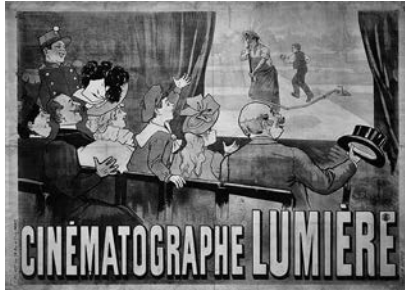


**THE
ELECTRIC
HOTEL**

by
Dominic Smith

The Silver Quickenings



When Claude remembered seeing those first Lumière reels in the basement of a Paris hotel in the winter of 1895, he closed his eyes and smelled the warming nitrates of the celluloid. He recalled the smell of damp wool as the photographic society members brushed snow from their coats, the high sweet chemistry of gelatin on his hands from the hospital darkroom. It struck him that the olfactory world was right there, burned into his memories, while the first glimmer of motion somehow evaded him. Was it a baby eating breakfast or a factory worker astride a bicycle? Was it a street scene or the sight of a woman and four boys plunging into the ocean?

He'd moved to Paris a year earlier, following his older sister as she began treatments for tuberculosis. He'd found a job not far from the consumption institute, working as a photographic apprentice for Albert Londe at La Salpêtrière asylum and hospital. The wards were full of women—hysterics, epileptics, lunatics, the destitute—and his task was to fix images of their behavior. A team of neurologists wanted to uncover patterns and characterize the phases of hysteria and epilepsy or the mounting nervous tics of a compulsive. In the early evenings, when the workday was over, he walked to the consumption ward and sat with Odette and read to her from their father's botanical letters, about his escapades collecting mushrooms and wild herbs

in the woods. As her illness worsened, it was a comfort to picture their father out with the farm dogs and his leather satchel, pulling on his pipe, tramping through the same square mile of northeastern France he'd known all his life.

Claude thought of his widowed father, a fierce patriot, as the Lumière brothers told the gathered members that the invention began with their own father's grudge against the American inventor Thomas Edison. Auguste Lumière did most of the talking, the older brother and commercial manager of the family factory in Lyon that produced fifteen million photographic plates a year. They stood on a makeshift stage in front of a canvas screen, their invention draped under a cloth down in the aisle between the seats.

—You see, friends, Auguste said, some years ago our father went to an exhibition where he saw Edison's crude peepshow device . . .

—The Kinetoscope, added Louis Lumière.

They were both in their thirties, bow-tied in elegant black frockcoats, looking more like wealthy aldermen, it seemed to Claude, than prodigious inventors. He moved his tattered stovepipe hat from his lap to beneath his seat, then he took out a pencil and a leather-bound notebook, the one he used to document his thoughts and photographs at the hospital. He'd been sent to the meeting by Albert Londe to see if there was anything to this new development. Claude wrote down *invention = patriotic grudge*.

—Edison's arcade novelty, Auguste continued, demands that the viewer drops a coin into the slot of a big wooden cabinet and watches through a viewfinder while a tiny motor churns the pictures in front of an electric light bulb. But who wants to hunch over a cabinet all by themselves? Our father heard that Edison wanted to start manufacturing and selling these kinetoscopes in France and he couldn't abide it . . . so he comes to my brother and I with a sample of a kinetoscope reel and a proposition. *Free the light*, he says to us, *and you will make Edison's invention look like a child's trinket and make yourselves rich in the process*.

Claude wrote *I believe you are already rich* in his notebook, then he looked up at the younger brother launching onto the balls of his feet, suddenly brimming and boyish.

—Indeed, we asked ourselves, Louis said, why keep the images cooped up inside a wooden cabinet? What if there was a way to project the views

onto a wall? The technical problem, *alors*, was the movement of the celluloid strip. How to thread at just the right speed, that was the question, and I am happy to report that we solved it as precisely as astronomers using mathematics to locate a new star or planet . . .

Louis put his hands into his pockets and looked down at the floor, as if he'd caught himself prattling to dinner guests.

