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THE SUDDEN DARK

(A Senior Thesis through ENGL 305/306)

by Sam Rebelein

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Six hours earlier, three small but important things happened at once.

Cate looked down at her jeans, crumpled into a small denim hill around her ankles. She lost herself for a moment staring at the wrinkles and folds in the bundle. Went somewhere else. Somewhere warm that smelled like flowers, buzzed with the sound of lazy summer insects. But she felt his hand on the small of her back, the thousand-needle pinpricks of his beard against the nape of her neck. His dry lips as he kissed the skin just below her ear. And the warmth, the summer, the flowers, went suddenly and utterly dark. Suddenly, it was miles away. Rain clicked against the window behind her. She heard him moving around the room, but kept her eyes on the floor. The quiet gurgle of phlegm as he cleared his throat. The quick swish of his tie as he re-knotted it. Shaking, she bent and rolled her pants back up her legs...

Ben stepped off the bus onto the curb. He brushed sharp brown bangs out of his eyes and gazed up at his house. It looked like every other house in the neighborhood. White columns, large front porch, big green lawn. Behind him, the doors of the school bus creaked shut. It rattled away over the asphalt. As it passed, someone leaned out the window and shouted something at him. Ben couldn't hear what it was. But he understood what it meant. He understood that it was about his sister. About the principal. The rumors. His parents. Him. Faces peered out the back window as the bus growled down the street. The tires surged through puddles, sending water onto the sidewalk in a clean rainbow arc. Ben recognized a kid with acne, a junior, one year older than himself, laughing through the dim glass. He gripped the straps of his backpack, walked up the path to his front door and, humming, tried not to think about how this was the anniversary...

The third important thing concerns a man ostensibly unrelated to the rest of this story. At the moment, he is standing in his kitchen, several houses away from Ben's home. He leans

against the fridge, flipping through his mail. His wife is at the sink, washing vegetables. On this day six years previous, there was an odd patch of time he cannot account for. He was not at work. He was not at home. He would not answer his wife when she asked what he had been doing. Every year on this day, she thinks about this. It grew to be a point of silent contention in their marriage. One of those unspoken things that allows itself to build until it slowly pushes two people apart. She would think about this slot of unaccounted time more than she meant to. But, unbelievably, neither she nor anyone else would ever put two and two together.

His name is Ed. He coaches a team of young soccer players on the weekends. He is forty-three and is married to a nervous, high-voiced woman named Annie. She smells like peaches for reasons neither of them quite understand. He always thought it was her shampoo until he found out she never *uses* shampoo. She worries it might thin out her hair and make her go bald. For similar reasons, she never wears makeup. She never wears nice clothes. And she never leaves the house for much other than groceries. These are other points of undiscussed contention in their relationship. Over time, Ed's disquiet about them grew steadily until it reached a point of bottled rage. The kind of buried, ancient fever that drives certain men to, say, offer a child a ride home from practice. Then bludgeon them to death in a field. For instance.

The important thing that happened:

“Are you going to Ghoul Fest?” Annie asked.

Ed looked up. “What?”

She turned off the faucet. “I said, are you going to Ghoul Fest?”

Ed frowned. “Maybe,” he said cautiously. “Are...you thinking of going?”

“No,” she said quickly. “I was just curious.”

She turned the faucet back on, stuck a zucchini under the stream of water.

“Of course,” Ed said softly. He watched her. His grip on the stack of mail tightened.

Nearly six hours later, Ed and Annie are, again, in their kitchen. Now, however, they’re arguing. She throws a plate at him. He ducks. It shatters on the wall over his head. A shard falls on the back of his skull and cuts his scalp. When he stands again, there is blood running down the middle of his face. He yells at her, making the blood pump into his head, and his scalp, and it takes him several seconds before he realizes there is a very thick, very red river water-falling off the tip of his nose. Down his chin. Annie gapes at him. He touches his forehead. Rubs the hot, sticky fluid between his fingers. He glares at her. Annie backs away. He’s never touched her in anger and she wouldn’t be afraid of him otherwise. But the blood has turned him into something else. Something she can’t recognize. Something ancient that he keeps buried. He comes towards her. She presses back against the counter, fumbles behind her for a knife. He sees the way her arm bends back and he knows. Ed’s eyes widen. The blood drips faster off his nose, his chin, running between his teeth. He spits frothy red mist at her. He comes at her, darts past, moving for the blender sitting on the counter. He turns it on. Over the whir, he can hear her screaming at him. He moves around her and starts the microwave. He turns on the stove, the coffeemaker. He takes the toaster with him as he moves into the living room. Annie trails behind, wailing, clutching her hair. He turns on the TV, the stereo, the lamps. Every lamp he can find. Classical music blares as he moves into the master bedroom. He goes into the bathroom, starts filling the tub. He clutches the toaster to his chest as he shoves his way past Annie back into the hall. He turns on the outside lights, the garage light. As Ed steps into the garage, Annie slips in the hall. She looks down. A thin zig-zagging trail of blood runs across the hardwood. She sits, crying, her legs out akimbo in front of her. Ed comes back from the garage. Through the open door, Annie can see rows upon rows of blinking Christmas lights thrown about the floor like viscera. Ed

