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EVEN THE SMALL GREEN LAMP

STEVEN KILEY

Emilio felt hot tears in his eyes. He stood over the smashed remnants of a plastic Santa someone had left near the edge of a bank parking lot. It was ridiculous to see, a plastic Santa in the middle of March. Immediately it had made him angry. With swift kicks he had assaulted it, reducing it to a white and red plastic u-shape. He did not feel any less frustrated. The air was cold around him. His old shoes, inches deep in slush, were no longer waterproof. Pain shot intermittently from his toes. Looking down at the crushed plastic he still felt angry, but could no longer muster the will to stomp it. The tears threatened to pour out. He shouted, roared, threw his fists up in a display to no one in particular. His hands twisted as though gripping some invisible parcel. A high-pitched shout was muffled by his clenched lips as he kicked the crushed plastic one last time. He took a deep breath and collected himself before stepping into the bank parking lot, his jacket tattered and tight. He occasioned sips from a brown bag, which he nestled in his inner pocket. The city of Chicago loomed from the east, a vast cemented pillar of light and sound. White luminescence rubbed the sky all around it, like the aura of a great beast. Seeing it from a distance he could imagine the whole city rearing up, bucking and flinging the masses from it. Tearing at the pipes, tubes and black lengths of road until it broke free; running for the open spaces to the west or perhaps diving into the blackness of the lake. But when he got there it always seemed so different, everything divided and subdivided into squares and rectangles, thinning at the peaks and spiraling down into the subways and basements that spread like roots beneath it.

He had gone west out of town trying to find work. A classified ad listed a concrete pouring company in Bensenville looking for help. Ecstatic about his interview Jeffrey supplied money for his cab fare. The interview went quite poorly. Choosing to walk back, he spent the remaining money on scotch. It was still early but the sun swung low, its light slanted. He was walking and mumbling to himself when a familiar voice shouted to him. Confused he searched for the source. Underneath a streetlight she was leaning against the pole, wearing an odd combination of gray and yellow and looking painfully thin. Laughing she waved him over. They exchanged their greetings and she commented that she hadn't expected to see him again. When he told her he was staying in a room in Jeffrey's house she looked away.

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"He's no good." She shook her head. Emilio shrugged. "You seen what he did to me." She shuddered. Hugging herself she asked how long he thought it could last, how long before he would be on the street again. He shrugged trying to explain that Jeffrey had turned over a new leaf, but she shouted him down. "You know what you oughta do..." she stopped. "You wanna go back on the street with nothing?" she studied his face. He began walking away and

she ran up to him. In his ear she whispered where he could find her, if things started to fall apart.

That night when he got back Jeffrey asked him how the interview had gone, to which he only grunted. He sniffed, commented that Emilio smelled like booze, and immediately began a tirade. It was impossible to understand how he could fail to find

a job. Was he enjoying his free ride? Emilio recoiled, growing angrier with each word. When Jeffrey asked if he thought his patience limitless Emilio punched the table, shouting that he had never asked for any help.

There was silence and they stared at each other. Calmly Jeffrey went into his room and brought out his bible.

He clasped Emilio's shoulder and began praying, punctuating his words with hard slaps. Emilio stared at Jeffrey's closed eyes, perplexed. Once done praying he sniffed and said his patience wasn't limitless.



It was on a Sunday that he first met Claire Louise Duhamel and Jeffrey Wayne Stehle. They were odd to see together; Claire tall and pale, Jeffrey short and dark. Both had eyes like chameleons and in the winter when fevered chills shook him, he swore their pupils floated in different directions. The first day he met them they were sitting in Ada Park under a tree passing a bottle of bourbon around.

"Can I get a pull?" he asked.

Claire laughed slowly, a guttural sound with an abrasive falsetto riding atop. Jeffrey shook his head, his breath whistling through his gapped mouth. "What ya gonna give me?" He gave Emilio a quizzical look then reluctantly handed him the bottle. He tipped it up to his mouth and drank. Immediately some of it went down the wrong pipe causing him to choke and cough. Claire was rocking in a fit of gasps and squeaks. "Boy, look a'tcha face!"

