

AZIMUTH AND ALTITUDE

by Erica Plouffe Lazure

You have reached the home of Juniper Weaver. Please leave a message after the tone.

Junie? It's Shirl. Don't think for a minute Mama doesn't know it was you snitching at the butter again. It couldn't be anyone else. She called me just now and told me what you were up to. Asked if I could talk sense into you. You. A grown woman. Still sneaking butter from Mama's fridge.

I guess you decided not to stay with her tonight, even though I couldn't be there, me all laid up at the doctor's with my broken leg. It's a shame, because I bet she would've liked you sitting out on the porch with her. I bet you would've liked it, too. It's the only time of day when she doesn't talk. I remember when we were little, how we'd look out over the hillside at the red blinking lights from those towers. Do you remember those names we'd give them? *Fire, Zap, Power, Blinky*. They're so pretty, all red and twinkling, blinking at us in the dark, winking up at the airplanes like barmaids or something. And those times when a plane did fly by at night and we'd yell up at the pilots telling them not to hit the towers, even though those planes flew so high at night you could have stacked one tower on the other and they still would've never hit.

For a long time, when we were really little, you thought those lights were red stars. Then you decided they were planets, then fireflies. *Fire-lights*, you called them, and you'd reached toward them and once you nearly fell off the porch. You were all clean from our bath, smelling like talc in your pajamas with the plastic soles that made your feet sweat. Your hands were so small then. And you'd reach out and those lights would blink off every time you tried and sometimes you'd cry because you could never get them. And this one time Papa came out to smoke and you asked him, "What are those *firelights*?" And he said, "They's beacons."

"Like a bird's nose?" you asked, because you were too little then, and

I guess I was too, to know what a beacon was. It made sense for you to think: Bird's Nose, when you heard the word beacon, even though everyone knows beaks aren't noses. And me, I thought he'd said bacon, and I laughed and laughed and laughed at the idea of bacon, flaming red on a tower. I breathed a little deeper, pretending maybe I'd smell it sizzling in the night sky. Oh, I know you're thinking, of course *you'd* be thinking of bacon. What with that baby fat still with me some thirty years later. As Mama says, Junie, my stomach comes first. I've stopped blaming her for overfeeding me all those years. I figure it's the one way she can show me her love.

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If you're listening to this message, I know you're probably blushing by now. You always turn red every time I say those old words we used to use, like *Bird's Nose* and *Bacon* and *Baby Fat*, like I know you probably blushed when Mama asked if you snitched butter from the fridge.

I understand how you can't help how you are. I guess it's natural for you to want butter, like it's natural for me to want bacon and sugar and all the things the doctor tells me not to eat. I guess I've got Pa's genes. But I wonder about you and the butter, sometimes, because when we went to see you at that first apartment you had – it must have been six years ago now because Pa had driven us there – do you remember how I kept drinking all that cold water from your fridge? You kept saying stuff like, "Boy, Shirley, there's no camel in all Arabia with more water in him than you!" And I laughed because I could just imagine my head and a camel's body, the big solid hump full of water caravanning some genie Arabian princess through the desert.

I admit I drank all that water because I was curious about the butter. And we weren't three minutes on the freeway home after we had to leave because Pa kept breaking things in the living room, when my bladder gave its four-alarm warning and Pa had to pull off the road and I had to drop it all behind the sign for Beulaville. I still think of all the people on the highway that day who saw me squatting with my pants around my ankles. I still have it in my head that, some day, when I'm in town, or out at the grocery store, that a cute boy with a nice car will come up to me

and say, “Hey, I think I saw you once, up on I-40? Near the Beulaville exit?” Because if he saw all that and still liked what he saw and thought to go out of his way to find me and to mention it, maybe my search for your butter would have a point.

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But the funny thing is, is that I don’t recall seeing a single block of butter in your fridge. Not next to the Oriental takeout containers, not in the egg bin, not even behind the box of salad, the box of juice, the box of milk. So many boxes. The soy sauce and relish. All those pill bottles. But no butter. I thought at first maybe you’d eaten it all before we got there. And then I thought it was strange because I thought for sure it was your favorite food. I know that if I had my own place, for sure I’d load up my cabinets with the Cap’n Crunch, bacon and eggs, and butterscotch Moon Pies.

But then here is Mama calling me at the hospital, calling me when the doctors say I should be resting, and all she can do is complain about your tine marks in the butter. I told her she should pay more attention to you and less to the butter, seeing how little you get to visit. I told her, “Give Junie the whole stick if she wants it,” but you know her. Waste not, and all that. And I know you; you’d never admit you so much as took a lick of that butter. Still the fork tines telltales you, but I didn’t say that to Mama because it would confirm everything and you and I have never been ones to tell on each other.

