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The Invention

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Author Bio

Natalie Orga is a first year intending to major in English with a writing concentration and Studio Arts minor. She is from Bear, Delaware, and hopes to become a published novelist in the future. She would like to thank her dog for being extremely fluffy.

The Invention

The first time I saw the shadow girl was my fifth birthday.

That day, at my request, my parents and I went to the park. It didn't have any playhouses or swing sets, just a yellowing strip of grass and a murky pond. Even so, it was my favorite place in the universe. There, not a single tree or rooftop obscured the horizon, so when the sun rose or set, it was framed by nothing but ivory earth.

We brought a whole loaf of bread with us, as we always did. The loaf had been sitting on the counter, growing stiffer by the day for an entire week, so by the time my birthday arrived, it was ready. I crumbled slice after slice of age-stiff bread in my tiny palms and lobbed the crumbs into the pond. We spent the day watching clusters of fat, glossy ducks gobbling up whatever we threw, paddling with thick yellow feet and squawking. As the evening approached, a chill swept the muggy California air, and my parents and I huddled together in a huge, grass-stained picnic blanket. It smelled like wet earth and summer. The sun was sliding beneath the trees, smearing the darkening water with gleaming bars of orange and gold silk.

I remember the laughter, just snippets of it. My mother's laugh, like a sweet bell, her hair a dark tangle beneath the picnic blanket. My father, his deep, gravelly chortles thrumming against my back as I laid against him. The air had a crisp, honeyed scent. I don't remember what we were laughing about, but I will always remember the laughter.

That's when I saw her. My smile faded like an old photograph. I only just glimpsed her--a flash of dark hair, the length of her fingers--before she vanished into the twilight shadows. But the memory followed me home as if it had folded itself up inside that picnic blanket and nestled in the checked folds.

I knew she wasn't just a random bystander or someone who passed us by chance. She was watching, hiding. I felt her eyes on me like silent brands. Thinking about her was wrong; seeing her felt...unnatural. It was as if I had seen something that I shouldn't have, like a kiss on the lips that I should have hidden my eyes from. But time spiraled away, and I almost forgot.

The second time I saw her I was eight. It was the middle of the night, and a gentle hand on my shoulder woke me. My dad was nudging me awake, a finger pressed to his lips.

"Come on, Claire. I have to show you something," he whispered. Anticipation instantly flooded me. For two months now, he had sequestered himself in our basement, working. When I pressed my ear against the door, I could hear the soft scratching of graphite, the whisper of papers rustling, but I couldn't fathom what he was making. It wasn't exactly new to me, though.

My dad called himself an inventor, though he had yet to invent something. He lived off my mom's sparse paycheck and tried desperately to think of something no one had thought of before.

"A useless endeavor," my grandma used to quip. "There's nothing new under the sun."

"But what about beyond the sun?" he would grin. I suppose that's why I

adored him so much. There was no such thing as impossible to him, and I was boundless, a child.

But even at the age of eight, I knew there was something desperate about him, something frantic. I'd never been allowed in his basement before, but his half of my parents' bedroom was enough to hint at what it was like. Papers, crumpled and tossed, smears of ink on the sheets, dirty dishes on the nightstand. To me, those drawings, all hectic scribbles and excited scrawlings, were the most mysterious and beautiful things I'd ever seen. I would smooth them carefully with my palms, drinking in his imagination until I heard his boots on the basement stairs. Then I would rush to my bedroom, head spinning, cheeks flushed with the impossible.

In hindsight, I don't know why my mom put up with his work. He lived because of her teaching job, and she supported us alone. But I guess she thought she saw something special in him, in the agitated way he tried to create, the bizarre intelligence behind his eyes. She was right. He was special. Or maybe it was just the way he laughed, stale bread in one hand and a picnic blanket in the other. Either way, she let him sketch and continued budgeting her spare dollars in mason jars.

I'd seen him inspired by an invention before, but that night was different somehow. He had barely left the basement for weeks, and when I did see him, he looked strange. His cheekbones protruded, skin sporting a waxy sheen, and his face was sallow. His eye sockets were sunken and dark, as if bruised, but his eyes...they were thrilling. They were electric in a way that I'd never seen before: raw, unbridled.

That night my heart fluttered in my throat. Was he going to show me his invention? Would I be allowed, finally, into the wonderland of his basement? What would it look like? I imagined beakers filled with sparkling, vibrant liquids, rabbits hopping in hanging enclosures. But we didn't turn towards the basement. Instead, we crept towards the guest bedroom. I held my breath as we ascended the stairs noiselessly. He grinned, opening the door with exaggerated caution, and I watched with wide eyes as he pried open the window. Awkwardly, he swung his lanky legs out and over the sill. Perched on the roof and grinning mischievously, like a child, he turned to me.