- 10 He wheezed and recovered, laughing at himself before handing the liquor back. They introduced themselves, asking where he was headed. Nowhere in particular, he told him. They nodded. "Got no place to go, huh?" Jeffrey grunted. "Neither do we." The bourbon rotated around and he sat, some unseen force pulling him lower and lower before finally pinning him down. Claire and Jeffrey began to bicker and he listened complacently to their nonsense fight.

So it was, week after week, Emilio stumbling into the park; sweating in summer,

shivering in winter. Night after night he melted in a peculiar mixture of fatigue and vigor. Things would always start with laughter and end with screaming.

That's how it happened, one night in the dead of winter, sitting in a row on a park bench, their hands and faces red. What was once a snowman stood directly in front of them not ten feet away. Repeated thawing and re-freezing had warped it beyond recognition, forming the top and edges in consistent wavy lines as though it were a pulpit painted by Salvador Dali. Sitting in a row staring at it reminded him of going to church with his mother. The way she would wake up hours early and brush her hair until it was perfect before combing his. She would pinch his cheeks and tell him how handsome he was. "My little Emilio." Her plump face was always tucked in a smile when she combed his hair. The smell of eggs and chorizo stuck to the air densely so he could still smell it when they got home from church. His suit was too big for him then, and by the time it fit properly she couldn't get him out the door on Sundays.

Emilio was lost in such thoughts, not paying attention to Claire and Jeffrey arguing when Jeffrey stood and struck Claire in the mouth. She shrieked and he hit her again and again. Emilio sat in a stupor, still hazy and shocked. Jeffrey straddled her legs, laying punches into her stomach over and over. He was screaming something Emilio couldn't understand and she was screaming, crying and begging for his help. Slowly he stood, heart pounding, staring at the inky human shapes roiling in the snow. He kicked and caught Jeffrey in the face, but it didn't slow his assault on her. Again he kicked his head, this time succeeding in ending the attack. Jeffrey turned towards him and leapt off Claire, looking very much like a bullfrog, his gut hanging from his torn shirt. He struck Emilio in the chest and stomach driving him back with shortened cries. He fell and Jeffrey immediately dove on him socking him in the face. Blood flowed into his mouth and he realized, quite suddenly, a liquor bottle was in his hand. The world was flashing white when he swung it and he was unsure if it had struck home. Darkness overtook light and he moved his hands to his face. He was no longer under attack, that much he knew, but why was everything so black? He lay moaning in fear and pain before Claire's swollen face eclipsed his vision.

"You gonna live?" her gruff statement couldn't hide her gratitude. She helped him up and the world spun. Light and clarity slowly returned to him. She brought him to the bench where he slouched and closed his eyes. When he opened them again she was gone.

That was the last he saw of them for a long time. Every night for weeks he still went to the park, searching near every tree and bench. By day he wandered the streets shaking from cold and withdrawal. Holes were spreading across his coat and it no longer kept the wind out. Slowly he felt himself decline. He shivered all day and he couldn't feel his hands even after cupping them inside his pants. Snot dripped down his face and in his throat. Air came in hard, ineffective wheezes until he could no longer walk more than a few yards without succumbing to vertigo. Reality shifted, twisted, and moved beyond him. The normally alternating orbs of the sun and moon appeared in nonsensical order. Darkness followed darkness and light went on for days. He would wake not remembering lying down. He would arrive somewhere without memory of walking, shaky and unsure of what he had intended to do.



"Emilio." His father's voice was reserved, his hand outstretched. Emilio set his bags down and shook the hand. It was hard and the skin scaly. "Was your trip good?" Emilio shook his head up and down. His father was fatter than he had imagined, his belly a hard, spherical mass of tissue. His eyes were dark and time had stretched deep lines from them; out, up, down, merging and crossing. He was only thirty-six but time had been harsh. He looked nothing at all like the man in the pictures his mother had shown him. She was surprised when he said that he wanted to contact his father, but she gave him the phone number. When he asked if she ever talked to him she stammered out "sometimes" before adding, "on holidays." He wondered why she never let him talk to his father if she had been calling all those years, but didn't ask. "Seventeen, huh?" his father sniffed and ran his hand under his nose. "You look good. You look real good." He stooped and grabbed Emilio's bag. "Let's get going, you're probably beat." His father walked away and Emilio tried to follow, but his legs were numb and wobbly. He wanted to shout, but his words were slight and jumbled. In steps he descended to the tile floor, his father's back shrinking. Suddenly he was in his father's arms, only he had changed. He had a mustache now and looked like someone else. He kept repeating "you're gonna be ok" over and over. They were no longer inside and the sun hung at its odd winter angle. Darkness crept over his peripheral before consuming his vision. Only the bright spot of the sun remained, sending shapes of purple, blue and white in spirals until nothingness overtook him.



