

RADIANT SHIMMERING LIGHT

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NANA BOONDAHL HAS amazing wavy white hair that's dyed a deep turquoise at the ends and fades up gradually to mint green, and eventually natural white at the roots. She wears the waves swept up and pinned to the top of her head, where they sit like swirls of cake frosting. She also wears a long, baggy, camel-coloured coat with many pockets. It's belted, which makes it look bathrobish. If you're Nana Boondahl, you can wear whatever you want.

"Welcome to my studio," I say. "I share it with the designer Yumi Senza, who is mid-process right now. Please excuse the wool-lens you see."

Nana Boondahl steps into the studio and makes it her own, just by standing in it. Her energy courses around her in waves. I step back to give her more space. She has a very strong presence. Her eyes go to the wooden table where I've set up my sketch pad and pencils.

"I am curious to see what colour you will use to capture the light around her," she tells me. "What do you think?"

The elegant greyhound stands patiently in the doorway. One-quarter of Sophia's tan body is neck. She wears a white fleece coat—more of a cape, really—with a woolly, knitted, tube-like extension that covers her throat and most of her head. Her ears are tucked neatly away under this hood. She is wide-eyed and humble, but looks at me with dignity. I take her in, and feel the hot pink-purple light around her.

"Magenta," I say. "It's so pretty. Can you see it, too?" I've never met anyone else who can see animal auras.

Nana Boondahl shakes her head. "I once knew a woman who could see auras. It was when I lived in Greece. She saw them everywhere. It made her dizzy, and sometimes sick. She would faint if she was with more than six people at once."

"I can only see animal auras," I say.

"What a shame," she says. "Apparently, human auras can be very interesting. Unstable, but dynamic."

Juliette told me that Nana Boondahl was eccentric. "Thank you for coming in person," I say.

"We are very interested in your work," Nana Boondahl says. "Say hello, Sophia." She nods to the dog. "Polite."

Sophia sits on her narrow hindquarters and balances there.

"This must be so cold for her," I say.

"She was rescued from Florida." Nana bends down and pushes down the fleece tube, releasing the dog's ears and face, and leaves the fabric ruched around her neck. "She was a racer. Quite successful, actually. Oh, look at her face!" She makes her voice go small. "*This is so unfair*, she's saying. *I wasn't built for winter.*"

"I know how she feels," I say.

I make Nana Boondahl a cup of coconut-almond tea and let her get settled on the chaise lounge under the window, by the space heater. I unclip Sophia's leash and invite her to my drawing area.

Listen to the messages from your body. My body tells me about colour. When I see colour, I feel it. It's a sensation, like hot or cold. Every colour feels a bit different to me. It's hard to explain. It's kind of like synesthesia. But then, of course, I'm seeing and feeling colour around animals that other people can't see. I know, it sounds complicated. It's not, really.

I first learned that I could see and feel coloured light around Kitty—a grey tabby cat, my first pet. In the second grade, I earnestly described her emerald glow in a mortifying show-and-tell presentation. Immediately I realized my mistake. Children can be cruel. But things got better as I grew up and learned to be more careful about what I share with others. I never stopped seeing the auras—coloured light radiates around dogs, goldfish, hamsters, even pigeons—but I kept it to myself for years.

Now, as an adult, I don't feel the need to hide it anymore. I include auras in my pet portraits because they're part of the animal's being. I feel them together, the colour and the animal. They're inseparable.

Sophia sniffs around the upholstered floor cushion, finds the cookie, and eats it: two small crunches and an inhale. She licks her chops delicately. When she does finally lie down, her thin body looks like a bundle of branches. The angles of her limbs collect in triangles. She exhales and shows me the grate of her ribs. Greyhounds are so thin! I begin to sketch.

Nana Boondahl sets her cup of tea down on top of the space heater, which is probably an electrical hazard. She opens a silver case that came out of one of her deep coat pockets. It's the size of a pack of gum, and engraved with a filigree design. She opens it and looks inside—there must be a mirror set into it—staring intensely into the silver lid. Her turquoise-and-cream hair frames her face and brings out the blue of her deep-set eyes.