grabs her by the front of her blouse. She can't even scream. He drags her into the bathroom and throws her in the tub. Water sloshes everywhere. Ed jams the cord for the toaster into the socket in the wall next to the medicine cabinet. There is a nightlight shaped like a flower there. As an afterthought, Ed turns that on, too. He faces Annie. She stays under the surface of the water. It's cold and maybe she'll freeze or drown before he can kill her himself. Immersed in water, she can pretend she isn't crying. He flicks the lever of the toaster. And suddenly, the little flower pops in a quick blue flame. The entire town goes dark.

Their fight began with an offhand comment from Annie to Ed about how high the electric bill was.

This story is set up in shards. If you begin to feel lost or confused, think of it not so much as a story but as a collection of evidence or clues. An analysis. An analysis of why, on a night in early October of last year, there was a blackout in an insignificant town in upstate New York. An analysis of why Peter Rourke, a lawyer, on this night, saw his son appear in his living room and ran to him, weeping. Know that much of this takes place in a part of our existence inaccessible by language. The things that happen in these shards are representations of things that words can only attempt to understand. Sorrow, loss, love, death, life, happiness... These words glance off their subjects. The following shards act in much the same way. Know that all of it makes sense, but perhaps only if viewed sideways with your eyes half-closed. Know that it is meant to illuminate an incident or series of incidents. Know that this story ends with Ben standing in the hall, holding his father as the old man cries; and begins with a shower of white ceramic shards, back when they were still just a plate, when three small but important things happened at once.

Six hours later, everything everywhere turned off.

#

Wind moved through their house in odd ways. When he was ten, eleven, twelve, Benjamin Rourke would sit on the pink plush carpet in the upstairs hall and watch the air outside push the curtains gently in, and suck them back out. The white lace curled first one way, then the other as the breeze slipped through the window. The hallway ran down the entire length of the house, from the stairwell at one end all the way down to the master bedroom at the other. There was a certain spot somewhere in the middle, between Ben's room and the bathroom where he could sit and, with all the doors open, see the wind move all the way down through the hall. If all the doors were open, he could see one fluid wave down all the curtains in all the windows. He could see into his room on one side. His blue space-themed drapes, backlit by the sun, waved out at him. The air in the hall rippled. And out the other side it went, through his older sister's room, the green and grey curtains covered with horses running through fields.

When Ben was ten, eleven, twelve, the wind was his only friend. He'd spend hours just sitting there, feeling it wash over him. Listening to it shift through the house. By the time he had grown out of it, there was a dark splotch on the wall where his head had rubbed the shine off the white paint. Ben's perch was right by the heating vent, too, so he could leave the windows open in any season and stay warm. He could remain on the pink plush carpet almost the whole year round. Which was good because the wind changed scents. It would grow sweet in the summer, crisp and minty in the fall. The spring smelled like dirt. The winter was always horrifying because his parents made him close the windows. And then there was no wind at all.

If he was lucky, the wind would perform for him. This was the best part. Sometimes it closed doors. It blew papers around. Moved things. Like small figurines on shelves. Just gently, and just small things. Never so much as to be frightening or surprising. But enough to make it

feel like there was someone else there. Someone just beyond, in the other room. Instead of far away, underground and dead. Which was, of course, the point.

#

In the sudden dark, the room was still. Everyone was breathing hard and the windows on all three sides of the large living room began to fog. The hallway beyond warped and became the opening of a black hole. For several seconds, no one moved. People put their hands to their chests. Their heartbeats had become suddenly painful and loud. They felt very aware of their bodies, everything around them. They hadn't paused for such an awareness in a long time.

