

Jeffrey Chapman

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MIGRATION

It's their first apartment together. Three flights of stairs, hardwood floor—of course hardwood floor (it was the one point-of-no-compromise)—and swing doors opening, draft-bearing, onto a small balcony over a pizza place and a street (loud for a city like this). The kitchen is small, but there's a mirror over the sink. The bathroom is tiled and mildewed: flagrant and disgusting but easily dealt with.

They have nothing. They have books and some musical albums to play on the small stereo. They certainly have no friends; any friends are two-thousand five-hundred miles away. They have no food no icecream no chairs no tables one down-comforter no linen some pillows no coffee-tables no potted plants no junk cleverly recycled as furniture no televisions.

One night, driving there from the East coast, they stopped to stretch at a rest area and they looked up and saw more stars than they had seen before, and she said that there were more stars even still. She said they would see more and more the further West they went. If they walked off into the Pacific Ocean they would see the most stars of all. Delicious, he said.

When she goes to work on her first Monday he goes out to buy things. They can't afford many things yet, until she gets her first paycheck. He finds five strings of white christmas lights which he shouldn't buy but does, along with a hammer and some small gold-coloured nails.

He hammers nails around the room and strings up the lights, all along the conjunction between wall and ceiling. Five strings. Five-hundred lights.

After a day of shaking hard hands, after a long late day, she comes home and looks around at his purchases.

She opens the fridge.

"Juice?" she says.

"No," he says. "Sorry."

She looks under the sink.

"Garbage can?"

"No."

She wonders what he did buy. It was a long day and she feels lonely; at that moment he seems impractical, naive. Too young, suddenly.

In one corner of the living room they have spread their down comforter on the wood floor. They don't yet have a mattress. He's thrown pillows on top. The room is hot. He asks her to close her eyes and lie down on the comforter.

"No," she says, tired.

"The sheet's are cool," he says. "Take off some clothes."

As if illustrating something unusual, he kicks off his shoes.

"I'm tired," she says.

"Then lie down," he says. His smile is so gentle that she softens a bit.

He opens the doors to the balcony and a draft cools them. She takes off one shirt and he touches her on the arm, the skin which has always reminded him of the soft, silver undersides of the russian olive leaves that grew around his last house. He covers her eyes and guides her to lie down.

Excited—like a child opening presents—he plugs in the lights. He slips down next to her and kisses her neck.

"Okay. Open."

She opens her eyes. For some seconds she looks around and then she strokes him on the cheek. Pretty, she says.

He pulls her close to him, and together like that they lie for minute after minute after minute. Then, just before they fall asleep, she is kissing him. Then, when they have sex—him on his back looking up, his hands feeling her back, she with legs on either side of him, leaning back, eyes open, neck stretched back—they see the lights and it is like they are in the desert, under a wide and huge sky with five-hundred stars. More stars than that even.