—My brother is being far too modest and *cosmique*, said Auguste. During one of his bouts of insomnia, he has suffered nervous complaints and headaches his whole life, you see, regardless, one night he stumbled downstairs and took apart our mother's sewing machine and began to copy the mechanism that pulls the hem of a garment under the grip of the churning needle. She was not very happy, I can assure you, but the claw mechanism Louis designed was our great huzzah! In a way, gentlemen, you could say that we learned how to stitch light together . . . heavens, now I am the one being *cosmique* . . .

An older society member in the front row, an optician from the Latin Quarter with a monocle, folded his arms and bellowed up at the stage.

—Perhaps, esteemed brothers, now that you've stitched so many words together we can we see the damn thing work?

Auguste smiled weakly and bent into a continental bow. He gestured for Louis to take his place down in the aisle with the covered contraption.

—The public exhibition will be after Christmas, said Auguste, so we'd appreciate your discretion until then. Behold, gentlemen, the *cinématographe*: a working camera, projector, and printer. A photographic trinity, if you will. Amusez-vous bien!

Claude expected Louis to remove the cloth with a stage magician's flourish, but the younger brother delicately lifted each corner and revealed the machine by degrees. Claude cleaned his spectacles with a silk cloth and put them back on. He was sitting on the end of a row, and as the gaslight sconces were dimmed he leaned into the aisle to study the device. It resembled a wooden sawhorse with a ten-inch box camera mounted on one end and a metallic lamphouse on the other. There was a hand-powered crank on one side of the camera and a narrow strip of silver-black film coiled onto a spool above. Louis Lumière opened a hatch on the lamphouse and lit the limelight, then he began to steadily turn the hand crank, the air sharpening with quicklime and emulsion. Claude would remember his

eyes smarting and a swallow, a moment of suspension before everything changed.

A space opened out behind the stage, a catacomb of dappling motion and light. Dozens of workers came silently bustling through the wall of the hotel basement, surging between the enormous metal doors of a factory at the end of a day, a man astride a wobbling bicycle, women in hats and sturdy shoes with aprons and baskets, a brown dog circling and tail-wagging in the foreground. They were all suspended in midair, slightly jittered and staccato in their motions, accelerating toward evening, as if under the unwinding tension of a spring, toward dinners and children, toward taverns and lovers. Claude felt their humanity in his chest, the headlong plunge toward home, even as he thought of a million drops of mercury teeming on the surface of a daguerreotype, a chemical rain that somehow atomized and animated these figures to life.

When a horse-drawn carriage barreled out of the factory's darkened, gaping mouth, the optician in the front row gave a start, threw up his hands and dropped his monocle as the horse veered toward him. Another member, a funeral photographer not much older than Claude, stood up and began to ghost toward the screen, a sleepwalker roused by otherworldly music. He drifted down the aisle, right by Louis Lumière, and suddenly his monstrous shadow crossed into the projector's arc and was pinned against the wall, blotting out the factory scene to a volley of French insults and expletives. The first matinee heckle, Claude would think in years to come. The forty-six-second reel came to an end and Louis began to thread another, looping the strip of shining celluloid between a series of spools.

Later, Claude would forget the exact sequence of the views. A prankster with a garden hose; a congress of photographers arriving by boat in Lyon with their equipment; a baby being held up to the rim of an enormous glass bowl filled with goldfish, a grinning, white-frosted monster wobbling above her watery domain. There was a reel, perhaps the final one, consisting of a woman and four boys, probably her boisterous, wiry sons, running out along a wooden plank in their bathing suits and jumping into the gunmetal sea. Each of the ten reels was less than a minute long, just long enough to peer into the crevice of a human life, but they would all run together in his mind,

a confluence that came bursting over him like shards of recovered memory. And although the order of the images remained hazy, he would never forget the revelation that fell through him as he sat in the half light, the sound and smell of Louis hand-cranking the shimmerings of existence in front of the limelight.

