

*L. M. Davenport*

## **SHARK T.V.**

There is a room in the television. There is almost always a room in the television; today, it is AUTUMN WITCH COTTAGE AMBIENCE. A woodstove, potbellied, warm light behind its barred grate; a pile of gourds spilling over the wood floor; the air thick with sparkling motes; a tome laying open on the farm-style table, next to a mortar and pestle that are slightly too big for the scale of the rest of the scene. There is movement: the light in the woodstove flickers, the motes fall and are replaced, the richly hued leaves outside the window flutter in an unceasing wind, moving like shoals of fish. The motion is on a loop, but there are many kinds of motion and the loops for each kind are of different speeds—at least, they are in the higher-quality rooms that you prefer, such as AUTUMN WITCH COTTAGE AMBIENCE—and most of the time you do not sit and watch the room continuously for longer than a minute, so it is easy to decide that the repetition is unnoticeable, which is for all practical purposes the same as its not existing in the first place.

There is also music. The music is your least favorite part of these rooms, and most of the time you mute the television and play something else on your headphones when a room is on; it's inevitably a generic looping track of soothing piano and strings and low percussion, filler music, a type of sound that draws attention to the filler-nature of the room itself, which you dislike and work hard to overlook. You cannot overlook this when the music is on, and the illusion is better, more complete, with your preferred music, even if it does not tonally match the room. It used to be that other people would tell you that your choices of music were strange, or sad, or ridiculous. (It used to be that each person with whom you could conceivably

discuss music had one, at most two safe genres or artists that overlapped with yours, and you carefully matched the genre to the person. When you drove people to locations, you had a car playlist for each individual.) Your headphones make a second room, a room the size of your skull, which overlaps with the room in the television. Today, it is the soundtrack for a film about a beheaded knight and a rash promise. The score is at once jagged and trancelike, with a deep echo to it, menacing and plaintive. Its long stretches of instrumentals are intercut with medieval carols, performed on lute, recorder, and hand drum. It makes you feel like a lightless forest is growing in your chest. You used to listen to this soundtrack frequently, and it always brings with it a shadow of that time, though not quite enough to make you believe that you could recover it. (You were not as you are now. The explanation for this change is dreary.)

You are at the center of the Venn diagram, the overlap of three simultaneous rooms: the room in the television, the room in your skull, and the room in the house. You think about this while you pilot your body through the house, chewing on the knowledge that what you are really doing is attempting to curate your way aesthetically to a transcendent psychological state. Repair yourself with the correct aesthetic environment. Was this not, you ask yourself, essentially the premise behind those rest cures that the wealthily disturbed or tubercular were so fond of in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries? The altitude of sanatoria, you imagine, served more of an aesthetic purpose than a practical one, but surely some people went and looked at the mountains for long enough that they got better.

You are unconvinced that such a thing is possible for you—you can barely even name the impulse—but still you continue to attempt it. You wash a round of dishes; while they are drying in the rack, you take the recycling out. It is autumn outside the house, just as it is in the television, though of course it is night; you stop to look at the row of large trees on the hill behind the house, after you pour the recycling into the curb bin. They too

move in patterns that would perhaps repeat if you tracked a sufficient number of motions. You do not do this; you go back inside and move a load of laundry from the washing machine into the dryer. The night is long.

You are aware, naturally, that the television watches you back, that the headphones are listening to you in return. It is discomfiting, this awareness, but you can do nothing about the watching and the listening—by using the television and the headphones in the first place, you have consented to them—and since this is something you cannot alter, you have accustomed yourself to it. You cannot revoke that consent now. So the television and the headphones suggest things to you: things they have determined that you are likely to enjoy, or at least to consume. And who are you, when you stop and break this down, to say that you will not enjoy? That you will not, at least, consume?

Today the headphones offer you ROSARY VAMPIRE FRIDAY NIGHT. There's a jolt when you see the title, that do-they-know panic with which you have grown so familiar over the past months, but when the adrenaline spike fades and you scroll through the playlist, this turns out to be mostly songs that were popular with alternative teens when you were a teen yourself but not yet alternative. You reject the television's offerings, which today are uniformly pumpkin-themed and even in the thumbnails contain assets of grotesquely mismatched size, and search for *cyberpunk ambient*; the third result, RAINY BLADE RUNNER BALCONY, looks promising, and you select it. Low candles, neon twilight blurred through condensation-fogged glass, a chaise in that gritty, weathered style that signals an eighties vision of the future. The rightness of this combination is immediately apparent to you.

