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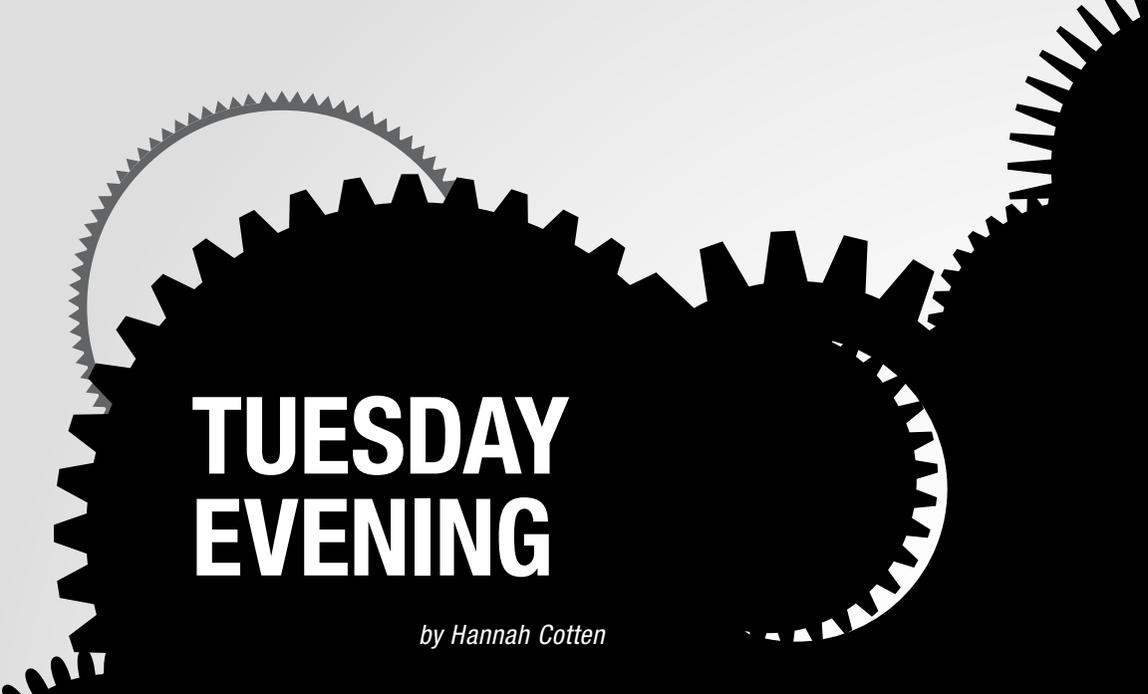
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TUESDAY EVENING

by Hannah Cotten

Tuesday evening. The tar on the toll bridge is so grey that it almost loses itself in the colors of the ocean below. The sunset is a fire poker, glaring hot and pointedly through the windshield, as we beat a swift trek over the water. I've got the music on low as my sisters and I talk high speed about the day, which happens to be my sister's sixteenth birthday. I feel unstoppable. My foot slams a little farther down on the gas and we almost hit the car in front of us. I laugh at my timing. Cherokee, the kind, quiet one, asks in a worried voice from the backseat for me to slow down. Savannah, the birthday girl, the ferocious fighter, tells me to slow down. I back down to my signature granny-like driving, my sails deflated. We pick up our cousin McKenna, and head to McDonald's for shakes.

The sun is gone by the time we get to the beach. Sitting at a drive-thru in McDonald's took the last of the light out of the evening, not to mention 20 bucks from my pocket. From the public parking lot, you can hear the roar of the Gulf of Mexico, and smell the heavy scent of salt water, the sand like sugar, blowing from the beach to the tar of the lot. Giggling, we tiptoe towards the entrance, feeling the luscious squirm of sand between our toes.

Most of the buildings near the parking lot are abandoned because of the hurricanes from last fall. They stand eerily, giant and dark, like pot-headed thugs, intimidating the night, their tops melding into the dark black-blue sky. It's surreal. The sky looks like the kind you see on Disneyland rides,

and the ocean is just a sound effect until you are close enough to really see and feel its touch. We are high as mother-fucking kites off the sheer atmosphere.

Savannah draws a heart in the sand with her big toe; Cherokee and McKenna have a sand fight farther along the beach. I stand and look at the moon hitting the Gulf, mesmerized by the beat of the surf and the colors of the evening. The lights of the restaurants towards the more populated end of the strip bleed onto the sand, but refuse to mix with the water or the sky. The beauty of it allows me to enjoy the untouched aspects of this city, a happy denizen of the nighttime.

I sit down on the sand and stare. Eventually they all come down to sit a little behind me, talking. I am too far away in my own mind to hear them.

“What’s that?” one of them says.

I turn around, “What’s what?”

“That,” says Cherokee, pointing out into the water.

