

Your house glows at night like everything inside is on fire.

The drapes she chose for the windows look like linen. Expensive linen. The weave is loose enough that I can usually read your mood. I can watch the girl flip her ponytail while she finishes homework. I can watch the little boy toss tennis balls at the twelve-foot ceiling while your wife lunges around the living room in leggings, reversing the day's mess. Toys back in the basket. Pillows back on the couch.

Tonight, though, you've left the drapes open. Maybe to see the snow falling. Maybe so your daughter could look for reindeer. She's long stopped believing, but she will pretend for you. Anything for you.

You've all dressed up. The children are in matching plaid, sitting on the leather ottoman as your wife takes their picture with her phone. The girl is holding the boy's hand. You're fiddling with the record player at the back of the room and your wife is speaking to you, but you hold up a finger – you've almost got it. The girl jumps up and your wife, she sweeps up the boy, and they spin. You lift a drink, Scotch, and sip it once, twice, and slink from the record like it's a sleeping baby. That's how you always start to dance. You take him. He throws his head back. You tip him upside down. Your daughter reaches up for Daddy's kiss and your wife holds your drink for you. She sways over

to the tree and adjusts a string of lights that isn't sitting quite right. And then you all stop and lean toward one another and shout something in unison, some word, perfectly timed, and then you all move again – this is a song you know well. Your wife slips out of the room and her son's face follows robotically. I remember that feeling. Of being the needed one.

Matches. She comes back to light the candles on the decorated mantel and I wonder if the snaking fir boughs are real, if they smell like the tree farm. I let myself imagine, for a moment, watching those boughs go up in flames while you all sleep tonight. I imagine the warm, butter-yellow glow of your house turning to a hot, crackling red.

The boy has picked up an iron poker and the girl gently takes it away before you or your wife notices. The good sister. The helper. The protector.

I don't normally watch for this long, but you're all so beautiful tonight and I can't bring myself to leave. The snow, the kind that sticks, the kind she'll roll into snowmen in the morning to please her little brother. I turn on my wipers, adjust the heat, and notice the clock change from 7:29 to 7:30. This is when you'd have read her *The Polar Express*.

Your wife, she's in the chair now, and she's watching the three of you bounce around the room. She laughs and collects her long, loose curls to the side. She smells your drink and puts it down. She smiles. Your back is to her so you can't see what I can, that she's holding her stomach with one hand, that she rubs herself ever so slightly and then looks down, that she's lost in the thought of what's growing inside her. They are cells. But they are everything. You turn around and her attention is pulled back to the room. To the people she loves.

She will tell you tomorrow morning.

I still know her so well.

I look down to put on my gloves. When I look back up the girl is standing at your open front door. Her face is half lit by the lantern above your house number. The plate she's holding is stacked with carrots and cookies. You'll leave crumbs on the tile floor of the foyer. You'll play along and so will she.

Now she's looking at me sitting in my car. She shivers. The dress your wife bought her is too small and I can see that her hips are growing, that her chest is blooming. With one hand she carefully pulls her ponytail over her shoulder and it's more the gesture of a woman than a girl.

For the first time in her life I think our daughter looks like me.

I put down the car window and I lift my hand, a hello, a secret hello. She places the plate at her feet and stands again to look at me before she turns around to go inside. To her family. I watch for the drapes to be yanked closed, for you to come to the door to see why the hell I am parked outside your home on a night like tonight. And what, really, could I say? I was lonely? I missed her? I deserved to be the mother inside your glowing house?

Instead she prances back into the living room, where you've coaxed your wife from the chair. While you dance together, close, feeling up the back of her shirt, our daughter takes the boy's hand and leads him to the center of the living-room window. An actor hitting her mark on the stage. They were framed so precisely.

He looks just like Sam. He has his eyes. And that wave of dark hair that ends in a curl, the curl I wrapped around my finger over and over again.

I feel sick.

Our daughter is staring out the window looking at me, her hands

on your son's shoulders. She bends down and kisses him on the cheek. And then again. And then again. The boy likes the affection. He is used to it. He is pointing to the falling snow but she won't look away from me. She rubs the tops of his arms as though she's warming him up. Like a mother would do.

You come to the window and kneel down to the boy's level. You look out and then you look up. My car doesn't catch your eye. You point to the snowflakes like your son, and you trace a path across the sky with your finger. You're talking about the sleigh. About the reindeer. He's searching the night, trying to see what you see. You flick him playfully under the chin. Her eyes are still fixed on me. I find myself sitting back in my seat. I swallow and finally look away from her. She always wins.

When I look back she's still there, watching my car.

I think she might reach for the curtain, but she doesn't. My eyes don't leave her this time. I pick up the thick stack of paper beside me on the passenger seat and feel the weight of my words.

I've come here to give this to you.

This is my side of the story.