Today is one of the vacuuming days, so you shove a dirty towel into the gap under the bedroom door to muffle the noise. (She needs her sleep.) It is also a litter-box day, which means it is also a take-out-the-garbage day. You steer yourself

in the direction of the bag of bags, pull two out of the tangle and stuff one inside the other. You flap the bag-inside-a-bag construction in the air so they balloon out together; if there are holes in one bag it will not matter now, as long as the two layers of holes do not align, allowing a trail of soiled cat litter from the interior of the first bag to seep out into the interior of your home. It is satisfying to you, this layering. In all the time you have been ferrying litter from box to trash can, this technique has yet to fail.

The two of you are together—a weekend, blackout curtains in the living room, one of you up early and the other preparing to stay up late—and you watch the sharks. The two of you have watched every shark movie, show, and special that the television can offer; said offerings have decreased substantially now that it is no longer summer. At one time, shark season lasted only a week; then it became a month, spliced between the end of July and the beginning of August; now it is a *season*, replete with one-episode specials, their title cards screaming in the same three typefaces. You've seen them all: the silly sharks (THE MEG 2), the kid-oriented sharks (THE CROC THAT ATE JAWS), the dramatic sharks (HAMMERHEAD RECKONING), the conservation sharks (IN SEARCH OF THE ANGELSHARK). You have come to appreciate sharks; they were not an arena of the world in which you had previously invested much time. You started out by watching her, watching the sharks; now you watch the sharks together.

Today, you click through all of your saved shark programming, but none of it is right; you (her) do not want a silly shark, and you (just you) do not feel up to a dramatic shark, or to the level of mental shut-off that is required for a kid-friendly shark. You (the two of you) cannot agree, and in anxious frustration resort to the *you may also like* tab. You (just you) see that your breath is moving shallow, high-up in your chest. It occurs to you that the television may or may not know that there are two of you watching it today. Which *you* is

the one that *may also like*? Or has it amalgamated you together, the way that your headphones sometimes feed you her music, pushing your rooms together even when you are apart? Your chest is moving as if you were afraid.

There is a new shark, buried halfway down the *you may also like*. It is not the season; the presence of a new shark startles the breath higher in your chest, so that it floats just under your collarbones. It seems to be a conservation shark; it is narrated by Sir David Attenborough. You pause, enlarge the thumbnail: a leopard shark caught from a low angle, appearing to smile. It's backlit, almost haloed. HAVEN OF THE LEOPARD SHARK.

*David Attenborough!* she says. *That one.*

You agree. You liked David Attenborough long before you began watching the sharks. You have always liked casually learning about animals or fungi or rocks or brains or dinosaurs or outer space; when you were a child, this was mistaken for genuine preprofessional interest, and as a consequence you received many science-related books on birthdays and Christmases, and were frequently taken to museums. Your mother always set the science insert in the newspaper aside for you on Tuesdays; there were kits about fossils and rock hardness and basic chemistry; one year, you competed in the Central Ohio Brain Bee and somehow came in third, despite writing *killer neurons* on your whiteboard in response to a question when you knew you did not know the answer. The fact that you were completely lacking in genuine scientific curiosity, and also did not care about math enough to forge through the thickets of woe that surrounded it, did not deter anyone, and if you're completely honest, you still feel guilty for not having been smart enough, or even just having cared enough and in the right ways, to follow through on what the child-you appeared to promise. David Attenborough narrated your sick days, and a lot of your ordinary days as well; you found (and find) his documentaries comforting in the same way that articles about cryptocurrency scams or the guts of search algorithms are comforting. You can learn about

something in which you have no personal stake, and on which you will not later be tested; you can, for a brief period of time, feel as though you are doing exactly what you are supposed to be doing, and that you have no reason to feel guilty or ashamed for doing it. You may even learn something that, at a later time, you may wish to tell another person. Something you can offer them. (Offer her.)

The two of you watch HAVEN OF THE LEOPARD SHARK. The television shows you rooms on a boat, in a lab, in a submersible. It shows the ocean, as if it were a room: the house and the ocean become joined parts of that diagram you sit in and walk through, and David Attenborough tells you about it. Your house, the haven of the leopard shark. Your body cannot act as if it were afraid, in the combined presence of David Attenborough and this shark. It should not have acted afraid in the first place, and you remind yourself that tomorrow is the day of laundering the towels.

The room the television suggests to you today is not a room at all. It is a deciduous forest, shot in the early morning; it's lush, summery, but toned down from the faint sun. A trail of broken stems suggests that someone else has passed this way, but no creature now disturbs the scene. It is called, unfortunately, EARLY MIRKWOOD PEACEFUL ADVENTURER WOODS, but you can't argue with the image quality. You stand and watch it for a long time, waiting in vain to catch a loop restarting. The mist hovers gently, never quite dissipating.

