WHERE THEY ARE

ava camello

Ms. Evelyn peered around the half-closed bathroom door. Lucien was still lying on the floor in his new pajamas: this particular set sported trains. She turned back to the mirror and continued brushing her teeth. Swish, spit, check on Lucien, brush, spit, Lucien's still on the floor, brush, swish, spit, Lucien is still —

"Lucien?" Ms. Evelyn called from the bathroom doorway, "Where did you go now?" She put down the toothbrush on the sink counter and stepped into the flickering hallway. "This damned light, they are never going to fix it," Evelyn said with a sigh. She looked left into the neat spare room. Then she looked right at the closed door of Lucien's parents' room. No Lucien.

"Lucien!" She called again, hoping she'd hear a reply. Silence. She stepped into the little boy's room and began to check his regular hiding spots. Behind the door: no luck. In the closet: nope. Ms. Evelyn then stood in front of Lucien's bed and looked down at her feet. He had always feared the dark, but maybe he changed his mind. She knelt and lifted the bed skirt but was met with the silence of nothing. Evelyn stood up and saw little Lucien standing in front of her. "Where did you go?" she asked.

"I'm not sure," Lucien replied with a puzzled look.

"Were you lost again? Because remember what I said, your parents will forgive me the first time, probably again on the second, there is a chance on the third, but absolutely no chance of forgiveness if I lose you a fourth time."

"I remember. I was lost, and I think I still am," he stated, looking down at his shoes.

"Whatever do you mean? You're right here, Lucien. You can't be lost."

He looked up and stared right into Ms. Evelyn's eyes, "That's not what I meant."

"Then what do you mean, dear?" Evelyn started to become worried.

"I'm not quite sure myself. I suppose I don't quite know where I am going."

Ms. Evelyn tilted her head in question, "You mean right now?"

"No, I mean in my life."

Evelyn stopped and began to stare blankly at Lucien's small, chubby face. "I guess — " she hesitated, "I guess I don't quite know either. I guess I'm lost too."

Lucien smiled at this. "Really, Ms. Evelyn?"

Evelyn nodded.

"Then we can be lost together. It gets kinda lonely ya know? Being the only one lost."

"I bet it does. It's getting late, we should get you to bed before your parents get home, okay?" Lucien nodded and crawled into his train-themed sheets with his matching pajamas.

"Ms. Evelyn? Will you read me a story tonight please?"

"Not tonight dear, get some rest." Ms. Evelyn said as she pulled his sheets and comforter to his chin.

"Promise you won't tell them I got lost again. They give me a funny look after you tell them." Lucien squeaked from under his covers.

"I promise," Evelyn said, shutting off the light and watching as the little engine night light illuminated the room. "I promise," she repeated as she gently shut the bedroom door.

An hour had passed since Ms. Evelyn put Lucien to bed and just as she had sat down after cleaning up in the kitchen, there was a knock at the door. Ms. Evelyn figured it was Lucien's parents who may have forgotten their key, it wasn't the first time as they tended to be forgetful. Ms. Evelyn unlocked and opened the tall, mahogany door to reveal nothing but the night sky riddled with stars.

"Who was that?" Asked a little voice from the stairs. Ms. Evelyn turned around to see Lucien rubbing his tired eyes just as the grandfather clock shouted out the time from the living room. "It's midnight. My mommy and daddy should be home to tuck me in now."

'I know dear. I'm sure they're on their way." Ms. Evelyn followed Lucien up the stairs to tuck him back into bed. It was very unlike Mrs. and Mr. Astor to be late; each time Ms. Evelyn had come to watch Lucien, they would arrive back at 11:13 P.M. without fault. She supposed they had gotten talking and lost track of time. They would be home soon, no need to worry. Lucien crawled back into his little train bed, and Ms. Evelyn kissed him on his forehead as she went to nap on the couch downstairs.

"Story?" Lucien asked again in a hopeful voice.

"Not tonight love, get some sleep. Your parents will be back soon to say goodnight." Ms. Evelyn smiled as she closed his bedroom door. As she stood alone under the dim, flickering hallway light, the first wave of worry hit her. Mrs. and Mr. Astor were the most organized, punctual people she had ever met in her life, and there was nothing the pair of them loved more than their little boy. It was strange that they had not arrived home yet, especially since before they left, they promised Evelyn that they would be home early tonight.

As Ms. Evelyn descended the creaky staircase there was another knock at the door. She paused trying to see through the skinny window at the top of the door, but the porch light was off so once again all she saw was the dark of the sky. She continued her way down the stairs, slower this time, careful to not make too much noise. As she reached the door, Ms. Evelyn put her ear against the cold wood to try and hear if there was anyone on the porch, but it was completely silent. She unlocked the door and opened it just enough so she could see the span of the yard. Nothing. No light. No sound. Not even a cricket chirped nor did a lighting bug light. Puzzled and a little frightened, Ms. Evelyn closed the door and made sure it was locked real tight.

She made her way back to the living room and took a seat on the soft linen couch. Evelyn supposed she should stay up as Lucien's parents would no doubt be arriving soon, and she was a bit too spooked to close her eyes. She opened the book she had been enjoying earlier in the night.

