

The Stars in Illinois

by Dallas Woodburn

Only early June, but the heat feels like August. Eleanor and Shelby sit on the front steps of the old Victorian-style house in downtown Los Angeles, drinking homemade margaritas and watching the daylight drain away to dusk. Shelby slaps a mosquito away from her sweat-sticky thigh. She has long thin arms and skinny ankles and wire-straight hair that sometimes looks brown and sometimes looks auburn, depending on the light.

“Damn it,” she says.

“What?” Eleanor has full eyebrows and a tiny diamond stud in her left nostril. She favors sundresses and wears her hair pinned up with silver barrettes. In high school a boy told her that she had “perfect breasts” because they fit perfectly in his hands like two firm oranges. Now she thinks of him every time she eats an orange.

“I meant to stop at the 7-Eleven,” Shelby says. “I wanted to buy a lotto ticket.”

Eleanor checks her watch. “You'd better hurry, if you want to get it before the drawing. It's almost six now.”

Shelby swats at the air. “Naw, it's okay. I don't feel like walking.”

“I can drive you,” Eleanor says.

“You can't drive.”

“I can drive.” She holds up her margarita cup. “This is only my second.”

“It's fine. There's always next week,” Shelby says, working her fingers through her hair to massage her scalp, searching for lumps. She is terrified of dying. So terrified that she sometimes thinks she might as well kill herself and get it over with.

Eleanor gazes out at the pink smear of sunset caught between buildings. “There aren't really sunsets in L.A.,” she says. “Daylight just... slips away.” She is thinking of Illinois. As a child she would sometimes grow anxious, gazing up at the full expanse of sky, trying to grasp where it ended. Illinois sky isn't like L.A. sky. Illinois sky doesn't end. It stretches at the horizons to a blurred uncertain line.

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So much sky. Two years ago, when she first moved to L.A., Eleanor would sometimes spend hours online, clicking through photographs of cornfields and rivers. But you can't capture the sky in a photograph, not truly. The sky is what she misses most.

"If I won the lottery," Shelby says, "I would buy this house so we didn't have to pay rent all the time. Paying rent sucks."

"You'd buy this house?" Eleanor asks. "This house of all houses?"

Shelby half-turns to gaze at the eaves, paint peeling like a bad sunburn. "I've grown fond of it, I guess," she says. "I like this porch. And the music-note wallpaper in the hallway. And I like how the honeysuckle grows up under my window."

"My window doesn't get honeysuckle," Eleanor says.

"Plus, if I bought it, it would be mine. That would be enough to make me love it."

"Then you could live anywhere, is what you're saying. As long as you own the house you live in. You can love anywhere."

"I guess so," Shelby says. She takes a pondering sip of margarita. Inside her room, on her bedside table, rests a bottle of pills and a glass of water. "But I do really like this house."

Eleanor stretches her legs out in front of her. She hasn't shaved in a couple days and dark nubby hairs are visible on her knees and shins. The heat makes her legs itch. "If I won the lottery, I wouldn't live in L.A.," she says. "I'd buy a house somewhere far away."

"Where?"

"I don't know. A small town somewhere."

"Let me guess: Illinois?"

"I'm just saying, Shel. Someplace people actually know your name. Around here, you say hi and people look at you like you're crazy."

"But is it really like that in Illinois?" Shelby asks. "Everyone's friendly? Everyone bakes casseroles and apple pies?"

"My mom makes green bean casserole."

"No pie?"

"Well, sometimes, on holidays." Eleanor leans back on her elbows. She knows Shelby is making fun of her, but she takes the bait

anyway. "Pecan pie. My Aunt Susan makes the best pecan pie. She won a ribbon at the country fair."

"The country fair!"

"What's wrong with the country fair?"

"Nothing's wrong," Shelby says. "It just sounds ... quaint."

"L.A. has a fair, doesn't it?"

"Not a quaint little country fair, that's for sure."

Eleanor wrenches a pack of Marlboros from her jeans pocket. Shelby watches Eleanor search her other pockets for her lighter. There are so many ways to die. Lung cancer. Skin cancer. Fire. Car crash. So many uncontrollable ways. Shelby exhales a drawn-out sigh that turns into a yawn. "God," she says. "I hate paying rent. I feel like all my money goes towards rent. I mean, *all* my money."

"That's for sure." Eleanor, lighter found, tips her pack and daintily pulls out a cigarette with the tips of two fingers. "Do you mind?" she asks Shelby.

"Of course not," Shelby says. "You don't have to ask."