He awoke in a bed too small for himself. The sheets wrapped his hanging feet. Babbling he struggled to sit up, not comprehending his mummification. Turning and pushing he fell, wrapping himself in the process. Shakily he stood, one arm pinned in the sheets the opposing arm free and on his face. He was in his room, from the house he had lived in until he was twelve. Someone had taken down all his posters and put up new wallpaper. His

wallpaper had been the planets of the solar system with a border of little rocket ships blasting off. Now it was brown striped on a white, flowered face. Little geraniums and daisies grew out of pots in twos and threes, occasionally broken by a pot of lilies.

"Who took all my posters." He mumbled. His hand slid down the wall, the brown stripes of the wallpaper bending out above him at impossible angles. Yet there it was. "There it is." His chin rested against the wall, his eyes staring up. The wall grew taller and he whimpered as a burning sensation intensified on his chin. Suddenly his free hand touched the ground, palm bent up. He yelped and thrashed, weaving the sheets tighter. Moaning desperately he rolled onto his knees. The wall was leaning in above him and it looked like it would collapse if it warped any more. Crying out he tried to free his other arm. Spots swam on his vision. He stood angrily and it was like he hit the ceiling. The room split in two equal and intersecting halves then disappeared.



Water boiled over the lip of the pot onto the stove, steaming and hissing on the burner. The radio was set at low volume and static cut the signal severely making the music indiscernible. Emilio stood in the kitchen watching the water boil over. He called to his mother but there was no answer. Nervously he watched the pot wondering if he should do something. He knew how to turn the burners on and off but his mother was always telling him not to touch the stove. Again he called out to her with the same result.

With an agitated grunt he stalked into the living room. His mother sat in an old wooden rocking chair, her nose in a book. On the cover a woman with sad eyes stood next to a lighthouse beneath a full moon. Waves swelled towards the rocks below her with all the foam, droplets and spray caught in mid-action. He called to her, quietly. Her brow was furrowed and her eyes intensely ate the pages. He called loudly, stamping his foot.

She stirred, moving the book slowly towards her lap without taking her eyes off of it. He shouted at her again. "What!" she shouted back. In a quiet voice he told her about the pot. "You didn't touch the stove did you?" she stood. He shook his head as she pushed him out of her path into the kitchen.

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Emilio rode the smell of fried eggs into consciousness. It caused him to salivate, which in turn caused him to lick his lips. He heard someone chuckle and opened his eyes. The blinds were open so the room was full of light and

gentle shadows. His feet hung off the end of the bed again, wrapped in sheets. His head lolled towards the sound, his eyes slowly focusing on the face. The man sitting next to his bed was clean-shaven with short cropped hair. He wore red and black flannel. Filling his face was a smile, forming the same lopsided shape as his crossed arms. It took a moment to register, and it wasn't until he looked at the fat stomach propped up on the man's legs that it hit him.

"Jeffrey?" His voice was raw. The man nodded and handed him a glass of water. Emilio lay in a haze as Jeffrey went into the kitchen and made eggs and toast. The room looked different now, the feeling of familiarity gone. When he brought in the food Emilio ate greedily. Casually Jeffrey asked if he liked the apartment. He muttered yes between bites. Truthfully it was quite run down. The walls were stained in yellow shades, and the carpet worn. A strong funk filled the room. Without paying attention to his response Jeffrey began his story.

After his fight with Claire he had hit rock bottom. Wandering the streets he had found himself at the Gospel Mission. It was fate, he told Emilio, that he had wandered there. The Lord had been calling him, across the desolate life he had built. He slapped the table hard with each point of his story. Through all the drugs, booze, and sin God's love had found him. Emilio eyed him skeptically but kept silent. A nearby restaurant had employed him as a short-order cook, and friends he had made at the Mission had set him up with this apartment. All of this was possible, Jeffrey pointed at the sky, only by the grace of God. When Jeffrey brought out his Bible and began reading a section of it goose bumps broke out over Emilio's skin. After he read he grabbed his

shoulder and began praying. Emilio's heart began to race.