The grandfather clock's loud voice struck again, waking Evelyn from her unintended nap. "My goodness, I fell asleep again," she whispered to herself. She awoke to the dark living room and a silent house spare the few natural creaks of an old house settling. Ms. Evelyn supposed Lucien's parents had arrived while she was asleep and chose not to wake her, but she stood up from the couch and decided she should check their bedroom just to make sure. As she climbed the stairs, a thought crossed her mind: she could have sworn she left the lamp in the living room on. Evelyn always leaves a light on because no matter how old she had gotten she was still scared of the dark. She reached the Astor's bedroom door and turned the handle to open it slightly. The room was completely dark. She opened the door wider and flipped on the light. The room was quite messy, with clothes scattered around the floor. They must have forgotten to make their bed, Evelyn thought as she looked at the messy stack of red sheets covering the bed. But still no Mr. and Mrs. Astor. *Oh dear*, Evelyn thought. They most certainly should be home by now. More worried, Evelyn rushed to Lucien's room to make sure he was still sleeping soundly.

The door creaked slightly as Ms. Evelyn pushed it open. But just like his parents, Lucien was not in bed. Extremely worried now, Evelyn began calling the little boy, praying he didn't disappear again. However, her calls were met with the eerie silence of the house. Absolutely beyond worry now, Evelyn rushed downstairs to see if Lucien had made his way down, but as she was descending the stairs another knock came at the door. She completely stopped in her tracks, listening for any signs of someone being on the other side. And for the first time all night, the knocking continued.

The knocks were gentle and came in groups of threes, repeating every couple of seconds. Evelyn stood in her spot at the bottom of the stairs for what seemed like all night. She only worked up the courage to move when the knocks suddenly stopped. Hearing nothing but her breath, she approached the door, unlocking it slowly and opening it only the tiniest bit. To her surprise, Lucien was standing out on the porch. Still wearing his train pajamas. Still rubbing his tired eyes.

"Oh, my goodness! Lucien, how on Earth did you get outside? Are you alright?" she said, flinging the door open and hugging the little boy tight in her arms.

"I was knocking all night Ms. Evelyn. Why didn't you open the door?" Lucien's little voice said right into her ear. Evelyn pulled back in confusion.

"What do you mean love? You were sleeping in your bed. There was no one at the door, I checked twice." Figuring he was just exhausted or sleepwalking, Ms. Evelyn brought Lucien inside away from the cold night. Evelyn locked the door tight and turned around to bring Lucien back upstairs. But in the light of the hall, Lucien looked different from before. His eyes carried large, dark bags and his skin had turned a bright red. "Lucien? What happened to you, dear?"

He looked up at Evelyn with his tired little eyes. "I don't know. You put me to bed and then I woke up outside. I was really cold, and I knocked on the door. But you never answered. Neither did my mommy or daddy. Are they home yet Ms. Evelyn?" Evelyn looked at the little boy very confused.

"No dear, your parents are not home."

"Ms. Evelyn, why aren't my parents' home? Their car is here. Where are they?" She stood up and walked over to the phone to call Mr. and Mrs. Astor.

But Evelyn could not call his parents, she could not make a call if there was no phone to call with. She stepped back from the hallway table where the phone should be. Where it always was. "Lucien. Did you mess with the phone dear?" Evelyn called, still staring at the empty spot on the table.

"No." His voice came from right behind her. "I was outside, remember?"

"Right of course," Evelyn said, still looking around.

"Why are your hands red Ms. Evelyn? Why aren't my parents' home?"

Evelyn paused, unaware of what she should say to the little boy, "I don't know dear I'm sure they'll be here soon."

"You keep saying that Ms. Evelyn. They're not home yet." He said staring into her eyes, his voice nervous.

"Relax dear, I'm sure they're on their way," Evelyn said, making her way into the living room now. She heard Lucien's little footsteps follow her.

"Where are my parents, Ms. Evelyn?" His voice was shaking with fear now.

Evelyn sighed and sat back on the couch. "For the last time Lucien, I don't know. I'm sure they'll be home soon."

"I'm gonna go look for them, is that ok Ms. Evelyn?"

"Yeah, yeah whatever." As moments passed, Evelyn suddenly remembered. "Lucien!" The little boy's voice responded from the hallway. "Your parents are upstairs dear. They're in bed." She heard the footsteps running down the hall and up the stairs. She heard the creak of their bedroom door. She heard the scream of the little boy. "Lucien! Your parents are home. They are asleep upstairs." She made her way up the stairs to Lucien's parents' room. As she stepped inside, she saw Mr. and Mrs. Astor forever asleep in their bed. "How silly am I, I put them to sleep too, Lucien. I must have forgotten dear." Lucien's terrified eyes pierced her, but Ms. Evelyn seemed unbothered. "I'm going to go now, Lucien. I'll see you soon. Goodnight, dear." She walked over to him and kissed his little forehead.

Ms. Evelyn made her way down the stairs, out the front door, and into her car, and as she accelerated into the big oak tree in front of the yard, she said, "They'll be home soon dear, I'm sure they're on their way." ☀