

## The Neon Artist

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The neon artist's hands are perpetually tinged in phosphorescence. She doesn't wear gloves; it is essential to feel the heat building up in the glass tubes as she bends them into letters and shapes. Once a bend is made, it cannot be corrected or undone.

Faintly glowing fingertips speckle the surfaces of her apartment; the juice of modernity is difficult to wash off. Otherwise, the apartment is spare and clean. Her studio is a small room, just off the hallway. Signs of various shapes and sizes congregate there in the dimness, half-lit or blinking. Many have been left on her doorstep for repair. They spell out hours of availability, the allure of alcohol, invitations to erotic massage. In days past neon proudly advertised Broadway shows and French perfumes, but now it is devoted to the seamier side of things, and in some areas of the country it has been banned for this very reason. Other technologies are taking over—ones more efficient, easier to manipulate. Still, there is a need for neon. For now, she is able to make a living bringing these signs back to life.

Her own creations are something altogether different. The neon artist is currently in what she refers to as her "blue period," her mind filled with oceanic visions. Jellyfish and sea urchins glow red and blue and green from the shelves that line the studio walls. Some are suspended from the ceiling – a tiny octopus, a pulsating starfish. Occasionally she mails photos of these creations to local art galleries, but rarely gets a response. The outside world is interested in newer forms: post-metaphysical graffiti, binary code ballet, ethernet disco slams.

In the outside world the neon artist is often lonely. Her magical fingers turn toxic in the world of non-mechanical beings. The mercury she uses to intensify the colors leaves a residue on her skin. The asbestos from the paper on which she draws her designs collects beneath her fingernails. For some time she didn't understand, but the few lovers she'd had developed curious illnesses in response to her touch.

The first man, a philosopher, fell in love with her after the third date and moved into her apartment shortly thereafter. But he soon grew feverish and began to repeat himself. His speech grew rapid and nonsensical, his words falling over each other as they rushed to leave

his mouth. The neon artist didn't know what to say in response and so she said nothing, spent more and more time locked in her studio. When the man told her he was leaving, she listened for a moment to his sad babble before nodding silently and showing him to the door.

"It seems to be over, it seems," she heard him mutter as he walked down the steps. "It seems to be. Over, it seems."

The next man, a cellist with a glorious afro, began to lose his hair—slowly at first, and then by the fistful. It nested ominously in the sink, snagged in the air vents, coiled blackly inside her coffee cups. He stared at his balding head in her mirror and grew enraged.

"There's no baldness in my family!" He yelled. "And I'm only 26!" He glared at the neon artist. They both knew this was somehow her fault.

The last one was a kindergarten teacher who held her sweetly through the night. But within weeks his skin grew scaly, like a snake. He spent hours in the bathtub but still complained of dehydration. He became disoriented, forgetting the name of the season they were in, and the year. Finally the neon artist understood.

"Please," she said, crying, "just go." And he did, his expression perplexed, his body too parched to produce any tears.

The neon artist has grown a certain tolerance to these substances. They have become a part of her chemical makeup. There is, too, the ritual of it all. Neon is in her blood; it is how she understands the world. If she gave it up, what would she do? When she was young she had thought she would become a doctor, or a dentist, perhaps, but now she can't imagining sticking her fingers into so many unclean mouths, or worse, into a person's body, that mess of fluid and emotion, delicate yet grotesque infrastructures that too easily fall apart. No thank you. She prefers the clean and simple mechanisms of her neon creatures.

Downstairs from the neon artist lives an old man, a French socialist with terrible arthritis. He has watched the lovers come and go with little comment. Sometimes the neon artist pauses on their shared stoop in the fading evening hours to ask him how he is.

"Not so good," he always answers.

If she asks why, his reply is also the same: "Because I have not won a million dollar."

The first time this struck her as contradictory—a socialist with his hopes pinned on winning a million dollars—but who was she to question? The second time she noticed the

twinkle in his milky blue eye: it was his own private joke, this response, even if he wasn't entirely unserious.

Although the Frenchman can barely walk, he still manages to ride about on his rusty bicycle. He rides to the market two blocks away and returns slowly, grocery bags dangling from each handle. Sometimes he knocks on her door to offer her things—day-old bread, canned corn, potatoes growing eyes.

"On sale," he says, "three for a dollar."

He finds great joy in these deals, regardless of whether the items are things he wants or even needs—the bargain is the point, more so than the purchase.

Today the neon artist is working on a new piece. She holds a length of glass tubing over the ribbon burner, feeling not only when the glass is ready to bend, but what shape it is that this particular tube wants to be. The ringing of her doorbell shatters her reverie, and the glass tube droops limply in her hand, useless. There are times when her own art betrays her, when, even in this realm, her hands lose their effect. She sighs, sets the tube aside, and makes her way down the rickety stairs.

The Frenchman is at the door. "I bought some wine and cheese at the store, I thought you might like to come over and have some. For Easter, you know."

No, the neon artist didn't know, hadn't been paying attention to things like holidays, or time. She doesn't particularly want to go to the Frenchman's apartment, prefers to keep their interactions limited to the brief moments on the stoop, but he is so frail, so pathetic, and seems so hopeful in his anticipation of her response.

"Just let me put on my shoes," she says.

The Frenchman's apartment is dim and cluttered with odds and ends. He leads her down the hall and into the kitchen, where she sees the "wine and cheese" on the table: Kraft singles and Manishevitz. The counter is a junkyard of broken appliances.

"Please," the Frenchman says, "sit down." He sets two small jelly glasses on the table, and hobbles over to the pantry to fetch a box of crackers and a plate.

The neon artist perches gingerly on a kitchen chair, its vinyl seat the faded red of a Shirley Temple cocktail. "So, she says, "have you won a million dollars yet?"

