

A French-Looking House

An improvisation inspired by Magritte's painting, "Empire of Lights"

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One evening, Emily and I were out walking in a part of Oakland we had never visited before. Maybe it wasn't even in Oakland, I don't know. I had said, "Shall we do rich, or just middle?" "You choose," she replied in the wifely way she knows I like. "Rich!" I said without a moment's hesitation. So we headed for the Terrace Glen neighborhood. But we soon found ourselves turning corners without the slightest idea of where we were. There were more and more lots without houses, and we were clearly headed into some kind of suburban area. Then we went up a low hill and on the other side found a little valley with a lake in the center and a few houses along the far shore. It was already near dusk, so we thought we'd walk around the lake, maybe take a peek up some of the side streets, and then call it quits.

We parked and began walking along the street toward the end of the lake that narrowed into darkness. I think we both caught sight of the house at the same time, perhaps because it seemed deliberately to want to be alone: there was at least a block's length of trees on each side of it. In front was a single street lamp, already lit. We walked along the deserted street paralleling the street that ran in front of the house. Finally, we were standing directly opposite the house; it was a mere 200 feet from us, across the black water of the lake, which was now being stirred by the cold evening breeze.

We both stood silent for a while, taking it in.

"Look at it!" I whispered.

"It's so *French*-looking," said Emily. Her family had a little estate in the south of France which they had bought when her father was alive. She loved everything French. So did I.

We stood looking at it. It was a two-story building, with a little third-story tower on the right-hand side. All but two windows were shuttered with the kind of shutters you see only in French paintings.

"There's something wrong with it," I said, after a while.

"What do you mean?"

"Why are all those windows shuttered? That's the first question."

"Lots of reasons," she said, pretending to be surprised at my naiveté. "They don't use that part of the house any more. All the kids have moved away and now there's only the two old folks left."

"And they're up in that lighted room?"

"Yes," she said with a pout, as though determined now to stand by her theory.

"No," I said, "I can't see two old dotards sitting in rocking chairs up there. It doesn't fit. Nope. There is a woman up there in her thirties, and she looks like one of Modigliani's women: long face; black, severe, eyebrows; waxy smooth skin. She is not — *comment dit on?* — fun to be around."

"What is she doing right now?"

"Sitting on the edge of her chair. She is holding something tensely in her fingers — could be knitting, but if it is, it is made of black wool."

"Why is she tense?"

"Well," I said, "she's having this argument with a man in the room. He is sitting with his back toward the window. His head is sort of hanging down, as though he has been through this a thousand times, and all he can do is sit there and endure it for yet another time."

"Is she talking?"

"No. She is just sitting in that tense position. It's one of those eternal moments. God. And this twilight gloom hanging from all the trees. But look how bright the sky is! It's still daylight up there! You can see blue sky!"

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“Down here it’s practically night. And getting colder.” She hugged herself.

“I still say there is something wrong about the place,” I said

“What?” There was a trace of impatience in her voice.

“The shadow from the street lamp. What is causing that shadow? Look at it! There’s nothing that would make such a shadow!”

“It’s probably from inside the lamp globe or something.”

“Well, it’s not a *globe* in the first place. Look how old-fashioned it is. Like something out of the 1890’s. Come on, let’s go over and find out what’s going on.”

She was clearly reluctant. The cold and dark were bothering her. But she dutifully asked, “How do we get across?”

“The lake must end just a little ways down there. We can walk around”

“Maybe we could just shout, and ask them,” and she laughed. Now she was a Chinese lady with her arms in her sleeves.

“No. Oh, God, I wish we could just fly over, look into the window, fly down to the lamp, then fly back. Quick and quiet.”

“Well, we can’t”, she said, now rocking from heels to toes.

“I’ll tell you something else that’s strange,” I said. “There’s no front door! Look! There are six windows shuttered on the front and that’s that. No door!”

“Maybe it’s on the side.”

“Who would build a house on a sidewalk and then put the door on the side or on the back? It makes no sense.”

We stood there in the growing cold. It was clear she had all but lost interest in the game.

“I’d also love to know what’s in that little tower room,” I said. “I bet they do naughty things in there. Wait: *that’s it!* — they are brother and sister! They have this weird game they play, the whole point being to assume odd poses at odd moments, and the other person has to *understand* the pose, feel its particular oddness, understand why the person assumed it, what it is an expression of at that particular moment. Now we’re getting somewhere!”

Emily may have been cold, but now she was willing to play along with me again. “Maybe they heard our footsteps, and she is sitting on the edge of her chair pretending to be a bird.”

“And they have closed all those other windows just because it’s an odd thing to do — just because it makes the house look more mysterious. But the question is, what do they do in those rooms? Is there any furniture in there? Do the rooms smell musty? What did the two of them have for dinner?”

“I don’t think they eat,” said Emily. “Just cheese.”

“And mineral water.”

She laughed. We stood silent for a while in the descending darkness. Then a thought struck me. “They’re playing ping-pong!”

“*What?*”

“That’s what they’re doing up there. Playing ping-pong. Brother and sister.”

“You’d hear the ball.”

“They don’t use a real ball! It’s another of their brother and sister games. Right now, they are doing a sort of slow-motion ballet, batting the invisible ball back and forth. And the room is painted orange. That orange glow from the windows isn’t just the old-fashioned lamp bulbs they use, it’s because all the walls are orange. Think of it: the old green ping-pong table, the two of them in their graceful, ridiculous slow-motion ballet, and the glow of those walls making their cheeks red. Magnificent, no?”

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“Well...” She was humoring me now.

“You're cold,” I said. “Come on, we'll go home.”

“Can we come back?” she asked, coyly.

“Not during the day! Only at evening. Maybe they'll invite us in.”

“For a foursome”, she said.

“And some cheese and mineral water.”

She put her arm in mine and we retraced our steps to the car.