You used to love mornings. You weren't a *morning person* in the way that term is usually (angrily, defensively, cheerily) used, but it felt virtuous to be awake in the mornings, even though you rarely did anything special with that time. You liked feeling that there *was* time, that there remained a chance that the rest of the day would not fail your expectations. If the coffee didn't turn out right the first time, you could make it again.

The couch cushion is rough against your face, but clean. (You know because you lint-rolled it yesterday.) When you open your mouth, the fabric rubs against your teeth; it makes a sound, which you can hear because you have not yet put on your headphones. It is only ten-thirty; you have been awake for an hour and a half, but she went to bed ten minutes ago, so the longest part of your day has barely started. You have to be quiet. You stifle the cries before they make it to your teeth. The cushion, wet now, itches your lips and the skin of your forehead. Your back twitches and shudders, bowing in and out with the heaving of your chest against the couch. Green bursts flare on the backs of your closed eyelids as you press your face harder into the cushion and emit a subvocal howl. One of the questions you had at the beginning was *will I still be able to cry*, a question that was answered almost immediately: yes, and the tears will be almost exactly the same as those you shed before. Their texture is light and somewhat crystalline, as if a jarful of them would turn kaleidoscopic, but they are still clear and salted. You had been irrationally afraid that you would cry blood; this had made you cry; it was not blood; you cried harder.

You don't want her to wake up to this. You are already so full of guilt that you cannot live with feeling bad for one more thing, even a relatively small thing such as disturbing her sleep early in the night by crying too loudly. You want her to be awake for some other, entirely benign, reason, and to happen upon you weeping on the couch and not be distressed herself by this discovery.

She doesn't wake up; or, if she does, she doesn't open the bedroom door. When you finish crying, you make a list of tasks. Your headphones, perhaps in cahoots with the television, offer you the film scores of Howard Shore. You decline.

There are a number of possible explanations for what has become of you:

You decided to do this to yourself, knowing what the consequences would be and accepting them.

You decided to do this to yourself, not knowing the consequences. Or not *fully* knowing them, which comes to the same thing. In other words, you made a mistake.

You had an accident.

Someone else had an accident, and you experienced consequences.

Someone else made a mistake.

Someone else did this to you.

This was always going to happen, because it was in your genetic code or the shape your brain took on, during an earlier part of childhood than you can remember or the somewhat later part in which you learned about David Attenborough, or at the even later time when you were busy competing in the Central Ohio Brain Bee and being treated poorly by alternative teens.

You know which of these explanations is the correct one—or, you think you do—and so does she. None of them are acceptable to you, but you believe that the correct explanation is also the worst, by a metric which you cannot define, and also that she shares your belief. (She denies this.) She says *it doesn't matter how this happened, all that matters is that it did and we're here now, but at least we're together*. She says *please baby I can't talk about this anymore right now*. She says *please it's late I work tomorrow you know I work tomorrow please. I know it's not late for you but I have to go stand in front of the public for eight hours and they don't care how late I was up last night or why. I know you can't really understand because you're not working a job like that but if you did understand you wouldn't do this. Please*.

There was a period, in the beginning, when the two of you seriously discussed the idea of telling everyone who had known you before that you had died. In the end it was decided that this would be more painful for everyone than the alternatives you had also discussed. So instead your approach has been to

do nothing, for as long as that remains possible. Job: left, no explanation. Parents: too difficult, no action yet; you still have another month before they'll ask about Christmas and you'll be forced to answer. Friends: online anyway. Therapist: you lied and said that you were moving to a state where they didn't have a license.

You suppose it is still the beginning. For you, now, isn't everything the beginning? If there is no immediately evident end? You could read the Lord of the Rings books every day for the next two hundred years, and it would still be the beginning. You can't bear it.

The television offers you DARK ACADEMIA CASTLE WITH SOOTHING PIANO TO RELAX WORK OR STUDY. You accept. The ensuing room has a fireplace, the contents burning low; wingback chairs in deep shadow; lashing rain against the windows. The music is mostly strings and organ. You leave it on, this time, and do not add headphones; you are going out. If she wakes up in the night, as she sometimes does for reasons nightmare or digestive, you hope that this room will not offend her.

There is only one reason that you go out.

In the lore, people like you almost always have teachers: the person whose fault their state is takes pity on them and shows them the ropes. You have not had a teacher; you are making the whole thing up as you go. It's not as simple as sneaking up on someone and biting them, or even getting them to let you into their home so you can bite them there. You still don't understand the mechanics by which your thefts are performed. By which you perform them. It's not blood, or it's not *always* blood, or maybe it's not *only* blood.

