

The Highlights - Island Light



I am writing this at the edge of a Shell station, just outside of Fort Dodge, Iowa. It is ten p.m., and I am watching a twenty-year-old girl pump gas as she stands in the middle of the fuel island. She is the kind of girl lucky enough to have had to say, "Eyes up here." It is late fall and the crickets are chirping hard in an attempt to hold winter back. This girl is underdressed in a yellow bikini top, short shorts, and flip flops. She needed something and had driven out into the night, unprepared in these scraps of her uniform of youth and summer, to get it. Her face appears luminous and childlike under the island light, and her

hands fumble as she tries to secure the strap behind her neck that won't stay tied. Beyond her, the highway is a whirl of Doppler effects and thanksgivings she's not part of. Part of me wishes I could join her under the diving mermaid tails of the lamps as she waits for her tank to fill; the Shell sign above her like half of her broken bikini. We could dance in slow motion to her car stereo and pretend to be video stars. We could be BFFs. But I cannot join her, because I do not know her. It's hard to make real friends in transient places. And so, after she disappears into the station, I walk to the island, and stand in the spot where she was.





After the long trip through the Badlands, you leave the West and enter the Middle. And you come to a gas station and you pull in. And you are tired and lonely and hypnotized by the highway, and you stumble out onto the concrete island of the fuel station. The fuel station that saved you from more of the same. And there, in the middle of nowhere, under 1,000 watts of commercial light, you are a movie star. It doesn't matter that the ground below you is stained and scarred like the surface of the moon, It doesn't matter how humble your beginning was or how tragic your ending will be; you are in a dream sequence, time is remapped to 80 percent, and everything is possible. You are *safe, and alive*.

In this sequence, you play the scene like everyone before you has. Like an open call audition where every hopeful is exactly right for the part, where everyone lands the job. In this shot you pump the gas, and you think about where you've been and where you're going and *you stare off into the darkness*. The darkness beyond the wrong side of the highway, the side that, thank God, has nothing to do with you. And then, you look at your hands holding the pump, and then you look up and witness the numbers on the meter grow. You do the math on what this will cost you and what you could possibly have left. And maybe here is where you lean against your car and give it a little pat and say, "Good job girl, let's keep going."

It is easy to fall in love with this island light, this light that makes moonlight seem like a fairy tale. This light that is brave and means what it says. This light that illuminates the grease-stain action paintings on the ground of the service station. It is, after all, an island of sorts, that concrete stage where travelers disembark and tumble onto land. Land that holds steady and accepts everyone. Island light never needs a forwarding address; it is exactly where it wants to be.

I love this light, because it is one half of an amazing romance between cement and sodium. I love this light because that romance is a love story about a lamp loving a bit of ground.



From fifty-five feet above, filaments send love notes through lumens to their baby below. That humble patch of concrete is fiercely embraced in a light that spares no expense—spends it all. It would mortgage the moonlight, it would max out the credit card and move money

around at three a.m., just to keep it in pearls and milkyway diamonds, like a pageant mother who lies and spends everything to support her little princess with *so much possibility*. Goodbye husband, goodbye marriage. Nothing matters more than baby turning in her tutu, smiling with her milk teeth, under that loving spotlight.



Photos courtesy of Laurel Nakadate

I don't mean to say that there isn't another sort of light that could break your heart and will; I have nothing against halogen. There is, after all: The light that breaks your heart because you don't live *there* anymore. The siren light that seduces fireflies and gnats and moths with faces on their wings, in suburban summer heat, the zap-zap that breaks the rules and stops all hearts. The light that comes on when you are not home to tell the masked men to keep moving, the light that has your back. The lights on the Christmas tree that blink on and off, the ambulance of their red pointed plastic hearts, and of course, the light left on above the front door that tells you someone is inside who *still loves you-despite all your failures*.

But this is not about that light, though perhaps you wish it were. This is about the light that reassures you: You are headed home as you inch across America. This is the light that keeps you awake, talks you through it, with an open heart, and signals you to start the countdown clock when you begin to recognize familiar islands. And the closer you get to home, the louder the voice gets, reassuring you that there are indeed impermeable bread crumbs that have not scattered or been eaten by the lovely and motherless forest animals. And these crumbs have been laid out for you. Everything is in its place. *You may be in the*

Middle, but you are almost home.