

WINDOWS

I became fascinated with the lives of strangers as a night janitor.

After high school, my father's child support payments stopped arriving and out of necessity, I went to work with my mom in matching blue waffle knit uniforms, a pair of bookend Polish cleaning ladies washed orange under the streetlights. We would take the bus to the subway and then ride the F train to Midtown each night at eight, settling down in the back with the other cleaning women, clutching our tupperwares filled with varied meat and potato dishes as colorful club-bound people flowed around us, laughing and fighting and applying makeup. We walked a short block to our building, weaving through the clusters of tourists and fast-walking city natives as I gazed up at the brilliant gold and white squares of illuminated windows above us.

The security guard's name was TJ. He had worked in the building for years, reclining behind the desk where he could view each doorway on dusty monitors and sip his oversized thermos of coffee with just a splash of Kahlua. He called me by my Polish name, Ksenia, instead of my preferred name Kasey, but it sounded right in his gravelly voice so I never addressed it. He always let us in with a tired smile, cautiously flipping the heavy metal locks behind us while we walked to the elevator. "Still loving the night shift?" he called after us every time.

"Always!" My mom would reply as she pressed the button, illuminating a perfect circle around the number 2 in fancy script.

We alternated--on even numbered floors, I would clean the bathrooms while my mother vacuumed the carpets and gathered trash bags. When it was my turn to push the vacuum across the offices on odd numbered floors, I looked quickly into each cubicle, ignoring the stacks of papers and computers on sleep mode to find what I really wanted--photos of family members and pets, waxy fake plants, forgotten sweaters hanging off the backs of chairs. Everything was cold and sleepy under the half-lit lights. On floor five, I always ran a fingertip over the ear of a gray ceramic cat and wondered if it matched the pet at home, if the owner of the desk was petting a real animal as I felt the cool surface of the fake one. At the back corner of floor eleven, I looked briefly into the blank glassy eyes of off-brand stuffed animals and pictured a grandmother type arranging them hurriedly each morning before a daily meeting. I closely examined a tack-studded map of the world on floor seventeen, speculating which country the employee would visit next--India, maybe, or Greece, or South Africa, somewhere far enough away to forget about the map until they returned and pressed a fresh blue tack into the glossy paper with a smile.

For years, my fascination pulled me out of the building each night on the top floor. It was just past three a.m. and we always took a quick break before heading downstairs to take the trash out and clean the lobby, our final tasks before TJ handed us cups of sugary coffee for the train ride home. We sat in the lounge near the elevators, the puffy chairs shoved up against the floor to ceiling windows. My mom scrolled through her phone and I looked into the other buildings. Most of the windows were dark but I could watch other cleaning ladies scrub their final surfaces and unplug their vacuums. In apartment buildings, my favorite, I could see some people getting ready for work, brushing their teeth and eating bowls of cereal, pulling on sweaters and exchanging quick kisses goodbye. Other people were just coming home after parties and clubs, tossing off their clothes and falling into bed.

The apartment I loved the most was directly across from where we sat against the window. Two girls lived there, just a few years older than me, in a green apartment filled with eclectic furniture and cluttered with plants and books. Lamps burned in each room, lighting them up just enough for me to distinguish a long red mane on one of them and short curly black hair on the other. Sometimes they had small parties, little groups of men and women drinking and dancing in their cozy living room or curled up on the couch, watching a movie. Most of the time it was just them--getting ready for bed, talking and laughing about something that would always be a mystery to me. I prescribed different stories: the dark haired girl managed a coffee shop and she spilled a smoothie on herself earlier; the two of them were hit on at the bar last night by men who had no chance; the lady next door yelled at them for cooking something that smelled too spicy. I wished I could lean out and ask, shouting across the medley of car horns and rumbly trash collection on the street below us, and their explanation of the enigmatic jokes would be punctuated with wispy, brilliant laughter that floated up to the invisible stars. But instead they pulled the strings on their lamps and shut their curtains, sinking into unconsciousness out of sight as my mom and I went back downstairs.

On the way home, we passed by an art gallery with half the lights on, casting the faintest glow on the paintings within. My mother always stopped in front, blinking the sleep from her eyes and sipping TJ's coffee. She was tired, I could tell--years of rubber gloves and chemical sprays had worn her down. She never fully adjusted to sleeping during the daytime either, the sun always warmed her, even behind thick black curtains and under the cool fan current, and I often woke up for a gulp of water to see her scrolling through her phone, eyes heavy, unable to fall asleep.

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