"Eh," he says, "no, not yet." He chuckles. "I need to go to Las Vegas to find my million dollar. Maybe one day we will go together?"

"Maybe so," says the neon artist. She has never been to Vegas, though she has pored over many pictures of its magnificent artistry. It is one of the few places in the world where neon is not only still allowed, but celebrated.

The Frenchman pours the Manishevitz and holds up his glass. "Salud."

The neon artist clinks her glass against his. She takes the smallest of sips. The liquid is thick and sweet, difficult to get down. The Frenchman empties his glass and pours himself another. He offers her more, saying, "The Jews make good wine, no?"

*No*, she thinks, but nods politely and takes another sip. She looks at the doddering appliances on the counter. The Frenchman and his decrepit blenders are going to grow older and older and one day they will cease to exist. In a way, they already have. This room is like a waiting room between this world and the next, filled with muzak and incoherent mumbling, an intermittent ringing of the telephone—except no, no phone, the Frenchman has no phone, he is that disconnected from the human world of news and conversation.

"What is it you are doing up there all this time?" the Frenchman asks, gesturing above his head.

"I work with neon." It's been a long time since anyone has asked. She takes a minute to enjoy the cryptic, almost grandiose, sound of this statement. Already the wine has a fierce and sticky hold on her tongue.

"Ah, the neon light. It is from France, yes?"

"Yes." The neon artist smiles, pleased that he knows this.

The Frenchman refills their glasses and holds his up in the air. "To light!" he clinks his glass against hers and downs the contents.

The neon artist takes a larger sip. The terrible sweetness is becoming easier to tolerate. It sears a path down her throat and into her chest.

"It's a bit like lightning, neon," she tells the Frenchman. "The electric principle is very much the same."

"A beautiful thing," the Frenchman says, and the neon artist isn't sure if he's referring to lightning, or neon, or both. "I remember during the war, the lights went out for days," he says, growing somber. "A terrible time that was, so much fear, and poverty. You've never seen such poverty!"

“Terrible,” the neon artist agrees, with a solemnity precipitated by wine.

“Ah yes, but that was long ago,” The Frenchman nods, his gaze reaching somewhere over her left shoulder. Then his face brightens. “I know what we need,” he says, pulling himself to his feet. “Music!”

He totters over to the corner, where a record player nestles between a dusty vacuum cleaner and a four-foot stack of yellowed newspapers. He adjusts the needle on the record and it miraculously comes to life—a lilting melody, a woman’s voice crackling with time.

The Frenchman totters back and holds out his hand: “We must dance.”

She wonders how he will respond to her touch—a man already broken in half a dozen places. So far she has been careful to avoid the glance of his fingers during their toast, the shuffle of his foot in the small kitchen. But there seems no way to politely decline. And really, why not? The Frenchman has a flush in his cheeks, a sparkle in his eye. His stoop is less pronounced than usual.

“Alright,” she says.

Gingerly, she places her hand in his. As she stands to meet him he grows—not so much like a tree as fruit on a vine, everywhere all at once yet almost imperceptible. His hand tightens around hers, his arm circles her waist firmly. She hasn’t been held in what seems like ages. She closes her eyes, to better feel the music, the embrace, and the Frenchman leads her in a gentle waltz. After a moment she realizes that they are no longer dancing on the dirt-specked tile floor but among the molecules of air—floating, really, like figures in a Chagall painting, and like a Chagall painting, the colors of the room have grown incredibly vivid—the vinyl chair cushion a circle of cherry red in her peripheral vision as she spins, their reflection in the chrome of the broken toasters on the counter a whirl of cobalt blue and emerald green, her hair in a fiery pile atop her head. She looks up, for the Frenchman is now certainly a foot taller than she, and his jaw has grown smooth and strong; his eyes stare back at her intently, as if seeing her for the first time.

“You dance beautifully,” he says. He is thirty years younger. The accent is all but gone.

There is a term she learned in school – sprezzatura – effortless grace. She never understood it before; she understands it now. She feels her heart slip through the cage of her ribs like a sparrow and fly to meet that of the Frenchman. *This is what it could be like.* Hand

against back, wrist against neck, tempo and exhalation. And beyond that, life stretched out like a banquet table, gleaming with possibility.

The record ends, the needle lifts, and their feet hit the floor with a rude thump. The Frenchman is old once more, smiling faintly with his three good teeth, sweat beading on his wrinkled skin. Again his gaze falls somewhere over her left shoulder, and she realizes that he is going blind. She helps him over to his chair. He is wheezing, his stoop more pronounced than ever.

“One more toast,” he says, pouring the Manishevitz again, this time spilling several drops on the table.

The neon artist obliges, although the wine has grown too sweet again, and the air too thick. She is suddenly anxious to get back to her own apartment, to the quiet comfort of her studio. When she glances back at the Frenchman he is slumped over in his chair. His breath is now shallow, infrequent; his eyes are closed. His face is paler than usual; it has taken on a bluish tinge. *Is this it?* Her anxiety blooms into fear. She goes to his side and puts her arm under his.

“Let me help you to bed,” she says.

She hoists him up and leads him to his bedroom. His skin is scaly against hers and the pinkish skin of his scalp beams obscenely through its sparse covering of silver hair. Once in the darkened room, the old man crumples onto the bed. The neon artist kneels at his side.

If he dies in the night she will pour out her chemicals. This decision forms in her mind with the clarity of hot glass, then sinks into her chest, enveloping her organs. She recognizes the burn of loss, and it feels a little like freedom. She rests her chin on her folded arms and watches the shape of his breath, the faint rise and fall of his chest in the dark