O-mouthed, transfixed, Claude watched the screen, but he also felt some part of him pulling away to his childhood in Alsace, to the autumn his mother died of smallpox while he lay in bed with his own fever. The fever had distorted his vision and he could remember lying up under the eaves of the attic as the shapes of the room fell out of focus. For a month, while his mother slipped away in the room next door, the edges of objects began to slowly quake and fringe. When the village doctor finally sent him to an ophthalmologist, a bearded man who spoke gravely of the fever warping his corneas, Claude emerged with a wire-frame prescription wrapped behind his ears and it was suddenly as if he'd swum to the surface of a very deep lake. The world rushed back in as the coppered edge of an October leaf, the crinoline hem of his teacher's skirt, the yellow-white flange of a chanterelle mushroom on his father's foraging table. And with each new Lumière reel, that was the sensation he had now, of being startled from of a haze. He was a diver emerging from the murky, myopic depths into a bell jar of crystalline edges and forms.

The fever and his mother's death turned him into a devout watcher the year he turned eleven, the bespectacled, motherless boy at school who was always flitting his eyes between a sketch pad and the horizon, who fell in behind his father and the dogs as they collected and foraged some order back into the callous universe. Seeing the woman jump into the ocean in one of the reels he thought of his mother's habit of alpine swimming, the way she grimaced before the icy plunge but always emerged shivering and roaring with joy, and then he imagined her all these years later on a strip of celluloid, swimming, laughing, waving, forty-five seconds of her tenure on the planet. Nothing would ever be the same in the photographic world, Claude understood as he watched. Magic lanterns had been used for centuries to project mechanical slides, but they were glimpses through a keyhole, a shifting geometric pattern or resolving image. In each Lumière view, every inch of the screen was alive and it was the background of fluttering leaves, or

rippling waves, or drifting clouds that captivated the eye as much as the foregrounded subject. You burrowed into the screen, dug it out with your gaze. In the span of ten minutes, in a hotel basement, the still image and the projected slide had become the slow-witted cousins to this shimmering colossus.

At the end of the screening, while the members of the photographic society continued to sit in awed silence, the brothers turned up the gaslight sconces and discussed their plans for the invention from the stage. They wanted to hire a small army of concession agents to proselytize the cinématographe into the far corners of the world, a grand tour of sorts, to beat Edison at his own game of colonizing human appetites and curiosities.

—The Lumière concession agents, Auguste said, will project views of Paris and London and Rome for the locals but they will also make filmstrips of their new surroundings as they travel. They will sell the cinématographes and filmstrips to showmen and photography buffs alike. Imagine, if you will, a tribe of Esquimaux or the bushmen of the Australian desert or the philosophers of Buenos Aires seeing their own lives glowing back at them.

—Now, said Louis, we would be happy to take your questions.

Not a single member of the photographic society raised a hand. In a sense, they'd been leveled by what they'd witnessed. To ask how the sprockets fed the loop inside the box camera, or whether electricity could be used to fuel the lamphouse, or where the cinématographe could be purchased, was to quibble with wonder. To ask about the mechanics was to grind the air with so much noise. After a long enough silence, the members began to reclaim their coats and hats, the first cigars were lit, and Claude heard one of the veteran members say *I don't know what that was, but it has weakened my heart considerably*. Claude stayed in his seat, cleaned his glasses again as if it might polish his thinking, and stood in the aisle. As he came toward the Lumière brothers he realized there were tears on his cheeks and he paused to dab them away with his sleeve.

—Were you moved by the views, young man?

Auguste asked it with a note of fatherly concern in his voice.

—More than I can say, Claude said.

Louis, who'd begun to roll up the canvas screen, looked over at Claude.

—I must learn how to make my own views.

There was a slight stammer in Claude's voice.

—What is your name? asked Auguste.

—Claude Ballard, sir.

—Do you have any experience with photography? Louis asked.

The brothers studied Claude at the lip of the stage, his wrinkled stovepipe hat in his hands.

—I work as a photographic apprentice at La Salpêtrière, under Albert Londe.

Auguste gave an affirming nod and reached into his coat pocket. On the back of a business card, he wrote down the name of an optical store on the Left Bank. Then he wrote *Noon on March 1, 1896* and handed the card to Claude.

—Ask for Yves at the optical shop. He will make you a licensed cinématographe.

—And the date?

—If you come back here at that time, we will be hiring our first concession agents. Make some views for us to watch and we would be happy to consider you.

—What should I photograph?

—Surprise us, Louis said. That is the only requirement.