Eleanor smokes when she's stressed and when she drinks. Tonight, she is both stressed and drinking. This afternoon brought yet another no-call-back in a long string of call-backs she hasn't gotten. She didn't expect it to be this hard. Everyone said it would take time, and yes, she expected it to take some time — but *two years*? Two years and nothing more than a handful of student films and background bit parts and one shitty half-line ("Mmm, cinnamon") in a gum commercial? Sometimes the embarrassment felt so big it eclipsed everything else. Her identity nothing more than a tired cliché: the small-town Midwest girl who moves to L.A. to become an actress, squeezing in auditions between her double-shifts as a waitress. Everyone was tired of that story. Especially Eleanor. *If I don't land something in the next three months, she thinks now, I'm moving back home and getting a real job.* She turns her face to blow the smoke away from Shelby. She knows cigarette smoke gives Shelby a headache, even though Shelby, a jubilant martyr, makes a point not to complain.

Shelby gulps her margarita. She shifts her body slightly away from Eleanor's but doesn't say anything, trying not to think about the secondhand smoke wafting into her lungs. She believes friends make sacrifices for each other. She believes sacrifices are what make friendships stronger. Like a bird culling thread and twigs to build a nest, but in reverse. Casting away in order to build.

Eleanor takes a drag of her cigarette, thinking of her high school friend Bella, who taught her to smoke. They haven't talked in six years. Eleanor believes friendships are a matter of convenience and circumstance. Eventually, she or Shelby will move away. Drift apart. Get sick of each other. And then this, all of this — the margaritas, the lotto tickets, the lazy spirals of conversation — will end. It is inevitable. None of Eleanor's friendships have lasted as long as she had wanted them to. Eleanor is careful to turn her face away from Shelby when she exhales, so as not to speed up the decline.

"Hey Eleanor?" Shelby says suddenly. "If I buy a lotto ticket and it's a winner, I want to split some of the money with you."

"Thanks, Shel. That's sweet."

"No, seriously. Listen. If I die or something, like before I get the winnings, make sure you get some, okay? Don't let my parents take all the money."

Eleanor leans back on her elbows. The clouds, limned with purple, look bruised. All the ice in her margarita has melted. "Okay, Shel," she says. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing." Last week, Shelby took the bottle of painkillers from her medicine cabinet and placed them on her bedside table. Every morning when she wakes up, the pills are the first thing she sees. When she drives home from work in the evening, she considers how easy it would be to turn the wheel ever so slightly, to lean into oncoming traffic like lovers lean towards each other at a cocktail party.

"Come on," Eleanor says.

Shelby sighs. Her fingers thread through her hair and massage her scalp. "I think," she says, "that I'm gonna die soon."
If Eleanor were not Eleanor but someone else, she might laugh

uncomfortably and change the subject. Or she might think Shelby is being purposefully melodramatic and try to brush it away with facts: she is only twenty-two, she eats healthy greens, she wears her seatbelt. If Eleanor were Shelby's mother, she would jump straight to alarm and ask what's wrong, is she depressed, is she eating enough?

But Eleanor is Eleanor. She tips ash from her cigarette into the rosebushes and asks, "Why?"

Shelby stretches out her legs, almost knocking over her empty plastic cup. "I've just been thinking about it a lot lately. Death. It's always ... there. At the back of my mind. It didn't used to be there. I mean, it was there sometimes, I guess, but not that often. Not always like it is now."

"What's changed?"

"I don't know," Shelby says. She didn't expect it to be like this. Everyone said she would be a good teacher. She thought she could actually make a difference, even a small difference, even to just one kid. But she is a failure. Her students all hate her. When she turns to write on the whiteboard they whisper and titter to each other, and when she poses questions for discussion they stare at her blankly. No one raises a hand. Middle school kids are supposed to like their teachers. English is supposed to be a subject the kids look forward to. There are no wrong answers in English class. If you don't have something to say you can make something up. It's not like she has been assigning much homework, either — just the typical vocabulary exercises and a book report every other month.

"Did I ever tell you about my Death Dream?" Eleanor asks.

"No," Shelby says.

"When I was in seventh grade, I had a recurring dream that I drowned. There was this pond by my house that I used to swim in a lot. I loved it there. But in my dream, this whirlpool started in the center of the pond, and no matter how hard I swam for the shore, I felt myself being pulled under the water." Eleanor remembers the fear that gripped her chest and limbs as her dream-lungs filled with

water. She hadn't felt calm like everyone says you feel right before you die. She felt panicked and scared.

