

# It Was the Light

*by* Danny Goodman

Ben slid inside of Ashley, and she moaned. Ben hated when they moaned. He knew it wasn't real. He didn't need the reassurance. Ben wanted to come, and he did. The sweat on Ashley's back, Ben thought, was also fabricated somehow. She looked down at him and said something, but he didn't understand her. She mumbled, something about touching and finishing, and she rolled off of Ben and lay beside him. Ben lit an American Spirit and watched as Ashley finished what he had started. Or maybe she had started. And finished. She nearly knocked the cigarette from Ben's hand, and she called out someone's name. Not Ben's. Ben sucked in the last drag of perfect smoke and turned over, feeling the satin sheet slip off his bare ass. A fast breeze, along with laughter from a group of teenagers in St. Mark's Place, filled the bedroom. Ashley's hand slid over Ben's back, and he felt like shrinking away into the old king-sized mattress.

Mrs. Aguilera woke Ben around four in the morning. He was hungover and smelled of sex, and Mrs. Aguilera's wailing filled the building like a crazed alarm. Over and over, she called out the same words: *Como puedo salvarle?* Ben didn't know what the words meant, but the anxiety of them stirred him out of bed.

Mrs. Aguilera lived alone in their building on 3rd Avenue and answered the door only for those she knew. She had been attacked many years before and, as the story went, she called her attacker *tiburón* and smacked at his lifeless eyes until he retreated. The three locks on her aging door were the only visible scars.

Ben knocked hard enough to compete with the cries from inside the small apartment. The unlocked door opened, slowly.

"Mrs. Aguilera?"

There was blood on the floor. Not a lot, but a thin trickle leading into the kitchen. Mrs. Aguilera's shadow moved in a panicked back-and-forth against the linoleum.

“Carlos!” she screamed. There was a terror in her voice that was foreign to Ben.

“Mrs. Aguilera?” he asked again. “It’s Ben. Are you all right?”

The living room seemed messier than normal, with pillows strewn about and the dining room table left uncleared. Mrs. Aguilera had made paella, the remnants of which scattered the table, and the smell of fresh shrimp and saffron and something burnt permeated the living room.

“Mrs. Aguilera?”

Her head poked out of the kitchen. She sobbed, and her face looked to Ben like an overripe cherry. He could barely see her hazel eyes, which were swollen almost shut.

“*Mi hijo!*” she yelled, running from the kitchen and smacking her head into Ben’s chest.

She beat her fists against his shoulders. Ben let her use his shirt to soak up the tears, let her huff and wheeze until she could speak. He liked that she called him *hijo*.

“What’s happening?” he asked, confusion in his voice.

“It’s Carlos,” she said.

Mrs. Aguilera grabbed Ben by the shirt and pulled him into the kitchen. There, on the table, was Carlos. The eight-year-old Siberian husky rested motionless, tongue hanging from his mouth and touching the tabletop. A small pool of saliva formed beneath his mouth. The kitchen smelled as if Carlos’s gray and black fur had been lit on fire. Mrs. Aguilera yelled something in Spanish.

“What the hell happened?” Ben asked, contemplating whether to approach the dog.

“He no sleep,” she said, breaking down between words. “He scratched the door. It was early, but I hate him to wait when he wants to go.”

Ben approached Carlos and put his hand on the dog’s bloated abdomen. Carlos’s coat felt soft and wintry.

“I don’t understand,” Ben said.

Mrs. Aguilera stood beside Ben and placed her hand on Carlos. "It was the light, hijo. It was the light." She cried and bunched Carlos's hair between her fingers. "I want to fix him."

"What does that mean?" Ben asked. He walked around the table to get a better look at Carlos's face. His eyes looked as they always did, a soft blue, almost translucent. Ben thought, for a moment, that Carlos seemed to be smiling.

"It was the light," Mrs. Aguilera said. "Outside the streetlight. Carlos went to smell. He's so big. I couldn't pull him away." She rested her head beside Carlos's and slid her arm around his body. "He screamed and shaking. My little baby. Then he was gone."

"Jesus Christ," Ben said. He brushed his hand over Carlos's eyelids, closing them, and scratched behind the dog's ears. Carlos, he remembered, would lick the air and moan when his ears were scratched.

"*Como puedo salvarle?*" Mrs. Aguilera asked. She repeated it and looked up at Ben.

Ben stared down at Carlos, wondering what to do with the body. He felt like crying with Mrs. Aguilera. "I don't know," he said.

Ashley shifted when Ben opened the apartment door. He let his bare feet press against the hardwood. Standing in the living room, looking in on the woman in his bed, Ben felt nauseated. He grabbed a cigarette and hung his head out the fire escape. Neon from the comic store and pizza place and tattoo parlor took turns flashing in Ben's eyes. He blinked after each flash, the world outside his window growing cloudier until all he could see was one indistinguishable, artificial light. As Ben exhaled, the smoke hung in the morning humidity like a phantom.

"What are you doing?" Ashley asked, walking into the living room wearing only a pair of Ben's boxer shorts. Her naked chest shone in the lights sneaking in from St. Mark's Place.