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Do you remember that night we couldn’t sleep and we snuck into the pantry and Mama caught you swigging vinegar from the bottle and me eating my tenth packet of the travel sugar that Meemaw used to collect from the IHOP after church on Sundays? Mama in her nighttime curlers and julep mask so bright you could nearly see her face in the dark, like a green skeleton head as she came toward us, and she said she knew what kind of people we’d turn out to be based on the food we stole from

the pantry. I got the feeling, even then, that she used the word “stole” for effect, like it was funny to her or something, her two daughters swilling vinegar and eating sugar. She never did tell us what vinegar said about you, sugar me. And I asked her once and she said she didn’t remember ever saying that. It’s like hearing that a fortune teller has news for you, but then she never gives it out or tells you she forgot.

Don’t you ever wonder what she really thinks about us? Sometimes from what she says to me, I think she wishes you’d stayed at home instead and that I’d left. But that makes no sense, for you to waste all your brains and your good body to look after some old lady, even if she is your mother. You’re the one with the chance of finding a husband, not me. And I know you have told me time and again that you like girls, and that it’s a natural thing for two women to fall in love. And I believe it. I just can’t help Mama to understand it because all she wants is a grandchild and I don’t think she sees me as mothering material. And you’re all busy with your life uptown, reading books, teaching painting at the community college, loving women instead of men. And making no babies.

Say what you want about Mama, after all these years she’s still sharp enough to note the tine marks in the butter.

Even though I asked one of the nurses, there’s no room in the hospital that faces the hillside and I feel a little sad on account of it. I’ve been here going on three days and I never thought I’d miss going out on the front porch at home to watch those red lights. I still count the seconds between each blink, like we used to do when we were little, try to catch the pattern from one red tower light to the next. If you’d bothered to stay at home with Mama tonight, you would’ve seen that they added two new towers, up toward the North. You would’ve seen that they blink at the same time once every hour. But just once.

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I know there’s been a lot of talk about this broken leg of mine, and I’ll just tell you about it directly so you don’t have to wonder. Well, I was sitting out on the porch, and it was so dark and pretty and I was just enjoying those red lights, and the real stars. The air was really clean,

too, like the breeze carried whiffs of something alive in the hillside and it was making its rounds to all the neighbors. And I saw a little golden light turn on, right near the base of the fire tower, and the first thing I thought was: fire at the Fire tower. But it was just a porch light, or a campfire, or something, because it didn't move or grow or anything. But it got me thinking that if someone lived in the Fire tower, or even near it, and they cared to look south-ways toward us, they'd never know we lived here. And it seems unfair, don't you think, that we could be so aware of these towers, these lights, for practically our whole lives and that no one living near those towers would ever know about us back. That to them, we'd be just part of that landscape of rolling black; part of, I don't know, the great nothing the world becomes around here at night, except for these red points of light that shine and glow and wink up at those airplane pilots.

So it got me thinking: what if you realized you *could* shine and you *chose* not to? That all you had to do to get noticed was flip a switch and the whole world, if it cared to look, could see you, could know you were alive. Fireflies have been mating that way for years. It's how they find love. So why not make the effort? Maybe some love will come out of it, right? It's like how you know someone has been around; by the clues they leave behind. Like how I know you've been home when the butter block no longer looks like the last thing to touch it was a knife.

So what I did was find the lights from Christmas boxes in the attic. I started with the crepe myrtle. Then the mailbox. Then the porch. Then the lower branches of the magnolia, even though I know we've been saying for years it needs to be cut. That's when I thought about the rabbit ears up top the house. You can't deny it would make our part of the constellation here on the hill a whole lot brighter. Maybe the pilots will look down from their 747s or their Cessnas and see our glow and they'll think, *There's the golden Eye of the Mewborn Andromeda. There's the tip of the handle of the Little Dipper!*

Well, sorry for me that it all backfired. Sorry for me that I didn't think about waiting until daylight to make the house glow, that I didn't think how the roof would be slick with nighttime dew, that I'd slip off it and break my leg and bust my elbow. After that old ladder fell on me, my left eye looks like the shiner you gave me in middle school when you found out that I'd given my underwear to the seventh grade boys, and

they stuck it on your head during health class. I am still sorry for that, sorry you had to smell my privates on your person. I could not have predicted that would happen. I know we said we forgave each other, but strange things happen sometimes and they never leave you. Like when you cut yourself open, you are fine after, mostly, but the scar still stays, and you can't help but run your finger over and over it to remind yourself that you're not hurt anymore. And it's true. Even with the scars you can't see: you're not hurt anymore, but you can't forget either, however there's no place to put your fingers as a reminder. I was always grateful you never told mom I gave my underwear to the boys that day, even though I wasn't sure if it was because you were too ashamed, or because we were a Secret Sister team, that something special united us, just like something special united our parents.