He wanted to push his hands back and run from the room. Jeffrey spoke clearly and slowly his hand alternating between squeezing and slapping. He was relieved when Jeffrey finished praying and let go, red marks left on his shoulder. He cleared Emilio's plate and on his way out told him he could stay as long as he wanted. Then he closed the door advising Emilio to get some rest.



Emilio watched the street below him through the window in his room. Some children played in the road, screaming every time a car drove through. It was unnecessary to scream and run as they did. Cars came infrequently and drove slowly over the pocked surface. Once a car passed, the children returned to the slush in their little rubber boots. His mind was on the dream he continued

having. Maybe it wasn't always the same dream. Sometimes it was in a house, sometimes in a park, once it had even been a department store. What happened was always the same, or at least similar. He was sitting next to Jeffrey and Claire, and their fight would repeat. He sat frozen, fear and resentment filling him up. Sometimes it would be his father and Claire would become his mother, morphing and molding under the weight of blows. When he had returned from seeing his father he asked his mother why she had left him. Caught by surprise she could only stammer "it wasn't something that needed to be discussed." He had guilted her, goaded her for the better part of an hour until, flustered, she shouted that he had beaten her. He was immediately sorry he had asked. Jeffrey interrupted his reverie, telling him dinner was ready. Sighing he stood and followed him into the kitchen, where a small table occupied one corner.

Jeffrey sat across the fold-out table sipping from a can of Coca-Cola. He devoured his food in bouts and thumbed a newspaper in silence between gulps. Head down, he avoided Emilio's eyes. It was silent, except for their loud chewing. Occasionally Jeffrey would give Emilio hurried glances, saying nothing. Once they were finished eating he pulled the paper from under the corner of his plate and handed it to Emilio.

"You been here a few weeks..." He trailed off. The paper was open to the classified section. Hasty circles were drawn around several of the ads.

"And you think I need a job," Emilio offered. It was true, he had lived in this apartment for weeks, leaving seldom and sleeping often. He said he'd take a look at what was available. Jeffrey nodded and began cleaning the table as Emilio shuffled into the tiny living room. He flicked on the lone green table lamp and read slowly to the sound of the kitchen faucet. In Bensenville there was a concrete pouring job available. It was something he had done for several years when he was younger. He found a pen and marked the entry before setting the paper to the side and turning on the television.



Emilio sat in the room Jeffrey was letting him use. Outside the sun was setting behind the gentle, slush covered hills to the west. The day was warm and people were venturing outside to enjoy the late March weather. Emilio had not spoken to Jeffrey since their argument over this interview. He mulled over the past days in his mind. When he decided to find Claire it was a choice he made quite suddenly. She was standing at the corner exactly where she said she would be. He had been about to turn around when she had seen him, waving and grinning. From his coat pocket he had pulled a wrapped sandwich and given it to her.

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"You think 'bout what I say?" she had blurted with the last of the sandwich still in her mouth. It was why he had gone to her, but his nerves had unraveled. His throat was tight and he was unable to speak. "He's no good. You know he's no good." Emilio had opened his mouth, surprised to find

himself defending Jeffrey. "He gonna throw you out. You know dat." His eyes were pinched as he nodded. "How 'bout it?" she had gently rubbed his shoulders with her long fingers. He had said yes without looking at her, at the gaps in her grin, at her hard eyes. She had asked when and he had said tomorrow, since Jeffrey always worked late on Saturday. She asked where and he hesitated, reluctant to cross that threshold. "Emilio..." she had whispered, filling his ear like the sound of water. Gently she rubbed his arm, saying his name over and over. His numb lips had formed the words, and as soon as they shut again she had been gone.

Lost in thought the bulk of Saturday moved quickly behind him. Across the street the blinds were drawn on the windows of the dingy apartment complex. Light was being drawn from the room, anchored to the sun. In darkness he sat watching the sparse traffic until his thoughts pulled him into sleep.