"Don't tell your mom," he whispered, holding his arms out to me.

He lifted me out onto the roof and into the humid night air. Then he lay down right there, sprawled out under the immeasurable expanse of the night sky. I scrambled down next to him. The gritty asphalt shingles pricked my elbows.

"This is what I wanted to show you, Claire. Look up," he said. The moon was huge and pearlescent, hanging dangerously close to earth. The stars were close enough to taste. I sighed.

"Isn't it amazing?" he breathed.

"Yeah. I wish every night could be like this," I murmured.

"But they won't be," he said softly. I turned to look at him, taken aback. He shifted to peer at me, and there was that glint in his eyes, that dark, obsessive excitement that was beginning to frighten me a little.

"But if you could go back in time," he continued, "you could revisit this moment, again and again, as many times as you want."

I sat up.

“You would never have to wish for nights like these again, Claire.”

“What are you talking about?” I asked, but I already knew.

“It’s my invention! The Time Machine!” he exclaimed, folding his arms under his head in self-satisfied way, beaming up at me. I rolled my eyes, propping my elbows beneath me. I only realized he was serious when he remained silent, his eyes shadowed and searching beneath his brows.

“Mhm...” I began.

“No, really! I’m not joking, Claire! So many people have tried before, and I’ve been looking at their attempts, and I think they’ve been going about it the wrong way entirely! I think I know what to do now--how to make it work!” he burst, sitting bolt upright, “I have what they were missing! That old basement is going to be an edifice of science! My Time Machine is going to change...*everything*,” he declared, his voice low and strained. His hands were calloused but still delicate, like an artist’s, when they clasped mine.

“It is going to change the world, Claire. We are going to change the world.”

He radiated excitement. I knew he needed me to believe in him. He needed me. He’d never needed me before. I allowed a small smile, and his eyes were suddenly ablaze with pride.

It was infectious. I giggled, the exhilaration slowly gripping me, stealing my breath.

“I can’t believe it! You’re serious?!” I gasped, and he bobbed his head.

“Why would I lie?”

“You...you can really do it? Do you really think you *can*?”

He put his finger to his lips in caution and nodded vigorously. Then we were laughing, delirious with exaltation.

For a while, we just flopped onto our backs on the roof, beaming up at the stars, and in that moment I could have sworn I was one of them. We both were; so bright and impossibly untouchable. It was as if the future was spilled out before us in the patterns of the Milky Way, and I knew that nobody could look at my face without being blinded. Nobody could touch me without feeling that bursting light just beneath my skin, white-hot embers of hope. We were unstoppable.

Suddenly I felt the sensation of eyes on my skin. Of watching. I turned.

The shadow girl was there, standing stock-still on the roof. She was just a dark frame, perched lightly on the shingles, as if she were a ray of light on the verge of vanishing. I couldn’t see her face, but the moonlight illuminated the crescent of a smile. And then she was gone.

It wasn’t exactly threatening, but I immediately felt protective of my father. Was this girl trying to steal his ideas? But no, she couldn’t be. I’d seen her before, a long time ago, in the midst of some sun-sweet memory...

Soon after that, the sounds in the basement changed from the whispering of a pencil to the grinding and shrieking of metal on metal. It drowned out my voice. I tried to keep my excitement fresh--tried to help. On the roof that night, he’d needed me. But as his work drew him closer to a breakthrough, it pulled him further from me.

Years passed. I saw the shadow girl five more times, seven in all. I never knew how to feel about her presence. She just watched. She appeared mostly on

the happiest of occasions, like my high school graduation, and though I never saw her face, she seemed glad for me. At first, I thought she was a ghost. Some sort of lost spirit following me in secret. After a while, I began to think of her as a sort of guardian angel. Even when I couldn't see her, I felt her like a hand on my shoulder. But as my dad became more and more obsessed with his work, her presence became less and less frequent. Though the shadow girl unnerved me, I felt unexpectedly abandoned.

I grew up. Once he began his work on the Machine, he spent more time surrounded by cords and wires and plates of metal than he did with any human being. Eventually, mom and I moved into a different house with a roof much too slanted to sit on and stargaze. It was a tiny house. Mom planted vibrant flowers and crawling ivy everywhere, and the effect was that of an old-fashioned cabin in the woods. It was as if she were trying to ward off technology completely. The new house had no basement.