"I was terrified to go to sleep because I died every night in my dream," Eleanor continues. "Finally my parents took me to a shrink."

Shelby frowns. "I thought you couldn't die in a dream. I read somewhere that if you die in your dream, then you actually die for real in your sleep."

"There's no way they could know that," Eleanor says. "You can't know what someone was dreaming when they died."

"I'm just saying, I read it somewhere. In a magazine."

"Well, I died in my dream."

"So what happened?" Shelby asks. "Did you go to Heaven?"

"No, it was just dark. Dark and quiet. And then I'd wake up."

Eleanor stubs out her cigarette. She drops the butt into her empty plastic cup. "Anyway, it stopped after a couple months. The shrink said it was tied to my parents' divorce."

A fly hovers around their sticky cups. Shelby swats it away. "See, that makes sense," she says. "Part of what scares me is I can't think of a trigger. There's no reason I should be obsessing about death."

Eleanor sits quietly. She is the type of person who can keep eye contact for a long time. Shelby is the type of person who gets uncomfortable and looks away.

Shelby looks away. "I figure it means I'm gonna die soon," she says. "It's a premonition."

"Maybe it's the opposite," Eleanor says. "Like how a watched pot never boils."

"Huh." With her index finger, Shelby lightly traces around the small scar on her thigh she got from climbing a chain-link fence in grade school. There were no trees, so Shelby climbed fences. "You mean, I won't die if I'm too busy thinking about dying."

"Yeah, I guess." Eleanor smiles like a lady in an old painting. Her lips aren't really smiling, but her eyes are.

"What?" Shelby says. "What are you thinking about?"

"Nothing."

"Are you laughing at me? You're laughing at me."

"No, Shel," Eleanor says. "I was just thinking of my shrink."

"Your shrink?"

"Of what my shrink would say."

"What shrink?" Shelby leans forward, elbows on knees. "You don't go to a shrink."

"My old shrink, the one my parents sent me to. Because of my Death dream."

"Oh," Shelby says. "What would he say?" The sky is steadily losing color. Above them, the moon is an orange.

Eleanor lights another cigarette. The moon is a perfect breast. "She would say, the question becomes: if you're constantly worried about death, are you really living?"

"No." Shelby rubs her eyes. "That's the answer, right? 'No, so I should stop worrying and start living!' Right?"

"There's no answer. It's just what my shrink would say."

"Do you think she's right?" Shelby asks. "Is that the answer?"

Eleanor exhales, a perfect trail of gray smoke. She doesn't say anything.

Her recurring dream wasn't really because of her parents' divorce. Her parents had been fighting bitterly for months. The divorce wasn't much of a surprise.

Eleanor first dreamt of drowning on a Wednesday in late November. That day, her best friend Mariah Quinn inexplicably untangled herself from Eleanor and retangled herself with Veronica Cross. "Sorry, Eleanor," she said. "Bus seats only hold two." Seventh-grade Eleanor walked numbly to the back of the bus and slumped down in her seat, hiding behind her backpack, crying tears into her lunch bag. She and Mariah had been best friends since kindergarten, when they both caught the chicken pox at the same time. They sat next to each other on the bus, ate lunch together, had slumber parties on the weekends. How quickly everything could be swept away.

Eleanor leans sideways against the porch railing. Between the clamor of buildings, a few stars press through the smoggy night sky. Suddenly, she points. "Hey, Shel. Make a wish."

"I thought you only wish on shooting stars," Shelby says, thinking of Bobby Meyers, the lanky blonde boy her teenage self wished for and wished for.

"In L.A., you should wish on any star you can find," Eleanor says.

Shelby tilts her face up to the sky. In ninth grade, she wore the same blue polka-dotted headband for two months because she was wearing it when Bobby Meyers asked for her phone number, and some part of her thought he would only call if she kept wearing it. The white polka-dots gradually turned gray, and then the cloth at the ends of the headband began to fray and unravel from the plastic. Shelby stopped wearing it. Bobby Meyers never called. Still, Shelby knows she will keep the bottle of pills and the glass of water on her bedside table, a comfort, a superstition, like the dreamcatcher hanging above Eleanor's bed across the hall.

"We do too have stars in L.A.," Shelby says, pointing. "Look! Right there."

"Those aren't real stars," Eleanor says. "Not like Illinois. You should see the stars in Illinois."

The night before she left for L.A. to become a famous actress, Eleanor slept outside in the bed of her dad's pickup truck. She found the Big Dipper and Orion's Belt and searched the sky for shooting stars. None came. Or perhaps the sky was too big, and she missed them.

