

Clarity

The wind blew patches of light across the ground, chasing down the valleys and across the ridges. Each house had its moment of light between long stretches of shade. Except for one. The two story house beside the gas station was illuminated all day long, as if it lay below a long twisting river of cloudless sky among the swirling gray masses above. You would have to have stood looking at it for hours to notice, and no one paid it that much attention. A surveyor measuring the boundaries of the gas station remarked to his assistant that the house seemed to catch the light more than its neighbors, but after an hour they moved on. And no one watched the house at night, when the wind continued, and the house stayed anchored in its river under a full moon, spotlighted while all around it passed from black to silver.

A week later, though, the stray remarks and casual observations had come together and added up. People started noticing, and driving by to see. There was a little note in the paper, and the radio weather forecaster mentioned it. Even during a week of continuous cloud cover number 25 Noel Road was never in the shade. Two weeks later, at the next full moon, it snowed and a team from a national television network did a time-lapse film of the house from a hilltop over forty eight hours, the constantly changing streaks of gray and black twisting around thin streaks of white which wander randomly across the landscape but always include that one point, with its six small windows.

No one remarkable lived in the house. No prophet, no psychopath, no person of extraordinary virtue. A retired teacher and her husband, occasionally one or another of their three children, and a lodger, who worked as a bank teller, and had very little coherent to say to reporters except that she had come to the city two years before and spent most of her evenings watching animal

programs on television. One reporter took her out to dinner, one cloudless night. A frustrating experience; she didn't have any idea that when you are with someone they expect you to talk to them. She did reveal one interesting fact, though. She was pregnant. The reporter mentioned this to a colleague, and she did some calculations. Miriam's pregnancy seemed to have begun in late March. The unshadowing of the house had begun around then. The baby would be due in the middle of December.

A pattern is not obvious till someone makes it so. It took a long time till someone put it into words, either because the link was too unlikely or because it was something that people were afraid to think. When the thought finally crystallized it was as a headline in the *National Reporter*. MESSIAH DUE AT CHRISTMAS. Of course Christ would choose his own birthday to be born, and of course the location of his gestation would be marked as a very special place. And if not Him, then something equally special, a prophet, a savior, a Buddha, someone. Once the threshold had been crossed the matter could be discussed in more respectable places. It was interesting to calculate the tiny though non-zero probability that in all the swirls and contortions of the clouds and through all the angles left by the paths of the sun and the moon one spot on the planet should not be shaded for n days. The number is extremely small when n approaches a hundred, as it was when the calculation was first made: just one of these unlikely events that happen all the time. When n approached two hundred the probability is a power of tiny, in other words next to zilch. Respectable opinion just bided its time, while masses of people began to gather around the house, taking photos, buying souvenirs, eating meals from the food vans that parked along the street.

Miriam never went out. She took pregnancy leave from the bank and stayed home, living on free deliveries from Gabe's pizzeria, which found its business tripling with the public knowledge that it was the food of the future whatever this would be. The public was not disappointed. It snowed in the third week

of December; the house stayed illuminated, day and night. Miriam's contractions began early on the twenty fourth, and around eleven pm an ambulance arrived. She walked to it, refusing the offer of a stretcher. The crowd reluctantly made way. The more thoughtful among them wondered what would happen when she left the house. Would the illumination now be on the house or on her? The clouds shifted so that sharp cold moonlight lit the snow all around the house, and the crowd, and the road, and the hospital. It became a cloudless night.

The ambulance howled to the hospital. The drivers noticed that one of them was called Sheppard and another LeBeouf. The media panted on its trail behind. Miriam was rushed into the maternity wing. Half an hour later the clouds began to gather, leaving a hole in the sky through which the light of the moon, as if gathered and focused by the hole, bathed half the hospital in an intense yellow-grey light.

The baby was born; the midwife put her in her mother's arms; the bed with mother and baby was wheeled to a ward; the midwife changed and took a back exit to the parking lot to avoid reporters; the nurses put away the unneeded anesthetic and fetal monitoring equipment, and went out the front door amid a crowd of other hospital staff just as a bus arrived; the nurses aides stripped the bed and strolled over to the cafeteria in the other wing of the hospital. On the way they delivered the packaged placenta to a freezer, in a bin with the name of a cosmetics company.

Drop a single bead of thick cream into a glass of dark coffee, and stir, very slowly and steadily so that you can see what happens. The bead stretches and swirls, swelling in some places and contracting in others. Sometimes it contracts so much that it divides into two new strands, so before long no part of the coffee is far from a patch of white. But there is no patch of white that does not trace to the original bead, and no patch ever disappears, small and

twisted and dispersed though it may become. The bead of light pouring through the cloud onto the hospital was stirred by the wind, dividing into strands lighting one particular hospital window, one blue Saab 900 with psychedelic stickers in the parking lot, one bus leaving the bus stop, and most of the cafeteria wing. The wind continued to stretch and fragment these patches of light, as people met people and passed on to them their previously rarer illumination, until everywhere and everyone, for some longer or shorter time, was lit by a clear ray of moon or sun, shining through a gap in the cloud whose history of twistings and divisions traced it back to the light that had originally shone on the two story house beside the gas station.