The point is that something is wrong with you. It has a name.

Before you go out, you make a list for when you come home: *scrub out bathtub, put clean dishes away, dust ceiling fans and flip switches for winter.*

The two of you are looking for old action movies when the television suggests another shark. Actually, two other sharks, both apparently involving David Attenborough. The first, *STALKING THE BOTTOM: THE GOBLIN SHARK*, has a thumbnail featuring a shark whose mouth reminds you of a xenomorph's; the second, *BRIGHT LIGHTS, LITTLE SHARKS*, presents a size comparison between the smallest shark you've ever seen and a human hand.

*That's a dwarf lantern shark, she says. It's the smallest shark in the world.*

*Does it glow?* you ask. You imagine that it does, given the name, but you can't think of anything else to say. In your chest, your breath has gone strange again, and you don't want her to see.

*Yeah. It has photophores.* She's smiling. It almost makes you smile, too, but the impulse is fragile and you don't want to break it by actually attempting to make it happen. *How does he have the energy for all this? He's what, ninety-seven? And it looks like this one was just released last week.*

*Ninety-three, I think. Still.*

*I'm not even thirty yet and I get tired just thinking about going to put gas in the car. D-A has fifty-three species named after him.* She clicks the thumbnail, and it unfolds into the beginning of the documentary.

*I miss being able to do this all the time,* you say sometime in the first five minutes, while the television is showing you a room in someone's shark laboratory. It bubbles out of you when you take a wrong breath.

*I miss it, too,* she says, keeping her eyes on the room. *But I'm trying to enjoy the time we do have together. We get so little of it.*

She doesn't mean it the way you think she means it. You know that. You've talked it to death. But your chest doesn't know that, and the next breath is worse than the one before. *I'm sorry,* you say, a combination of sounds that you have said so many times in your life, and for so many reasons, that it's

become compressed into reflex, feels like one syllable leaving your mouth instead of three.

*It's fine. Just, let's try and relax.* There's a pleading note in her voice. You would set yourself on fire on the spot, if you could. You try and fix on David Attenborough's voice, let it tell you about the smallest of sharks and their ever-smaller population. It keeps slipping away from you. She's watching it, but slackly, and you watch her instead for a minute: the unconscious posture of her hands, the television light caught as faint sparks in her pupils, the twist of hair that rests, sculptural, over the rim of her ear.

*How would you feel about... you hear yourself say. But, you know, no pressure, it's fine if you—*

*I'd like that.* She's looking fully at you now, smiling again. *The sharks will still be here later.*

*Okay.* A silent moment from both of you, in which the television makes the sound of the ocean. *I'd like that, too. Are you sure it's okay that...*

Her eyes glitter in the dim, wavelight and lablight and sharklight fractured across them. *I'm sure. If it could happen that way, don't you think it would have already?* A dry smile there, and you laugh a dwarf-lantern-shark-size laugh in response. *Anyway, that's not how you got—*

*You're right.* You kiss her forehead and stand up. *Let me wash first. I'll meet you in there?* She tilts her face up; you bend down and kiss her mouth.

CAVE CAMPING FIREPIT AESTHETIC  
 COZY SKELETON GROVE  
 SHARK AQUARIUM TOUCH POOL FIELD TRIP VIBES  
 GREEN ROOM BACKSTAGE AMBIENCE  
 YOUR GOTH FRIEND'S LIVING ROOM  
 PEACEFUL BOHO HOUSEBOAT  
 SNOWY CLASSIC LITERATURE MOUNTAIN RETREAT  
 SUPERVILLAIN NAP NOOK  
 YELLOW WALLPAPER DOWNTIME IRONIC

NIGHTTIME BATHYSPHERE  
TIDE POOL AT DAWN

You are scrubbing the stubborn dark slicks in the refrigerator when your phone shudders in your pocket; it is one in the morning.

*Didn't know if you'd seen this*, the text from your mother says. *I missed the obit when it first came out, so maybe you did too. What a life!* There's a link: *Sir David Attenborough, who narrated the natural world to three generations of future scientists, dead at ninety-three.* You sit down in front of the open refrigerator and click through to the article. It's dated almost a year ago. The refrigerator beeps angrily as you scroll.

*How did we miss this?* you text back. *This should have been a front-page obit.*

*No idea.*

You don't reply. The refrigerator light has turned off; it's emitting a sustained buzz now.