"You've got quite a draft in here," she says to the mirror.

I move from pencilling Sophia's ribcage to her front legs. When I'm drawing the lines of a dog's body, like the sweep of spine from neck to tail, it helps if I forget that I'm drawing and become the line itself. This requires deep concentration. The first few lines can be rough and sketchy, but generally I can lose myself in the drawing fairly quickly, and get to the right place. But it's hard to focus with Nana Boondahl in the room, watching me.

My phone buzzes in the drawer.

I prefer it when owners leave the dog with me for the sitting. When they have errands to do, or at least, emails to answer. They can be in the room, but when they're on their phone, it's as if they aren't even here. Nana Boondahl doesn't appear to have a phone.

"There's a café right around the corner," I tell her. I focus on Sophia's delicate, bumpy spine, trace it with my eyes as I move my pencil across the page. There: a few inches of line that feel accurate and honest. Then I lose it again, because I've started to think too much about what I'm drawing. The line turns false and self-conscious as I try to draw her tail. My phone buzzes again. I back up to the last detail that still feels alive on the page.

"Feel free to wait down there. I can call you when we're finished."

An e-cigarette materializes between Nana Boondahl's fingers, and she inserts it into her mouth and works it with her lips.

"Oh, no," she says. "I enjoy watching you work."

I feel a little thrill when she says this, but I want her to leave so I can focus. Having her energy in the room is intimidating. Can I use the energy? How can I work with it? I take a deep breath, look back at the page, exhale. *Remind yourself, "I'm here."*

I find the line of Sophia's tail again. I stare at the dog, soften my focus, and let her in. My peripheral vision opens up. There it is—the real line of tail. What I see with my eyes and what my pencil traces on the page become one. For a little while, I almost forget that Nana Boondahl is in the room with me.

I finish when I have five solid sketches, most of them with true lines. I remember Sophia's magenta light with my mind and body. Auras never leave me—I remember the way they feel the way I remember places I've visited. I slide the sketches into a portfolio case to take home with me, where I'll start work on the painting. "Sophia is a beautifully still dog," I say. "She made the session so easy! I wish all my clients would pose so quietly."

I open the drawer of the table, take out my phone, and activate my MoneyJack credit card reader.

@ElevenNovak> @LilianQuick So nice to hear from you.
I've comped two tickets for you. Come see me tonight!
Bring a girlfriend. Xx

It's a private message on Instagram. I read it again, because my brain can't make sense of it. Years before Grandma Bertolucci died, my mom and Aunt Rosie had a big fight and stopped talking to each other. The fight was about Uncle Jimmy. When we were in Evansville for summer vacation, my mom told Aunt Rosie she should get a divorce. Aunt Rosie got angry, said that my mom was jealous, and then kicked us all out of the house. Our families grew apart after that.

The Novaks are famous Evansville lawyers, and they have a lot of money. Uncle Jimmy's father and brothers were lawyers too. Literally, the firm is called Novak, Novak & Novak. My dad couldn't work, because he had to write his never-to-be-completed philosophy dissertation. He received many extensions for his PhD, and at some point the department told him to finish it whenever he could. My mom supported us by working at Red Lobster. When I was a kid, we ate a lot of cheese buns from the restaurant, with cucumber, mustard, and slices of mortadella. My dad died before he finished his thesis.

Aunt Rosie and my mom have very different personalities. My mother's bohemian lifestyle never appealed to Aunt Rosie, who was the more traditional one. Uncle Jimmy and my father were opposites: my father had a quiet, absentminded way of speaking, and would look at your forehead while talking, while Uncle Jimmy spoke as though performing on a stage. He could direct the energy of an entire room.