Mom never would answer any question we asked until she'd talked it out with Dad first. And it's not like Dad was any king of judgment, the way he got so out of control with his six packs and his smokes. Like those times when he rushed at you in the dark, and all you could see was the glowing ash coming from his mouth, smell the trail of smoke coming from his clothes, his hair. I was glad for that cigarette because even though I hated his smoking, you could never otherwise tell where he was headed. Those cigarettes saved us. I think about it now and maybe even if we were a Secret Sister team back then, that maybe you were ashamed of me deep down, ashamed of our family. Like Dad chasing you around the yard was nearly the same thing as me handing out my underwear to the boys, and it held up some sort of mirror about who we were. That maybe we weren't the perfect and loving and helpful family of four that Mama likes to keep on top of the television set, framed. All of us wore some shade of red the day that picture was taken because it brought out how blonde we all were.

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Last I saw, you'd dyed your hair red and called it auburn. And you know my hair is kind of an ugly blonde-brown now. "The color of blah," Mama likes to say. She still clips coupons from the Sunday paper and sets them on my breakfast plate every time she sees one for a Nice 'n'

Easy discount. But I heard those hair chemicals can give you cancer, and there's no sense killing yourself over self-improvement, even if I was inclined to go blondie-blonde like I used to be. It seems silly to think those people in the picture are the people we are today. Pa's not even around to compare it. Sometimes I go visit him up back the house. Sometimes I kick his gravestone because we both know he deserves it. And sometimes I cry about him being gone.

I remember Pa once told me I must have been a mariner in another life, always looking for the lights to guide me. One Christmas he made me a present of a map of the lighthouses along the Carolina coast. It was the only gift he ever gave me. I think he got it that time he went on that fishing trip to Hatteras with his friends. If you care to look next time you visit, the map is still on our old bedroom wall. I memorized the shape and stripe of each lighthouse a long time ago. They're like codes so you know where you are on the ocean, without having to ask anyone outright. And they're all black or white, so you can make out their pattern even at night.

Maybe someday we can take a rowboat out to the ocean together. We could start at the very tip of Hatteras, down at the Frying Pan Shoals and row all the way up to the Currituck Lighthouse in Corolla. And we could sleep all day in the sun and row at night, with the help of a lantern. And all those lighthouse tenders would see our little light and flash us a signal now and again, in Morse code or whatever they use to send their messages. We'd have to learn it. There's no secrets you could keep on the water if you know the code. I wonder if any of those tenders ever thought to tell a joke to those old sailors using the lighthouse light. I guess it would be hard to tell a joke using the light from a lighthouse. Can you imagine, sending out the punch line letter by letter? You'd probably figure it out before they were done spelling.

Pa liked to say, "Jokes got to come quick or not at all." I might not make a good lighthouse tender. They must spend a lot of time alone. And I know I'd be craggy if I never got to tell a good joke now and again, even if I had to tell it slowly and in code form. History shows you don't laugh at any jokes anymore. And Mama, she laughs at anything as long as I tell her it's a joke beforehand.

But we had a few good times, didn't we? Those quiet nights on the porch, swapping the knock-knocks in the dark, watching the lights

blink, me playing Meemaw's fiddle sometimes, and then after Pa broke my hand and then the fiddle. Then there were just the lights.

But see, now, how the lights brought you back home, even though you probably would have preferred to stay with your woman friend uptown and leave us be on the hillside. The good part in all this, of me falling, is that at least I was at the tail end of stringing up those lights. All we have to do, you know, when I get home from the hospital, is to find the extension cord from the shed and plug it in. I hope you can come and get me. I may be ready as early as tomorrow, the doctors say, and with you living uptown, it wouldn't be too much for you to come get me when it's dark. And we don't have to talk much to each other, because I know how much you like it quiet. But you know, I'd like to see what the tower lights look like from another view. And then it will all come back as we drive the road to our house, all those good and familiar feelings of home, all the tower lights placed just so, like we've known them to be since we were babies in footie pajamas talking about birds' noses and bacon.

Maybe you'll help me find that old extension cord and we can plug it in together, and we can join the rest of those hillside lights; our one small bright point in the dark. I bet when you drive away you'll be able to see home from your rearview mirror, and you'll see all our old Christmas lights on the rabbit ears, the weather vane and the chimney blinking at you along with the tower lights. Reminding you, like in code, with no words at all: We're here. We're here. And when you get home, I'd love it if you could call me and let me know if it works, if you can really see our lights glowing in the dark, out there with all the others.