There was a rapping at the door and it woke him. With a start he fell out of his chair and clambered on the floor towards the living room. When he opened the door Claire was in mid knock; one hand stretched up towards the door, head whipping from over her shoulder, a puzzled look on her face. For a moment neither of them spoke. Then she let out a hoarse laugh. Her laugh was throatier than he remembered, aspirated and full of grit. With her willowy arms at her side, she cocked her head and asked if he was ready. He nodded and she came in. Realizing it was dark he flipped the light switch and she looked around. She announced she had found some bags and tossed a pile of burlap and plastic sacks on the floor. He said nothing.

"You really ready?" she eyed him suspiciously.

16 "Yeah." He swallowed hard. They decided to split up the rooms. She would take the kitchen and living room. He would take both bedrooms. They would leave out the back fire escape. Immediately she began sorting through the oversized pile on the coffee table. Some things were thrown into a burlap sack while others were tossed on the floor. He could see no reason in what she took. TV guides and dirty silverware, losing lottery tickets and half a jar of peanut butter; what was the point in taking any of it?

"You gonna doing somethin'?" her question jarred him. He backed up a few steps before turning and slipping into Jeffrey's room.

Every movement in the small room created a cacophony. The sliding of the tiny plastic wheels on the sides of the drawers, the scrape of each wire hanger along the metal pole they hung from. His steps, backwards, forwards, round and

round, searching, digging, rooting through the pitiful wealth another man had accumulated. His ears burned, he couldn't hold his hands still. The room was spinning around him, papers and clothes flying around in the air as though a strong wind were sweeping through it. Back and forth he ran, ransacking in unordered fervor. He took the clock from the wall: nine-forty-five. There was a stack of twenty-dollar bills in the sock drawer: two-hundred-sixty dollars. A black comb, a dirty plastic mug, three spoons, five forks, a steak knife with a wooden handle, sixteen warm cans of coca-cola, an oversized trench coat, a mercury thermometer caked with dried, translucent goop. He was stuffing socks and stained pairs of underwear into a plastic trash bag when movement caught his eye. Babble dripped from him as he turned about face. It was the mirror on the wall next to the bed. He approached it as a waterfall of jingling silverware fell into a bag in the kitchen. Sweat beaded above his single continuous eyebrow. His eyes were red, open wide to display the serpentine paths of all the little veins. Scabs, mostly healed, still dotted his lips were they had chapped. Jeffrey had given him a razor but he had not used it in several days. Dense stubble formed symmetrical carpeting on his jaw. Cabinet doors creaked as they were violently opened. Hollow knocks resounded as cups were swept into a bag. That look in his eyes, the way his pupils dilated and contracted with uncertainty; how that made his eyes seem to waver. The refrigerator door slammed into the wall, condiment jars clinking together.

A thin line of black filled the space between his barely parted lips. The coat he was wearing was one Jeffrey had given him. It was badly tattered but warm. Lines were carving up his face, borders for tiny countries around his eyes and mouth. No longer contained, sweat moved in currents down his face, around the sides in big drops and down the middle in a crawling sheen. For a time he studied himself in the mirror, looking at every line, memorizing the distance between his eyes, the length of his nose, and the set of his jaw. He wasn't sure how long he stood transfixed.

"You ready?" Claire's voice started him. She struggled to lift three full bags onto her shoulders. How did you get three full bags? He wanted to shout at her. There had been almost nothing in the apartment to begin with. He looked down at the single half full bag clutched in his hand. "That's all you takin'?" His eyes flitted between her and the mirror, he couldn't answer. She followed his gaze and walked up to the mirror, looking at her reflection. Casually she pulled it from the wall and placed it in a burlap sack. Pulling the bags behind her she slid through the doorway. Over her shoulder she called for him to follow. As they climbed through the window onto the fire escape he surveyed the apartment. Everything was overturned, what hadn't been taken was scattered in piles. It had been thoroughly ransacked of its valueless treasures. The metal legs of the coffee table were removed so it lay conspicuously on the floor. Next to the grimy couch the end table was overturned, the small green lamp gone. There was a clean square on the lopsided, dusty entertainment center. He looked at the three bulging bags in her hands,

realizing that she had stowed the small television in one of them. Head half in the window he searched for something, anything that they had not taken. Claire tapped his shoulder, asking him to carry one of her bags. He mumbled and picked the sack up, closing the window as he turned away.