Claude noticed Auguste Lumière studying his scuffed shoes and the frayed felt of his hat brim. He felt himself flush in the scone light and looked down at the floor. He put the card into a deep pocket of his shapeless coat, forced his eyes back up at the brothers, thanked them for their demonstration, and rushed for the stairwell. Auguste called after him.

—And tell Albert Londe that he might grace us with his presence some time, instead of just sending his apprentice. Tell him that we just showed you the goddamn moon and stars!

Claude took the stairs two at a time, rushing out into the glittering cold Parisian daylight. His glasses fogged in the open air and for a moment the street came at him as if through a sheet of ice, everything muted, the pedestrians living as dashes and daubs of color. He stepped under a tobacconist's awning to let his glasses defog. As he stared through his freshly

cleared lenses, he found himself already auditioning passersby for reels—the shopgirls bundling along, arm in arm, their breath smoking in the chill as they gossiped, the butcher hauling a marbled side of beef over his shoulder behind a glass storefront, the ravaged old flâneur idling along with a spaniel and a cane and a wilting flower in his lapel.

Claude entered the fray of the street again, wending his way back toward the hospital. In the photographic plate of a clothier's window he saw his own image fixed, saw himself the way the Lumières or a Parisian passerby might—a tall provincial kid in a stovepipe hat too tight in the brim, a slouching sack coat and wrinkled black wool trousers, a bespectacled, unblinking expression that was earnest, if he was being kind, and hangdog if he was being honest. For a year, he'd wanted to believe his wiry build and high-bridged nose might distract Parisians from his mawkish clothes and big-knuckled hands shoved into his trouser pockets, but he understood now that he looked like he'd borrowed a fat uncle's funereal suit. He peered into the store window at a rack of tailored nankeen jackets, a walnut table of neckties, a wall of brogues the color of brandy and oxblood. He combed through the voluminous pockets of his coat, counted out his money, including part of next month's rent, and stepped through the clothier's doorway. His prodigious future, he felt sure, involved a Nile-blue necktie.



When Claude returned to the hospital in a mushroom-colored jacket with a blue silk necktie and caramel-colored shoes, the doctors and nurses of the neurology wing took notice. As he walked down the long white corridor, one nurse called him Casanova, another called him a duke of the provinces, and a physiologist, a bespectacled, dapper dresser in his own right, said *welcome aboard!*

Albert Londe's secretary said he was in meetings, so Claude decided to finish developing some plates in the darkroom. This narrow space was his sanctuary. Eyeglasses folded, moving by feel, rinsing and hanging exposures under an amber bulb. It always seemed to him in here that he was graceful and unencumbered, that there was someone with perfect eyesight moving inside him. Only once the prints were dry did he put his glasses back on and

study the distorted postures of hysterics, the knuckled spines and bowed arms. He placed the better images into a dossier for Albert Londe to present to a panel of neurologists.

Today, while a woman's buckled torso dissolved into view from a chemical bath, he felt a thickening line of dread in his throat. He saw himself in the darkroom for the next year while Albert Londe enlisted him to put the cinématographe to gainful medical use. He believed in science, in the photographic study of human movement and disease, but the idea of only making filmstrips of the hobbled and the stricken and projecting them for amphitheaters full of medical students was unthinkable. The Lumières had worked out how to reduce life to an emulsion and smear it onto a narrow strip of celluloid. To limit their invention to hospitals and lunatic asylums use was to miss its point entirely. It was to stage an opera inside a train station.

When he emerged from the darkroom, Albert Londe stood waiting for his dispatch from the monthly meeting of the photographic society. Bearded with his dark hair cropped close to his ears, his coat buttoned almost to the knot of his necktie, a clipboard in his hands, he carried an air of scientific heft and certitude. On the neurology ward, they called him the walrus. Claude was still wearing an apron from the darkroom, but something about his appearance clearly bothered his employer, perhaps the blue necktie flashing above the small island of bromide on his white apron. He searched for something in Claude's countenance.

—Have they done it? he asked. How does it compare to Marey's photographic gun? I doubt they have bettered twelve consecutive frames per second in a single sequence. Am I right?

