The Invention of Everything Else

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Extract

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Louisa hears the two men draw a breath together before knocking on the glowing door. They wait. They receive no answer. They knock a second time and still they receive no answer. 'Mr Tesla, please,' one of the men says. 'We know you are there.'

The other man joins in. 'Mr Tesla, please, we –'

The door opens.

To see God would have surprised Louisa less. From inside the room just down the hallway, power, electricity, whirling motion, and glowing light as bright as the sun spill out into the dark. The porter and the manager each raise a hand to cover their eyes. And there in the aura of this wonder is a man most unlike other men. A slender frame, terrific height, silver hair that reaches down his forehead in a peak. Louisa notices the dark hollows of his cheeks and even the fine length of his fingers on the doorjamb. He is lovely. Louisa catches

her breath. Her mouth hangs open at the hinge. He is stunning, like Dracula grown old, like cold black branches covered with snow in the winter.

She's heard so many stories but never, in all her years working at the hotel, has she had the opportunity to see one of its most notorious guests. Unlike all the movie stars and politicians who have stayed at the New Yorker, Mr Tesla is notorious for some rather unusual, sometimes unpleasant things. The first is that he refuses to let the chambermaids clean his room. The second is that he hasn't been able to pay his bill for the past two years. There are all kinds of stories. He is crazy. He is a genius. He is from outer space. He is from Serbia. He manages to survive on vegetables only. He drinks blood. He makes everyone stand at least three feet away from him at all times. He does not speak English. He is kind. He is horrid. He is just lonely and confused. He lets wild pigeons live in his rooms. He once invented something very important but no one at the hotel can remember what it is anymore.

'Mr Tesla, the electricity –'

'Ah. Forgive me.' His voice sounds ancient, accented as though he is from a place that no longer exists. 'I was, ah yes. I was conducting a small experiment. I see. The electricity. Perhaps if your generator ran on AC instead of –'

'Mr Tesla,' the manager says, apparently intending to scold but, out of fear or respect, unable to.

'Forgive me. I will fix it immediately,' the man says and comes out into the hallway. As he is about to close his door, in a sliver of light his eye catches Louisa's tucked back in the shadows, pinning her there. She might have

fallen had she not already been pressed up against the wall. Her breath and blood lose grip of her body as if he could suck the power from her as he had from the building. She doesn't move because she doesn't mind. His look holds her there for a moment before he closes the door to his room behind him, still watching her, plunging the hallway back into darkness. She worries that the stories she'd heard might be true, a vampire, and loosed momentarily from his sight, finding it difficult to breathe, she takes the opportunity to slip back into the room she had been cleaning. She latches the door, listening as the three sets of footsteps gain the stairwell.

Walking, bumbling with her hands splayed in front of her, patting the air, Louisa finds a chair in the darkness and has a seat. Time drips past and she waits for the electricity to return, imagining the strange Mr Tesla. She thinks of his long fingers rewiring the hotel, like a bird building a nest. She imagines his secret smile in the darkness.

The world can change very quickly, and just as quickly, in one blink, it can change back. She tucks her knees up onto the chair with her, curling up. And in a few minutes, as suddenly as it went, it returns, the bright glare of electricity restored. She stands and tucks her chin into her chest. Collecting her cleaning items, she stops before the once again illuminated desk lamp. No one stares at the electricity anymore. Louisa touches the glass of the bulb, trying to see the charge inside, the current that brings to mind the sharp brow of the man in the hallway and the fresh spike in her belly caused by Arthur Vaughn. The shock of electricity. The shock of meeting strange men. What an odd day she is having. She touches the light again.