*While I'm thinking about it*, she texts a moment later, *have you guys decided if you're coming for Thanksgiving yet? No pressure, I'm just trying to get a sense of how many people will be there.*

You close the room that has been playing on the television since your day started—VICTORIAN CAPTAIN'S CABIN ANTARCTIC EXPEDITION NORTHERN LIGHTS—and search for *David Attenborough*. The screen fills. Every title in the top three rows has a release date that's later than his death. Your chest tightens up. When you ask your phone to elaborate on what you're seeing—surely David Attenborough did not leave this much material for posthumous release?—you discover that he has been licensed. There are hours upon hours of his speech recorded; it was not difficult, evidently, to synthesize his rhythms, his patterns, his intonations.

As much as you want to imagine that it was done for purer reasons, that the world was simply suffering too much

in the absence of David Attenborough, you still recognize a cash grab when you see one. It occurs to you that some of the sharks, too, may be generated rather than truly alive; even the rooms in submersibles and laboratories and aquariums could be spawned from the existing footage. You put on HAVEN OF THE LEOPARD SHARK and sit in front of the television. You can't quite bring yourself to think of it as fake David Attenborough, manufactured David Attenborough, though certainly that is what it is.

You've moved on to ENIGMATIC GUARDIAN: THE NURSE SHARK, when the bedroom door opens. There are footsteps, and then the sound of something closing. *Honey*, she says, coming to sit beside you, *is there a reason why the refrigerator door was open? It woke me up*. She is forcing her tone into gentleness.

*David Attenborough died*. You gesture at the screen.

*Honey*, she says, fully awake. *I'm sorry*.

*He was dead when they made this. He's been dead for months*.

*Oh. Shit*. She leans forward, gazing intently at the screen.

The two of you sit there with the sharklight moving over your faces. Neither of you speaks.

When the sun starts to come up, you go into the bedroom and pull the blackout curtains down. She dresses by the lamp and kisses your forehead, which is the only part of you that sticks out above the comforter. At least, you tell yourself, you don't have to sleep in a coffin. (This had been another thing you worried about, at first.) You're asleep by the time the front door closes behind her.

*I don't think I can turn you*, you had said in the beginning. You were crying, and too sad to be relieved that you weren't crying blood, after all.

*I didn't ask you to. I don't want to live forever. I would make a terrible—*

*Please don't say it*.

*It's real whether I say it or not, love.* She was finished crying; her face looked worn, already older than it had an hour before, and you couldn't stop thinking about how she would always look older than you from now on, no matter how much time passed. How it would only get worse. This made you cry harder. *I'm sorry. I didn't mean to...* her voice trailed off, and you never did find out what it was that she hadn't meant to do.

*I can't do this.*

She looked at you levelly. *You're going to.*

Neither of you said anything for a while after that. You kept trying to imagine what she was thinking, and spinning off into strands of thought that were too terrible to voice.

*It's late,* she finally said.

*I can't go to sleep.* You started crying again, just when you thought you physically couldn't cry any more. *It's too much.*

*Shh,* she said, holding your hand. *Let me put something on for you.*

*It won't help.*

*Just try it. For me?* You nodded, your face pressed into your other hand. A room blossomed on the television: TEATIME IN THE GREENHOUSE RELAXING MOOD. You laid down on the couch and she put a blanket over you, from the neck down. *I'll come back before sunrise,* she said, *and we can get you situated. Okay?*

You nodded again. In the greenhouse, rain dripped on the glass. There was a chair, a table, a steaming teacup. It looked as though the chair's occupant had only just stepped away, and would return at any moment. While she slept, you watched long enough to catch the rain's repeat.

There are never any people in the rooms. The sun does not ever breach the horizon; the train chugs endlessly toward its alpine station; the tea never cools. They unfold the same ceaseless moment. The point is not to imagine someone else's life; nor is it, quite, to imagine yourself in the rooms, to build them larger and larger in your mind until they overtake the rooms

your body walks in. The headphones, on the other hand, aspire to mirrorhood, refracting your own taste back at you in recombinant microaesthetics. They recommend you, remade every six hours, to yourself. They know what you are.

You are curled at the center of the diagram, looking through the window that is the television, the window that half-promises itself a membrane. Time is always almost moving forward, in those rooms; you are eternally on the point of entering them. And David Attenborough, the licensed version, is in these rooms, too; like you, he is eternal now, unchanging and undying. You can practically hear him in the walls: he's tapping on the glass of the greenhouse, scuttling just under the paneling in the manor's library. And he's brought the sharks with him; you feel them moving like currents while you put away the dishes, brush the cats, wash the empty jars so they may be recycled. You're holding her hand. You're watching the sharks.