I haven't heard from Florence since Grandma's funeral. We were twenty when she died. A few years after that, my dad died of a heart attack. The Novaks sent flowers, but they didn't come up for his funeral. As far as I know, my mom and her sister still barely talk to each other.

Last year, I saw Florence in *O Magazine*, in a group portrait of awakened leaders, all committed to elevating the state of humanity in their own ways. I recognized her right away—her wide and lopsided smile, dainty heart-shaped face, and outrageous curly blond hair. The name listed under the photograph read Eleven Novak. But this was my cousin Florence, definitely. With a new name.

I looked her up online to learn more about her story. I couldn't find anything about her childhood. Instead, I found YouTube videos of Eleven speaking to large audiences about her struggle with drugs, alcohol, and manic depression as an adult. One day, she said, she woke up outside, at dawn, by a riverbed. She was barefoot, her legs ached, and she was wearing a black dress with a man's grey hoodie over it. For a few moments, she didn't know her name or where she lived. It was on this morning, she said, that she felt peace for the first time in her life. It was a profound experience. She felt so deeply connected to the trees and river and sky, she felt that she wasn't separate from them. And she knew that she had been called to teach other people how to find this deep connection.

Poor Florence! I knew she had suffered living with Uncle Jimmy, who had such a scary temper, but I had no idea she'd been struggling so much for the past twenty years.

I got in touch with Aunt Rosie right away to find out where Florence was living, but Aunt Rosie would only give me a P.O. box in New York.

I sent a card to that P.O. box—a painting of a sweet papillon with a fizzy green aura I thought Florence would like—and included a short handwritten note. I tried to be excited and gracious without sounding like a stalker, because she’s famous now. I didn’t want her to think that was the reason I was getting in touch. Her Ascendancy Program changes people’s lives, and I’m sure everyone wants to be her best friend now.

My note read, *I’m so glad I found you—congratulations on all your success! You’re such an inspiration, and I am so grateful that we’re family!*

I started tagging her and sharing her Sacred Ascendancy Prayer on social media after that, with no response. Until this message, today.

Nana Boondahl looks at me smoothly. “Sophia is my teacher,” she says. Then, in a small squeaky voice, she says, “*I don’t know why people work so hard at yoga when they could just lie down and relax instead.*”

Using the MoneyJack app, I type in the deposit amount that Nana Boondahl owes me. Does Eleven write her own social media? Would she have sent me the message herself, or had an assistant do it for her?

“I’ll get to work and call you when the painting is ready,” I say. “Would you like to leave me a deposit or pay in full today?”

“*Thank you*,” she says.

I smile at Sophia. “You’re welcome,” I say. I hold my phone in the palm of my hand and look back at Nana Boondahl.

“I’m sorry,” she says. “What did you say before?”

“A deposit,” I say. “Will you be paying by credit card?”

“I will pay in cash,” she says, “when the painting is complete.”

I hadn’t expected this. I need her deposit money to pay my January rent, which is already late.

“If you have a credit card, it’s very convenient to leave a deposit this way,” I say, and I show her my phone. “We can just swipe it right here.”

“No thank you,” she says. “I prefer to pay with cash. Just send me a bill when you’re done.”

I place my phone face down on the table and feel swimmy. Do I have to *tell* her that I need the money? She’s a poet. She should know! But she’s a billionaire poet. Maybe she’s forgotten what it’s like to be an emerging artist.

“I’ll need more than a week to finish,” I say.

“Yes, of course. Take your time. You’ll have it by next month? Whatever time you need, that’s fine.”

I can’t let her leave without giving me a deposit. What if I rushed the painting? I could work on it at night, and try to finish it in half the time. “Can you come to the studio to pick it up next week?”

“Really, there’s no hurry,” Nana Boondahl says. “I leave for New York next week and will be there until the end of January. February is fine.” She stands up and ties the belt of her coat into a knot. Sophia looks up, and the tag on her collar clinks with the movement.