Standing up, I scrutinize the water, blind to whatever it is they want me to see.

“What are you guys talking about?” I ask laughingly back, certain they must be pulling a joke on me.

“Something big and glowing in the water,” Cherokee says back, her voice trembling slightly, fearfully.

Unable to see anything, I walk a few feet toward the water’s edge. I gaze as deeply into the water as I can before giving up once more and turning around.

McKenna calls to me, “It’s RIGHT there!” She comes up behind me, with Savannah and Cherokee trailing along. “Can’t you see it? Its right over there, over by the dock, down there.” She points over my shoulder, down the strip towards the restaurants and the remnants of an old dock.

The only thing I can see in the water is a plain everyday buoy, placed there so boats know where the water is too shallow.

“I don’t see shit! Guys, all I see is a buoy. If you’re talking about that little bit of a light down there, it’s probably from that,”

“No, it’s farther out than that. It’s right under the water, and it’s bigger than that, glowing purple.”

I laugh at her, “Glowing purple? You guys are trying to play a prank on me.” I make a move to walk closer down to the water to see.

“NO! Hannah!” They shriek together.

“What? I can’t see shit from here. I’m going down to see if I can get a better look.”

“Don’t go down there,” says McKenna, her voice bubbling over with fear.

“Why? What’s the big deal?”

“Because, there’s something down there. It’s just bad whatever it is,” Savannah says.

“Tell me what it looks like.” I smirk, sure that this is a joke they are trying to sucker me into.

“It’s down there, glowing in the water, big, and glowing in green and gold and purple. I don’t know how you can’t see it, but I just get this feeling that if you go down there. . . . It just keeps giving me this feeling in my head that it would hurt you,” Savannah spat out angrily.

“In your head. . . . Right,” I say.

I believe in the unknown more than either of my sisters, but skepticism keeps people from making jackasses of themselves. A telepathic glowing thing just lying in wait in the water for some teenage girl has too much of a cinematic twist to be plausible. Savannah and McKenna like to play pranks, and they might’ve talked Cherokee into going along with it.

Cherokee pipes up. “Hannah, it’s there. Savannah isn’t lying. I hear it in my head, too.”

“We can all see it but you,” says McKenna.

“Well, if it isn’t a joke, let me go down to see,” I reply, walking firmly past their shoulders down the beach, toward the water. I wasn’t going to let them fool me, and there was a part of me that wanted to prove my guts, my invincibility.

“HANNAH!”

I laugh to myself at the obviousness of their lies, but there’s one fact I can’t refute—Cherokee is a terrible liar. She falls apart and laughs when she even thinks about lying. This gives me a little bit of plausibility to chew on but not much. I ignore their shouting and pleading from the top of the beach and march directly, stubbornly, into the water. The panicked screams crescendo.

I laugh, and yell out to them, “See? Nothing down here, I’m fine!”

“Hannah! Come back here! Christ! Get back here!” Savannah’s yell rips through the dark and the thump-splash of the surf. It hits the core of me, her fear. It seems ridiculous but honest.

I stomp back out of the water, cackling like an old hag up the sticky dry beach. “I’m fine! Nothing hurt me guys! There’s nothing down there.”

I finally look into their faces, and they’re stark white with fear, eyes big around as tortilla shells. I begin to re-evaluate my position. They could be in contact with something that I couldn’t see. And maybe, for once, I was being the insensitive one to their paranormal experience.

“Wow. You guys were really freaked out.”

Savannah tears into me, blue flames for eyes. “You think?”

Silence. We stand huddled together, my legs dripping, breaded in a fine coat of sand. Night closes in on us, circles around us like a shark, breathing its cold, sordid breath on our faces. The pounding beat of the surf sounds menacing, like the drumbeat of a tribe of cannibals.

“I want to go home,” says McKenna.

“Yeah, Hannah. Let’s go home,” Savannah says with just the slightest push of command to her voice.

“Okay, okay, if you guys are really that worried,” I say jokingly, trying to play it off. I want to ignore it. I want the atmosphere to be light and playful like earlier. But it wasn’t going to happen no matter how hard I tried; things are too heavy to lift off the ground again. Whatever it was sucked us dry, even me, the one who doesn’t even have the ability to see or communicate with it.

Their fear courses into me, making my pleasant mood feel forced, faked. As it flows into me, it pools and balloons, growing, ripening into a fruit of confusion that weighs heavy.

We walk back to the car in silence. The taint of our experience follows us like a phantom into the car. I am still muddled . . . what had they seen that I hadn’t? I turn on the car and pull onto the highway. After dropping McKenna off, I press Savannah and Cherokee for answers. Savannah refuses to talk about it beyond a “Yes” or a “No.” Cherokee sits mute in the backseat, eyes wide in the rear-view mirror. And I drive on, rolling down all the windows, playing Jimi Hendrix on the radio and waiting for the stars to come closer.

