

Summer 1996

Brilliant Lighting Effects

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SHIRLEY STEPHENSON

BRILLIANT LIGHTING EFFECTS

It was the summer I choreographed roller skating routines to Abba. The same year my mother taught me how to dilute my father's bottles of scotch and I couldn't get the chorus out of my head. When we returned from the market my brother's pick-up was already loaded and mother dropped her carton on the garage floor. He knelt on the lawn and said *kiddo, I'm leaving for California and never coming back*. All the neighborhood girls were there and I thought: what if we had matching costumes. The milk ran through an oil stain and under the mat. My mother said *please* and *money* but he had already turned the corner. You can't fool anyone with an upbeat letter. I took his Book of Lizards for myself. It was two days before the Fourth of July, *a holiday like any other*. Now I was in charge of counting how many drinks he had before the guests arrived. *Boys got the muscles, teachers got the brains*. All the neighborhood girls had just one face. It was the summer he set aside his plate of Hawaiian casserole and said *You'll always be my little girl, my little virgin*. It's never really safe to breathe. The chameleon is most adaptable. He said the view of the fireworks would be better from the boat so we piled in the orange Oldsmobile and drove to Monroe Street Harbor. I thought: what if we pinned string to our leotards, like fringe, like flappers. In the car my mother held a tray of cupcakes on her lap and whispered *five at home and two for the road*. The most versatile. One morning my father saw me in my nightgown and he cried. *My God. You've stopped eating*. He wrapped his arms around me and held my

bones. He said we both needed help. No he didn't. *But girls got the sexy legs so we win the game.* I could barely remember the color underneath the new wallpaper. There were millions in Grant Park and firecrackers waited on the barges. I thought: what if we made stars out of silver duct tape and stuck them to our chests? From my bedroom window, I watched him pad down the driveway in his yellow robe and stoop for the paper. I felt thinner after sleep. *Two for the road and five at home.* If mornings could last all day. My mother took their friends to park the car and he held my hand in the crowd. Blood never guarantees a pleasant dinner. My father slid the rowboat off the pier and said *hold it steady* but I knew I couldn't and when the hull flipped his head banged against the steel pilings. *It was a holiday like any other.* Sometimes changing color two or three times per minute, if necessary. The second time he surfaced, I dropped to my stomach and grabbed for his hands. In summer, all the neighborhood families traveled to landmarks. His head opened. The air exploded, sulfured. My brother knelt on the lawn and said *kiddo*— No one could hear me over the foghorns and water taxis. It was the summer she wanted to change everything to neutral tones. Blend, calm. When they pulled my father from the lake he said *look, she's trying to kill me.* Only one person on the pier laughed. I thought: what if we had matching everything.