I know what Fleurje would do right now. She negotiates million-dollar real estate deals every day—she knows how to direct conversations about money. She’d simply say, “I need a deposit in order to finish the work. Thank you.”

Why can’t I just say that?

“Okay then,” I say. My lungs shrink and my chest feels tight. “I’ll just send you an invoice when I’m finished. Can I call you in February?”

Nana Boondahl makes her voice go high. “*I look forward to seeing my portrait.*”

I can’t breathe. “I really admire your work,” I say to Nana Boondahl. “Also the way you’ve made your career as an artist and as an entrepreneur.”

“Oh?” she says, without looking at me. “Well, you know what that’s like.”

I laugh and look down. My arms are crossed. Oh no! Closed-off body language! I drop my arms and let them hang by my sides. Nana Boondahl stands in front of me, statuesque and calm. Her arms, covered by caramel woollen sleeves, are like two elegant cedar trunks.

“Was your family in business?” I ask her.

“My father was an architect. My mother died when I was young.”

“I’m sorry,” I say. “I meant, did you have any business training?”

“No,” she says. “I wanted something, it didn’t exist yet, and so I made it. It’s a lot of work, as you know.”

“Yes,” I say. “It isn’t easy, making a living, making art. I don’t know that I’m doing it in a balanced way.”

My phone buzzes on the table. Eleven?

The greyhound lies down on the floor in front of the door and sighs, waiting. Her magenta light is fluttery and warm. It really is beautiful.

“You have talent, that’s inarguable,” she says. She looks at me and tilts her head. “But your skin is losing elasticity.”

Nana Boondahl thinks I have talent! She said “inarguable talent”! I’m shocked. It’s not that I don’t think I’m talented. It’s just that—this is *Nana Boondahl*.

“I’m always dry in winter,” I say. I can’t afford Luze, but I moisturize with coconut oil, which is more natural anyway. “Can we make a date for the portrait pickup now?”

“Of course.” She pulls a small brown notebook out of her coat pocket and feels around for a pencil.

“Here,” she says, and hands me a container of Luze in the brand’s iconic silver-lidded, dark-green glass jar. This is probably about eighty dollars’ worth of cream!

“Thank you!” I say.

“I have nothing to write with,” she answers.

There are ballpoint pens in the Mason jar on Yumi’s table. Stuffed in the jar with the pens are orange-handled scissors, a pencil with a neon-pink troll topper, and a pair of armless magnifying glasses copper-wired to a chopstick. My phone buzzes on the table again. I reach for the jar and look at my phone at the same time. My hand collides with something sharp. I gasp from the slice, which is more shocking than painful.

I yank my hand back, and this action pulls the X-acto knife that is embedded in the palm of my hand right out of the jar. It clatters to the floor. My hand drips blood.

“Oh no,” I say. “Oh God. I’m bleeding.”

Sophia stands up slowly and sniffs the air in my direction.

“Let me see,” says Nana Boondahl.

I show her my hand and feel weak. It looks less and less like my own hand the more I stare at it.

“That’s not good,” she says. “That’s going to require stitches.”

The floor beneath me is covered in bright red drops in a swirly pattern. The contrast is so pretty, and with my boots in the picture, it would make an edgy toe selfie. But my hand is covered in blood. I have to stop the bleeding. More important to stop the bleeding!

I grab the blue sweater that Yumi gave me and wrap it around my hand. I use my wrist to help me wrap it around and around. My hand is now starting to throb.

“Can you tie this for me, please?” I ask Nana Boondahl. “I’m so sorry about this. Oh God, I’m very sorry.” Nana Boondahl ties the sleeves in a knot around my hand.

“This is cashmere,” she says.

“I have a great wool wash,” I tell her, fully delirious now. “Do you know Plunge products? It’s a small company from Nova Scotia. They make a delicate wash that you don’t need to rinse out. I use it for cashmere.”

“Can I call you a driver?” asks Nana Boondahl. “I’d like to get you to an emergency room.”

