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Night Comes Early

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The Word Hoard

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Night Comes Early

Annick MacAskill

She opens the door and sees her, leaning over the freezer, stretching as if to press her face against the August night.

The dishwasher stops and she pushes herself from the window, held open by a rag, the curtains pulled to the sides, offering light and a suffocating heat. She sees her, tries to smile, her face tightening in protest. She offers a heavy tray piled with cocktail glasses and highballs. A wine stain on her tunic, the smells of a liqueur coming from her skirt. In her mind she recites the names of the flowers she sees edging the walls of the bars across the street. White rose, *rose blanche*, *rosa alba*. English, French, Latin. Words learned from pouring over botany books and dictionaries. The door closes, and she is gone.

She leans to coax the dishwasher open. Steam comes out of the lazy yawn, an open-mouthed croak of emotion. She picks up a damp dishtowel and attempts to dry a sangria glass, careful not to twist her wrist too fast. Last shift she snapped a white wine glass in half, a clean break. Across the street a band plays. She sees the saxophone player, his white button-down sharp against the navy gate that leads into the restaurant terrace, open to the wide sky. She considers him, imagines herself next to him, a warbling, high voice, a flower limp from the heat slipping

through her fingers as she fumbles for the mic.

The sun sets early for her. That's how high the rooftops are, their cobalt lines affecting, limiting the day. The haze of the August sun and the latitudinal slant of Brittany are just enough that the sky remains illuminated—hazel, not blue—until deep into the evening. She can't see the bright globe past eight, so it's nighttime.

The door opens. By the look on her face, she knows that the night is almost done. Another indicator of time. This and the silence. After midnight even the musicians on the sidewalk disperse. Small bars become crowded as the street cools.

The girl is watched, studied. She would like to paint her, *la Canadienne*, soft but severe, her face warm and soft in the fading light. A van Gogh blur behind her, because you can't replicate the noise of this restaurant any other way. You can't finish this impression of her face—warm and smooth, as if untouched, but what could ever keep her steadied like this, as in a separate existence? The whirl of the restaurant-goers like rushing water downstairs.

The big eyes, lids shrinking them to a slit when she is tired.

Lily of the Valley, *muguet*, *convallaria maialis*. Her lips form these words but she adds no sound. She is quiet here.

Glass tumbles, breaks. Sweat pours. To quicken the process, she rinses out the glasses with their own contents. A laboratory serenity in the heavy night. Marie-Colombe—the art student-waitress with the name of a saint and a bird—stands at her side. They ignore the shards in the sink and stare at this careful pouring, an alchemist’s precision. The red wine blooms in the white, growing out like a cloud to kiss the edges of its cage.

“It looks like fire’s breath,” she says. She nods. It’s trite, and terminally romantic, but it’s true.