Claude hesitated, didn't know where to begin. Londe had developed a camera with nine lenses that could render human movement to a tenth of a second. But compared to the cinématographe, it was a painting on a cave wall.

—Well, Ballard? What did you see?

For a moment, Claude wanted to tell him that he'd seen his own future etched into the basement wall of the hotel. He could also imagine telling Londe how the invention parsed the images into a continuous, seamless

stream, that the study of the human figure would never be the same. But when he finally spoke it was to protect what he'd witnessed and felt, to keep it as his own.

—Sadly, sir, I don't believe this will be of interest to your work. In one image, we see Auguste Lumière and his wife feeding their infant daughter a meal. Breakfast, I believe it was, out in the countryside.

Albert Londe broke into a smile, then a chuckle, shaking his head slightly. He touched a brass button on his coat.

—*Vraiment*, babies eating a bucolic breakfast? That is what all the fuss is about? I have long said that the brothers Lumière aren't committed to scientific photography. They are commercialists, factory owners, businessmen . . .

He turned his attention to his clipboard, paged through a handwritten schedule.

—Now, Claude, can you set up the studio for tomorrow morning's studies? We have a delegation of physicians arriving from Vienna.

Claude nodded and watched Albert Londe disappear down the corridor.

It wasn't until he sat with Odette that evening in the consumption hospital that Claude grasped the magnitude of his lie. Within days, or weeks, Albert Londe would hear about the Lumière exhibition from other members of the photographic fraternity and wonder why his apprentice had downplayed its impact. He might hear of Claude coming forward, tears on his cheeks, to ask where to obtain a working *cinématographe*. He felt sure he had sabotaged his own chances at La Salpêtrière, jeopardized the wages that helped pay for Odette's treatments.

He watched his sister as she slept beneath the blue windowpane, night descending over the rooftops of the thirteenth *arrondissement*. Snow flurries whirred above her head, a spinning halo that brought him back to the reels in the basement, to the beautifully calibrated mirage. Her eyes fluttered and she woke coughing, her chest shaking. In the last month she'd become feverish and weak and luminously pale, her long blond hair turning flaxen. The attending physician had been a disciple of the doctor who'd invented the stethoscope, had traveled the world studying pulmonary consumption, insisted visitors cover their mouths and noses with cloth masks, kept the

windows cracked to allow ventilation, but it was clear he'd run aground with Odette's case. The disease was winning.

Claude poured her a glass of water from a jug beside the bed and propped her up with pillows. She took a sip of water, licked her lips, smiled through a sigh.

—Have you joined the circus, mon petit frère?

—I bought some new clothes.

—Father always said you'd become a dandy in Paris. Next it will be absinthe . . . and poems about the sadness of the moon.

On the nightstand lay a bible full of pressed wildflowers, a gift from their dead mother, open to the Book of Psalms. Claude glanced down at a vellum page and read the words *Let me know how transient I am*.

—I saw something today, he said.

—A madwoman pulling her hair out?

Claude shot out a laugh, felt his breath hot against the face mask.

—The walrus sent me to another meeting of the photographic society.

—Did someone bring back photographs of the North Pole again?

She coughed again, dabbed at her mouth.

—I'd rather see almost anything . . . than all that ice and whiteness, she said.

—The Lumière brothers from Lyon did a demonstration of something they call the cinématographe. I've never seen anything like it.

—Tell me.

—The machine projects images onto the wall. Only they're not photographs, exactly, but something else entirely. You see people moving and going about their normal lives, as if you are watching them from a window. Everything is silver and quiet. They walk along, smile, ride bicycles . . . it's as if you're watching your own dreams or memories up there. Everything is moving before you, over you, all of it quickening along . . . and you could touch it, it's so real. There was a woman and her sons running out along a wooden plank and jumping into the ocean. I thought of Mama . . .

He watched her staring out the window into the falling dark.

—This woman thrashed about in the waves like a happy dog in a mountain lake, Claude said.

She blinked slowly and smiled, her voice coming from far away.

—And what will they do with this silver quickening?

—The brothers are hiring concession agents to demonstrate the device all over the world.

—Will you join them? she asked plainly. After I'm gone?