“A driver,” I say. “A driver.” I say the word a couple of times in the hopes of understanding it. The word is a sound with no apparent meaning. It feels like the word “driver” is meant to signify something useful. Something that would fix all problems. Yes, I need a driver.

“Can you tell me the number?” she’s asking me.

“I’d like a taxi, please,” I say calmly. “Use PickUp. It’s cheaper.”

“The number?” she says.

I use my left hand to pick up my phone. On the screen a notification lights up from Ticketz.

Emmylou Harris is coming to Massey Hall in April!

Tickets on sale now.

I press the purple PickUp logo and a map opens up on the screen, with a marker for where I am, at the studio, and a cluster of yellow taxi icons around the nearest intersection. A badge pops up.

There is a problem with the credit card on file.

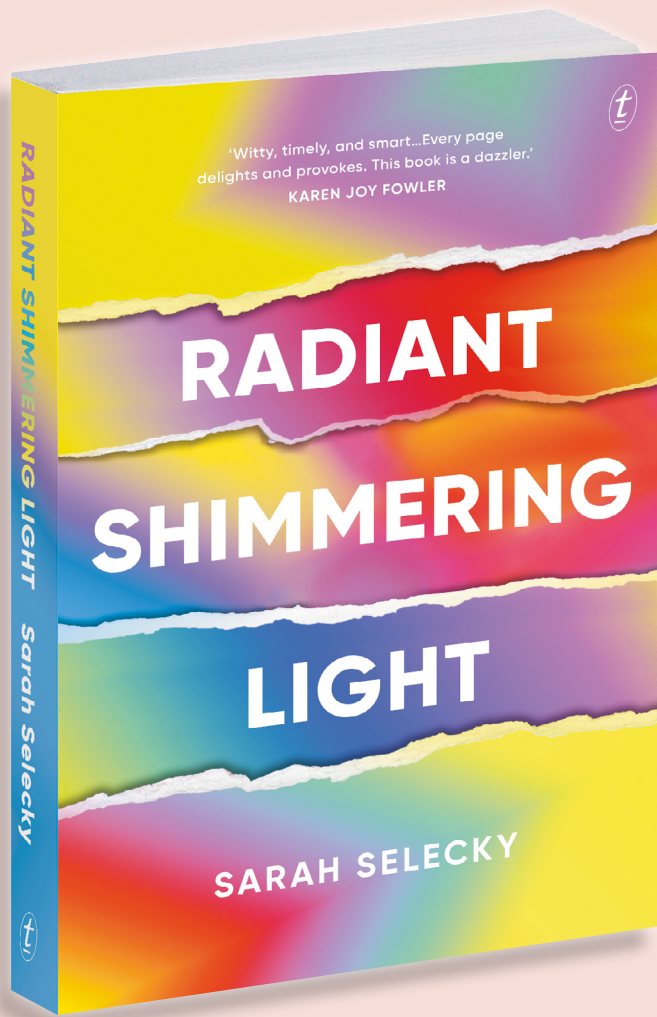
[Click here to fix it.](#)

“I’m so sorry for this inconvenience,” I say. My voice sounds prerecorded. “The app isn’t working. This is terrible. This is embarrassing. I’m so sorry.”

“Stop,” Nana Boondahl says. “Please. You need to put your coat on.” She turns to the door. “I’ll hail a taxi for you outside. Come, Sophia.”

Nana Boondahl and her dog leave the studio. The sun comes up over the buildings across the street, and narrow strips of light lick the floor of the studio. I pull my coat on, but my right hand won’t fit inside the sleeve because the sweater is balled over it. I use the left sleeve and drape the right side of the coat over my shoulder like a cape.

Nana Boondahl opens the taxi door for me and closes it when I fall inside. The seats are cracked pleather and the heat is on. I close my eyes. The car drives away from the studio. I didn’t schedule a pickup date for the portrait, and I didn’t get a deposit. And how will I paint Sophia’s portrait without my right hand?



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