Ben returned to the smoke before answering. "Go back to bed," he said. "It's too early."

"I heard yelling," she said and stretched out on the sofa.

Ben finished the cigarette and flicked it onto the street below. He imagined the butt smacking against the asphalt and quieting the street. "It was nothing," he said.

Ben watched Ashley fall asleep on the sofa, her dirty blonde hair contrasted against the black leather. Josh would be angry with him, he thought, treating Ashley like this. Josh didn't know Ashley, but he knew Ben. He knew how Ben treated women. Josh would like Ashley, Ben thought. She had a dimple that twitched while she slept, and Ben felt a moment of calm as he watched. He took his Superman blanket from the bedroom and placed it over Ashley. With each breath, Ben could see the blanket rise and fall, rise and fall, rise and fall.

Carlos was still on the kitchen table when Ben returned with satin sheets stripped from his bed in hand. Resting on the couch, Mrs. Aguilera, neither asleep nor awake, spoke out loud to nobody. He moved quietly into the kitchen and sat beside Carlos. Ben wasn't good at death. He didn't feel particularly good at life, either. Running his fingers over the dry, rough patches of Carlos's paws, though, Ben was at ease.

"So, I know there's nothing we can do now," Ben said to Carlos, "but about three months ago, I found a little poop by my door. Now, I'm not saying it was you. But, well, you're the only dog in the building. I've already asked Mr. Jenkins upstairs, and he assured me that he did not poop by my door." Ben heard Mrs. Aguilera rouse in the living room. "That just leaves you, my friend."

Ben stood and slid his arms under Carlos. Holding him close, Ben hoped to feel a breath or a shiver. When none came, he wrapped Carlos in the satin sheets.

"But I forgive you, my dear Carlos," he said and carried Carlos into the living room.

"*Hijo?*" Mrs. Aguilera asked, groggy. "What's that?"

"It's Carlos, love. Come. It's time to go."

The two walked downstairs. It was a few minutes before a taxi passed, and Ben felt the weight of Carlos in his arms.

"What I tell them?" Mrs. Aguilera asked.

"Tell them what happened to Carlos," Ben said. "Tell them about the light."

"You come, too?" she asked, looking up at Ben.

"No. No, I'm going to stay," Ben said. "I need to stay."

"What they do with him?" There was a naiveté in her voice.

"They can cremate him for you."

"He can be with me, then," she said. "Close to me." She clenched her face as a taxi pulled up. Ben could finally see the hazel in her eyes. He kissed her forehead and laid Carlos across her lap.

"Can you take them to the vet hospital on 18th, please?" he asked the driver, who nodded. Ben held Mrs. Aguilera's hand tight with his own. "It will be okay."

Mrs. Aguilera touched her palm to Ben's cheek. "You're a good boy," she said.

Ben closed the taxi door and watched them drive up the avenue. As he turned to go back inside, Ben caught a glimpse of something luminous across the street. The light moved, like something ethereal. It was a loose wire, sparking at the base of a streetlight. The light that killed Carlos Aguilera. Ben watched, mesmerized. He wondered, just for a moment, what it would be like to let the light course through him.

"I think you should go," Ben said, sitting on the sofa beside Ashley.

"What?" she said, half-asleep. "What time is it?"

"Still early. But you should go." Ben went into the bedroom and returned with Ashley's clothes and messenger bag.

"Is everything okay?" she asked, a look of confusion on her face as she dressed.

"Hey, it's me," Ben said. "Of course."

Ashley moved close and kissed Ben. He tasted her morning breath.

"Call me," she said.

"Yeah," he said and returned the kiss.

Ben sat on the sofa and lit a cigarette. Ashley took her bag and left the apartment. The sound of her closing the door reverberated through the hardwood floor. Ben sucked the nicotine into his lungs.

The apartment was empty. Quiet. Ben thought of calling Josh, running across the bridge to meet him. No, Maddie would kill me, he thought, waking them up at this hour. He felt stir-crazy, his skin like a caterpillar inching slowly off his bones. Ben stood in the living room, hardwood creaking beneath him, and stared into his bedroom. Without the sheets, the mattress looked vacant and old. Cumbersome.

Ben dressed in his jogging clothes and slipped a pack of American Spirits into his knee-high sock. The bedroom stunk of latex and booze. Ben grabbed the mattress and dragged it through the living room and into the building hallway. It slid down the stairs almost on its own, and Ben balanced between door and mattress to get it outside.

It was still early. Ben propped the mattress against a row of trashcans. Someone would take it, he thought, someone who wanted to share his or her sleep. Ben wanted something small. Something solitary.

The morning felt sticky, and Ben ran towards 18th Street. He would say goodbye to Carlos, touch his thick fur and scratch behind his ears. He couldn't get Mrs. Aguilera out of his head: *Como puedo salvarle?* Ben still didn't know what she meant, what she was asking. And he had no answer to the question. Instead, Ben ran. He ran up 2nd Avenue and let the rhythm of his footfalls overtake the discomfort of the morning.