For a while, it seemed as if my father hardly existed. Mom and I would sit on the threadbare couch in the new house, sipping tea and pushing pawns across a stained chess board. But my father's personality was so sharp, his presence so acute and lively, that his absence was just as palpable. We tried to laugh it off, but without his energy, that frantic scrambling for answers surrounding us, it seemed like we had no direction.

Between the bell-notes of my mother's laughter, I could hear him. In the moments when her eyes weren't fixed on me, I could see him. In the space between her words, in the silence between her heartbeats, in the early mornings when she pushed her coffee cup away from her and cast her eyes towards the lake, I could feel him. She could, too, and I guess that's why she died. When she stopped eating, I knew that she was already gone. My father wasn't at her funeral. I faced it, robbed by time and dreams and a basement.

But I wasn't completely alone. The shadow girl was there beside the coffin, just before the friends and distant cousins spilled in with flowers and perfumed sympathy cards. I barely caught a glimpse of her as I turned into the reception room. One long-fingered hand was cupping a rose bud, but she disappeared too quickly for me to see much else. She'd pulled one of the petals free when she fled, though, and I clutched that petal in my fist throughout the entire funeral. It was damp and creased, but it was my companion.

As time passed, I barely saw my father. I knew his health was slowly worsening as his obsession grew, but even so, I rarely visited. He never called. I occasionally called him, but when we were on the phone he always sounded distant and distracted. I didn't really mind. I called him because he was my only relative left, not because I knew him. Ignoring me was the least painful thing he'd done.

Sometimes, I stared at the peeling plaster ceiling at my mom's house, the house that I now owned, and thought about the days when the plaster was the night sky and my father's eyes weren't hooded and dark. The days when he was just an unsuccessful nobody, with a useless job and a mischievous grin, a knack for stargazing and a fistful of stale bread. But those days were gone.

When I was 20, the time finally came. My dad called me. I answered on the first ring, sure there was an emergency.

"Dad?" I asked, my blood rushing audibly.

"It's finished," he whispered. His voice was thin from disuse.

“What?” I asked blankly. I could hear his breath through the speaker, shallow and tense.

“The Machine. Come over now.”

I sped through every red light on the way to my parents’ old house, weaving between cars. When I got there, he was sitting in the front lawn, looking comically out of place. His skin was practically transparent, and he had lost an enormous amount of weight, his bones jutting like knives. He was skeletal, but the gleam in his eyes was stronger than I had ever seen. A feeling of unease beleaguered me. The grass, unkempt and shaggy, had grown long and yellow.

Inside, the house was almost exactly as mom and I had left it. Except, of course, for the dust. An old telescope sat by the window, and a few of my stuffed animals lay discarded on the carpet. It was like an abandoned building--a ghost town. Our lives, frozen in place and left to wither. I wondered for a moment if dad had even noticed when mom and I left.

My heart hammered in my chest as I walked down the basement steps for the first time. I’d always thought my first time in his secret study would be an exciting, enchanting moment. Standing in the simple cement room, I felt numb.

My father’s creation was in the center of the space. The Time Machine was oddly small and simple. Just a box, a metal cube really, veined with a labyrinth of gleaming wires and glowing buttons. It was barely big enough to hold a person. I knelt in front of it, staring at the countless years of tireless work, the memories of my dad I would never have because of this box. It had stolen them from me.

“How would you like to be the very first time traveler?” I heard him ask, his voice distant. There was a clicking noise as the door swung open on well-oiled hinges, and the hum of electricity washed over me. I folded myself into the tiny box, knees to my chest, the coolness of the metal seeping through my shirt.

“When do you want to go?” he asked. I already knew the answer. This box had taken my mom, crushed the breath from her lungs. It had robbed me of all those memories I should have had with my dad. Now, it was going to give them back to me.

“April 10th, 2020,” I said hollowly. “My fifth birthday.”

The machine clicked and thrummed as my dad pushed the buttons and shut the door, locking me into the darkness.

When I got out, it was all exactly as I remembered it. The quiet ripples on the pond. The ducks gliding across the water. The picnic blanket and the little girl, and that laughter. I could hardly make them out beneath their shelter, that mud-smearing blanket. I still didn’t catch what we were laughing about, but we were together.

Five-year-old me did something unexpected then. She peeked over the blanket. I saw her eyes find me.

Right then I knew that I would never stop visiting myself. I would appear on the roof of my house, at my high school graduation, and every moment in between. I would never go back to the bleak present. What was left for me there? I knew then that when the Machine was finally destroyed, I would remain.

She didn’t see much. A flash of dark hair, the length of my fingers. But I knew what I had become from that moment on. A shadow.