Claude watched Odette's eyes come back from the window and settle on him. Until now, they'd carried the possibility of her death in the gaps and silences that gathered around their words, in the lingering gazes they cast out the window onto the rooftops. Now she'd said it aloud and he couldn't look at her. He had promised his father that he would take care of her, assured him that Paris doctors were a league above the country hacks in the north. And yet he surely must have admitted defeat the second he'd taken the business card and imagined showing his reels to the Lumières. As long as Odette was alive, there was no chance he would leave Paris. But if she died, he was suddenly and terrifyingly free. He looked down at his hands, then at the impossible vanity of his toffee-colored shoes. He felt a tear well up and wiped it away with the back of his hand.

—Dear brother, I'm not afraid of it. I never have been. Who knows? Maybe death is its own silver quickening. You hate La Salpêtrière . . . photographing all those poor derelict women for men in white coats. You should work for the brothers from Lyon . . . travel the world. Do you know that I have always wanted to go to Brazil?

—If I wanted to apply, I'd have to purchase a cinématographe and make some views of my own.

—Views?

—The moving photographs.

She closed her eyes for a long time, then startled awake.

—I'm tired again. It's like quicksand, always pulling me back down.

—You must rest. I will sit here with you while you sleep.

He watched as she closed her eyes, tried to imagine what rippled through her thoughts and fitful dreams.

Within a week, the optical supply store had made Claude's cinématographe and he'd parted with a month's wages. The box camera, without the projection stand, was small enough to fit inside a carrycase and he brought it with him wherever he went. He captured lovers in doorways, a juggler in the Tuileries Garden, a woman selling bread and hothouse roses from the basket of her bicycle. It reminded him of foraging with a satchel and a pair of hand shears, of excavating a copse of trees or a riverbank with his eyes. For

a year, he'd pinned Parisians behind his eyeglasses, imagined their lives, and now he arranged them behind the brass-mounted lens. He liked the way the box camera felt in his hand or on a tripod, the mechanical click and certainty of its gears. But none of his initial views were novel. Like the Lumière reels, they were all filmed outside in daylight, and they either captured strangers going about their business or performing a feat for the camera. The camera glanced about but it didn't reveal.

The Lumières, he felt sure, had underestimated their own invention and he wanted to show them what was possible. Louis Lumière had told him to surprise them, after all. The camera could be placed low to the ground in the street so that an omnibus appeared to be careening toward it. Or it could look down from a height, widening out the landscape and miniaturizing horses and people. And what if it could film indoors, with the right lighting coming from outside the frame? During his second weekend with the device, he filmed a view from a tethered hot-air balloon, the Seine like a slate-gray ribbon. And he captured the otherworldly stares of the monstrous sea creatures at the Trocadero Aquarium, the dreadnought grace of a shark that loomed and then vanished into the underwater shadows.

At first, he'd bristled at the idea of putting the *cinématographe* to scientific use, but then he found himself re-creating one of Marey's famous experiments that depicted a falling cat righting itself in midair. One night he flooded Albert Londe's photographic studio with medical arc lamps and paid a nurse to drop one of the cats that perennially slept in the courtyard from a height of six feet onto a mattress on the floor. He filmed a dozen descents and sure-footed landings. And when Londe asked him to photograph an old hysteric after she'd undergone hydrotherapy, he positioned the *cinématographe* next to the regular plate camera. Under the direction of a neurology nurse, the woman removed her gown and walked back and forth along a Persian rug. Claude made the still images for Londe before repeating the exercise for the Lumières.

When he told Odette of his mounting collection of views she added her own images to the list: a basket of writhing fish at the market, a Sunday picnic where a child flies a kite above the trees and then lets it blow free into the upper drafts. He wanted to capture the images dredged from his dying

sister's consumptive dreams, but it was the end of winter. There were no kites in the air, no fish in the open-air markets. Her lips had turned blue-white and she frequently called out from the undertow of her fevered sleep. She called out their mother's name, the names of long-deceased family pets, questions about Paris street names and train schedules. One time, she startled awake, whispered to Claude that the rabbit was out of its hutch, and promptly fell back asleep. While she slept, he held her hand and sang one of their mother's Austrian folk songs, something about a nightingale winging its way through a valley.

