbing even a left cheek. My hands shook, my nerves overloaded with a solar afterglow, hardly responsive to let go.

I couldn't even clean myself up, surrendering to sleep immediately. That night, I dreamt, or remembered, what happened to me. The shift could not be witnessed but it could be recalled. The Not-Quite had helped me out, just as usual. My body was like an overloaded circuit box, so I could not even begin to trace their steps using my body as cobblestones. I did not know how they looked, but the nature of their assistance left suggestions, prickled my imagination about how they had serviced me. The prints in the restaurant meant it could easily wrap a hand around the base of my dick, fingers coiling upward until it reached the head. My clean windows implied reach and stamina; it would have put that hour to non-stop use. My mother's altar meant it had picked up an incense stick, placed it into the bowl, and lit it, implying dexterity: A massage? Fingerbang?

The pill boxes were the hardest to place, but, perhaps it knew my chemical makeup, and provided a therapeutic balance. That, funnily enough, was the most exciting thought. It understood me. Cared about me. Support was not something the material world had given me.

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Rent had gone up. Very illegally, but so was I, so there was nothing I could do to fight it. I took up more and more shifts in the restaurant, began unpredictably disappearing days and nights. The meihua was withering, its petals shedding, my personal summer ending. I could tell this upset the Not-Quite. The gardener, whose reward is not in the effort, had lost mastery over the cultivated land. If soil is subject to hurt, it becomes innourishable. Such violence is exorbitant extraction, and the roots of life will wither. Then even the plum tree, known to grow for a thousand years, will falter. Those years, after all, must be ones without disaster.

I had to call in sick. Thankfully, the boss was lenient enough. There have been bosses who fired me on the spot, so I sighed in relief at being given such simple, but thorough mercy. I couldn't stand the idea of needing to be taken care of past picking up after myself; the terror of having only myself made rest impossible, for support was virtually inaccessible. Rent meant land and land meant money and that meant survival, and that meant work. Without the last, this cycle would collapse. My panic stretched out over most of my day off. The density in my

apartment changed. A static increase, or a shift in air pressure, movements I could feel like bugs on my skin, my hairs picking up radio signals.

A bowl of fish-and-lentil soup appeared before me. Halibut. It was 14:32 PM.

I thanked them, but of course there was no response. This was the response to me. The language that they existed as, permeating my world as kindness. A nice thought I believed that I didn't deserve: these Not-Quites weren't learning from us, they were teaching us how to take care of ourselves. My cynicism could not hide the enriching aroma of the bowl; tears charged my eyes like a spark plug.

How did it move before midnight? Could it always do that? I caught myself speculating on the metaphysical aspects; I had been a philosopher, once. Before I moved here desperate for work, before my university had no use anymore for the 'Bolshevik' social sciences. My personal conclusion was that these questions had only one answer I cared about: they cared for me enough to defy their own rules. Safety be damned, cherishment be good.

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Another complication had occurred – I couldn't cope with the paranoia that I was simply using my Not-Quite. My stress meant their labour.

I had wanted to give myself to them again, but even before midnight, I had simply broken down. When I showed up for work, lying that I was fit again, my boss simply told me that I had been fired after all. Changed his mind, he said. Now I had no way to pay the rent after the mark-up. Homelessness seemed imminent, and a single police stop would reveal me as a fugitive. The winter had broken my knees past the point of running.

For the shortest second, I felt death loom over my room. A corpse flower, bursting from a bloody vine. The room became hard to breathe in; my lungs seared as if I had held my breath for an hour, which was probably true. I coughed, and wheezed, and it was gone. They were gone. The presence near my bed, their favourite spot, emptied. For the hour beyond midnight, the one I endured alone. The heater did nothing for me, it was freezingly lonely.

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The radio woke me up, or rather, unpaused me. Not a wink of sleep, which was reasonable of me. *A night spent thinking is more rewarding than a day spent working*, as the saying goes, but this was not worth staying up for, not that it was a choice. My whole life I had never been a dedicator to Nietzsche's theories, but that whole night, I finally understood his solitude.

A peculiar broadcast abruptly me from my dormancy. It mentioned the time of my breakdown yesterday, the apartment building from which I was to be evicted, and my landlord's name. It was, apparently, a crime scene. The gruesome details excited me, and I became motivated to go and see for myself. I hobbled her way.

The duality of what I saw mortified and reassured me. There had been a many-clawed beast unleashed in the rooms. A tiger that gored the antelope; a tank that tore through rubble. It was, indeed, my landlord, in a scrapbook assortment of chunks and pieces. The police was there, something I failed to account for in all my elation. The detective in charge gave me a question I knew the answer to: "do you know anything about this?" I lied, not out of obstruction or asylum, but because they simply did not possess the same tools I did. Perhaps the grifter could help them, but I did not mention that.

Thankfully, they never asked for any identification. They knew who lived here.

I returned to my apartment; it was warm, and full again. A plot of land, devoted to a single thing. A roped-off tree, well-tended to. I whispered a thank you.

With the landlord gone, my neighbour seized the opportunity to start their tenant union. Zada, was her name, and she promised to break the cycle of rent and debt. I believed her, like sunflowers aligning toward the summer. She gave me a slip of paper that I needed to sign. That worried me, somewhat. My hands had never been good at precision.

After hours of staring at the form, I shook up in surprise. I was looking at my own signature. The handwriting was beautiful. The time was 14:32 PM.

In the dream that followed, or the memory that flocked to me, Not-Quite had picked up the pen and put down a beautiful calligraphy.

I remembered seeing a hand, a mere glimmer of it. The only thing remotely human was the fingernail. It was bloody, like the first petal on a branch.