A light for the lower room

A complete short story

POCKET PAPER 01
ORIGINAL STUDIO FICTION

Created for the website. Separate from the author’s manuscripts.

The lamp arrived in a crate tall enough for a person. Nera helped the driver ease it through the workshop door, then stood watching while he collected the splinters from her threshold. Under the straw lay a bronze stem, three curved arms and a shade assembled from narrow pieces of amber glass. Someone had tied a numbered label around its neck. The cord was new; the lamp had been old for a long time.

The auction house wanted it ready by Friday. Clean the metal, replace the damaged glass, remove the remains of a paper notice from the base. The instruction sheet described a decorative lamp from a municipal interior. Nera knew the room. She had studied there during the winter when the heating in her flat failed. At closing time, its keeper went from table to table with a wooden ruler, tapping once beside each reader’s book.

The reading room had shut in March. A board across its doors announced improvements without naming any. Through a gap, Nera had seen the long tables stacked on their sides. Now one of its lamps was on her bench. Without the room around it, the object seemed almost embarrassingly elaborate. Laurel leaves climbed the stem. A small bronze moth rested beneath the shade, hidden from anyone standing upright. She had sat under it for months without knowing.

The broken glass was at the back. A thin branch of fractures spread from a screw, held together by a film of yellowed adhesive. The patch below it had been made from plain window glass. On the bench it looked crude. When she set a light inside the shade, however, that small clear patch threw a clean rectangle onto the wood. The amber pieces softened everything else. Someone had repaired a reading lamp so that a reader could see.

Nera worked a damp cloth beneath the paper on the base. Most of the notice came away as grey pulp. Four words remained: PLEASE LEAVE THIS ONE. She remembered the table nearest the stairs, where an elderly man used to spread out diagrams of ships. He carried a magnifying glass on a ribbon. Whenever the keeper rearranged the furniture, he would arrive early and move his chair back beneath the same lamp. She could not remember his name.

At noon, the auction house rang. Had she found matching glass? She had found something close. Could she make the repair disappear? That would take longer. The woman on the telephone said the buyer would expect the lamp to be complete. “It is complete,” Nera said, looking at the bright rectangle. The woman waited. Nera heard how unhelpful she sounded and promised to send photographs. After the call, she put the replacement amber beside the clear patch.

She photographed the shade in daylight and with the lamp lit. Then the bronze moth, the worn switch and the remains of the notice. In the final image she placed an open book under the clear patch. She sent the pictures with two repair options and separate prices. One would return the shade to a uniform amber. The other would retain the clear window and secure the surrounding glass. She expected the first option to be chosen.

The following afternoon, a woman in a rain-dark coat came to the workshop. She had seen the photographs before the catalogue went to print. “Will it stand on an ordinary table?” she asked. Nera measured the base. “A strong one.” The woman looked around the workshop, then at the shade. She said her name was Davin and that she had bought the old bakery on Bell Street. Upstairs would be her flat. The lower room was still undecided.

Nera pictured another immaculate shop: objects positioned far apart, prices written very small. Davin removed her wet gloves. She wanted a table for people waiting while she repaired their clothes. Sometimes they came with children. Sometimes they stayed after the work was finished because they had nowhere they needed to be. A neighbour had offered books, though she was worried about the damp. “I thought a good light might make it a room,” she said.

“You know it has been altered?” Nera asked. Davin nodded towards the plain glass. “That is the bit I liked.” She put her hand under the shade and turned it slowly until the clear patch faced the chair. On the woman’s palm, the light revealed a row of tiny punctures beside her thumbnail. Nera had the same marks from sewing endbands when the workshop still took binding work. She brought out the second estimate.

The auction was on Thursday. Davin was outbid twice and stayed on the telephone longer than she had intended. The next morning she returned without the lamp’s receipt. “Too much,” she said. Nera felt foolish for having imagined the whole lower room. Together they looked at a plain iron task light hanging above the bench. It was for sale, though Nera had never labelled it. Davin asked whether it would illuminate a table. Nera switched it on.

The bronze lamp’s buyer selected the uniform amber. Nera removed the clear patch, wrapped it in tissue and included it with the completed repair, along with a note explaining where it had been. She retained the outline of the paper notice in her condition report. By four o’clock the crate was closed. The workshop seemed smaller with its iron task light gone. She worked beneath a bare bulb until the following Tuesday.

On Tuesday evening she walked to Bell Street carrying a small box of books. The old bakery window had been cleaned, but the painted letters remained above the door. Inside, a boy was doing arithmetic beneath the iron lamp. Two women were sorting buttons into saucers. Davin had found a table with one short leg and folded a square of cardboard beneath it. She looked up from a coat and asked Nera to hold its sleeve.

For a while they worked without speaking. The boy pushed his exercise book aside to make room for the box. Nera thought of the bronze moth travelling somewhere she would never see, and of the clear glass enclosed with it. She hoped the note would be read. Then Davin turned the lamp a little, bringing the torn seam into focus. Nera threaded the needle. Outside, the remaining light drained from the bakery letters. Inside, there was enough.

End.

Notes from reading

A place for a question, an objection or a detail to return to.

A light worth keeping

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