Then one wintry night Claude arrived from a day of filming around the city to find a somber doctor posted outside Odette's room. He gave a downcast nod that Claude felt in his bones and gestured to the open doorway with a face mask in one hand. Claude told the doctor to fetch the priest, that his father would want that. He set his camera and tripod down, strapped the mask in place, and stepped across the threshold with his equipment to see his sister in her final delirium. Her blankets were thrown back and she lay under a thin cotton sheet. A cloth was pressed to her forehead, and the window had been flung wide so that the cold air flowed over her. She had been sick for years, a slow winnowing, but nothing prepared Claude for her tubercular end, the sougling breath and the ragged sound of a thousand drownings from within.

For a long moment, he stood motionless six feet from her bed, paralyzed by this desolate, violent act of nature. He rested his equipment on the floor and came closer, felt the chill air on his hands and forehead and neck. He found himself removing his coat to cover Odette, even as her chest barreled up and she writhed with the fever. The coat dropped to the floor, but she kept grabbing at her chest with her flushed hands to remove a terrible weight that was pressing down on her. *La table*, she murmured, *lis le*. He turned to see that on the nightstand, resting on the bible full of pressed wildflowers, was a folded note with his name on it and another for their father. He opened his letter to find a few sentences written in trembling cursive: *Beloved brother, take me with you when you travel the world. In your heart and memories, but also in that little box of dusk you carry around. The first human death captured on film—that is something the Lyonnais brothers and their audiences could never ignore. Remind them how transient we all are. Always yours, Odette.*

Claude wanted to bellow out the open window, wanted to lie down on the narrow bed beside Odette and hold her until the shaking subsided. But he knew she wanted to offer up this gift, to be granulized into a medium she would never see. Here is my own transience, she might think in her final moments, captured forever. He wiped the tears away, kissed her on the forehead through his face mask, and placed the *cinématographe* onto the tripod.



When Claude arrived in the hotel basement at noon on March 1, 1896, he found a secretary from the Lumière factory sitting at a small table taking down names, and a few dozen clerks, shopkeepers, and photographers lined up in a hallway, *cinématographes* clutched to their chests or resting in their laps. Until that moment, it hadn't occurred to him that this was an audition, not a private screening for the brothers. Suddenly nervous, he gave his name and stood by himself with his own equipment. He had developed ten reels, each forty-five seconds long, and he found himself looping through them in his mind while he waited.

Eventually, the secretary called his name and he followed her into the big darkened room where the brothers sat under a canopy of cigar smoke. He shook hands with each man and Auguste complimented Claude's clothes and shoes. The concession agents, Claude suddenly understood, were ambassadors for the Lumière name. Louis gestured to the wooden stand where he could mount his *cinématographe*. The lamphouse had been attached to electrical wires and Claude wondered if this was a concession to Edison. The Frenchmen would take moving images but they would concede direct current to the American tycoon.

Claude began with his filmstrips of Paris—the rose seller, the lovers in doorways, a fog-draped view from Notre Dame. Louis stared up at the screen, expressionless, and Auguste shifted in his seat. Then Claude showed them the view from the tethered balloon and Louis said that he never knew how many fishing boats were in the Seine. It was clear they'd already seen the novelties of boulevards and sight lines from previous applicants. Even the barreling omnibus failed to get the response Claude wanted. Auguste just nodded and said it was an interesting trick of perspective.

—This next view is an adaptation of Marey's *The Falling Cat*.

Louis thinned his lips, brushed some lint from his trousers.

—We all know the proverb that a cat always lands on its feet, Claude said. Well, here is living proof that our grandmothers were right.

Against a black background, a white cat drops from a height of six feet, its back briefly toward the floor. There's a flashing, midair scramble, a twisting motion as the cat rights itself—the feet kicking and cantering, the tail swinging out like a boom. It lands on all fours, ears back, after a plummet of less than a second.

—Within point-two-five meters it has already moved its legs to the downward position, Claude said.

He liked that it sounded precise and definitive, as if he'd watched and filmed a hundred cats falling from a height.

—Might we view that one again? Perhaps more slowly, said Louis.

Claude cranked the footage again, this time at half speed. Louis tapped his bottom lip as the cat flipped in midair, now slowed to the calculus of the human eye.

—Very nice, said Auguste, what's next?

Claude told them that the next view was part of Londe's scientific study and they both leaned in, eager to glimpse a rival's work.

—At the hospital, we have a research laboratory for physiological experiments. I help photograph some of the studies so that we can better understand animal mechanics, for example. We also photograph certain autopsies. This shows the distorted gait of a hysteric . . .

A naked, silver-haired woman hobbles away from the camera under a skylight, elbows jutting, legs bowed, hips cocked. Her hair is tightly cropped, revealing the whiteness of her scalp and neck as she moves. The spine is knuckled and distended and her black leather shoes with pulled-up socks somehow exaggerate her off-kilter walk.

—Londe says that women diagnosed with hysteria have a gait that refuses to be coordinated, that every step is excessive and exaggerated.

The woman bird-toes down the length of a narrow Persian rug, toward a pale velvet curtain.

—I suppose that crazed walk is part of her inner rebellion . . .

It was Louis who said it, a little sarcastic, but his face was completely transfixed in the ricochet of projected light.

The woman rights herself for a turn, her face in profile, and the filmstrip dissolves to black.

—The hysteric's family, Claude said, insisted we keep her face concealed in our studies.

Claude loaded the final strip, the scintillation he knew would force them to either offer him the job or show him the door. He took his time, adjusted the lamphouse, felt the blood beating in his chest. He swallowed, pretended to tinker with the cinématographe, pushed some air up behind his lips.

—Gentlemen, may I present the first human death captured on moving celluloid.

A hospital room gauzy with winter light. Under an open window, a young woman languishes on a metal cot, draped in nothing but a sheet, staring up at the ceiling. A priest by the bed with a bible and rosary beads, his lips soundlessly murmuring. Ten seconds of midwinter pall and quietude. Then a finch on the snowy windowsill, a hapless spectator. The patient raises a hand from below the sheet and holds it up to the priest. He takes it, their fingers draped in beads of threaded glass. Then the woman's chest barrels up through a coughing fit, her face incredulous. The bed shakes, the bird flies away, and the camera continues to crank. Right before it goes to black she reaches toward the corner, toward the camera, her hand clenching an invisible rope.

Claude felt the chill through the open window of the hospital room as he watched. He felt his hot breath against the cloth mask, heard the terrible pneumatic sound of Odette's final breath and the enormous calm that followed. In the darkened room, when the reel was over, he wiped his face with a handkerchief and tried to collect himself. There was a long, smoky pause before the brothers brought themselves back to the room and their cigars. Louis got up and slowly opened the curtains, flooding the space with daylight. Auguste—managerial and efficient—thanked Claude for his time and attention to detail. A letter would be sent with the results. They asked him to ensure he gave his current address to their secretary at the desk outside. Claude quietly packed up his equipment. He shook hands with the brothers and wrote his address in the secretary's journal.

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Then he was out in the Paris streets, the streets slick with runoff from the abattoirs and the tanneries, striations of offal and blood in the gutters. It was all too much to look at, so he removed his spectacles and panned the middle distances, the dead spot where faces floated in a fog. An enormous sorrow suddenly bruised up to the surface, lodged in the back of his throat. He huddled under a shop awning, glasses in hand, and shuddered into his grief.

When the letter came the next morning—hand-delivered and on Lumière stationery—he was heading out the door, on his way to the hospital. He kept it unopened in his breast pocket until he got inside the darkroom and read it under the amber bulb. *It is our privilege to inform you that you have been chosen as an official concessionaire and operator for the Fraternité des Cinématographe. Over the next year or so, you will be assigned to a tour in America and Australia.* He read the letter several times before putting it back in his pocket. All the women in his life had vanished, burned off like alcohol-blue flames, beset by fevers and pox. He felt ashamed for still being alive, for a year in Paris without a single friend to console him. But then he heard himself whispering in the darkness and he realized that he was praying, not to God, but to Odette. He heard himself say *I promise to keep you forever spooling and therefore still alive.*