Pete Rourke stood at the center of the room. He stared at the hall as if it might devour him. He blinked and the room cleared a little. He saw the glint of dozens of eyes, peering around at each other. Hushed whispers passed back and forth. In the sudden dark, he finally had the chance to take in the smell. A putrid, sweaty stink wafting up from the carpet. Years upon years of nights like this had stained the house itself. And in the sudden dark, Pete Rourke felt it press in around him. The shifting creaks of floorboards and rafters, cracking and bending against the cold. The stench grew. The room filled with the reek of alcohol, weed, blow, sex. And death.

Pete whirled around and faced the center of the room. He arched his shoulders down. He clapped his hands hard. Once, twice. He started a steady rhythm, bobbing his head on each clap.

He spoke and his voice was desperate: "Let's keep it going, people. Keep it going."

They all stared at him. He clapped again. "Come on. Can't let a little power failure get us...can't let...come on..." His voice faltered. He ran the back of a hand across his forehead. Someone standing close to him stepped back.

Eliza Rourke, Pete's wife, stood in the corner of the room. She had a cigarette in one hand, a Manhattan in the other. She couldn't see Pete through the crush of bodies stuffed into the

room. But she could hear him trying to get the party moving again. As she listened to him, she felt the desperation. She felt the edge he must have been near. She put a hand to her throat, touching it lightly with the tips of her fingers. She ground her teeth silently.

The party had never stopped before. It couldn't *stop*. What would happen, she wondered, if suddenly their big white house spent an evening being quiet and dark. Maybe they'd have a moment, finally, to force themselves to slow down and *think*.

And that was the most horrible thing in the world.

Everyone else wondered the same thing. They began to murmur amongst themselves. They, too, lived in big white houses where nothing ever changed. They weren't sure if they were ready for this. Like a flock of frightened birds, they turned their heads to the ceiling and chirped at each other. Some pulled out their phones instinctively. But the internet was down. The phone lines were down.

They were completely, suddenly, utterly alone.

"Come on," Pete went on. "Please. Let's...come on, people..." He kept clapping.

The wind outside howled around the corners of the house. Eliza sank into the corner. She believed in ghosts.

#

A memory:

Cate turned fourteen.

She came home from soccer practice red-faced and greasy. Her cleats slung over one shoulder. She walked past Ben at his perch in the upstairs hall without looking at him. When she turned into her room, she dropped her cleats and groaned.

"Ben," she said. "Don't go in my room, okay?"

He looked up from the book he was reading. “I didn’t.”

She pointed at the open window. “What’s this?”

He was twelve now and answered practically: “An open window.”

Cate’s friends were trying out swearing, so she spat back at him: “I know what it *is*, you little asshole. I mean *why* the *hell* is it open?”

“I wanted to feel the wind,” Ben answered. “Like I always do.” He closed his book and blinked. His chest was beginning to feel cramped. He hadn’t expected this...*resistance* from her.

Cate crossed her arms over her chest. She leaned against the doorjamb. “Be honest, Ben.”

“I wanted to feel the wind,” he repeated. More emphatically.

“You don’t want to feel *the wind*,” she said. She came towards him. He shrank back.

“Can you please just say it?” Cate said.

Ben opened his mouth. He gripped his book more tightly.

“Say you miss him,” Cate said.

Ben stared at her. His eyes burned. She was standing in such a way that the wind couldn’t quite move around her. He felt tears creeping against the back of his eyes.

“I miss him,” he said. “Okay? I miss him.”

Cate nodded once, satisfied. She went into her room and closed the door. From behind it, Ben could hear the window slide shut. The shadows from the dark bathroom seemed to lengthen across the pink plush carpet until they touched his toes. This was the last time he sat in the hall like this, and the last time he and Cate exchanged more than three words at a time.

#

Five years ago:

“We often project our feelings in directions they are not meant to go.”

The guy at the head of the circle had meaty, hairy hands. Pete couldn't stop staring at them. *Like a werewolf's*, he observed. The guy kept them clasped between the knees of his khakis as he talked. During his whole opening speech, they never moved. Not once.

"Sometimes we do not realize it until much later," he was saying. "Sometimes it is too late before we see that we have taken our emotions out on someone who...maybe did not deserve it."

Around the circle, heads dipped downwards. People coughed, scratched themselves. Stared at the tiles running down the floor. Pete's cheeks itched.

He thought about Ben.

The lightbulb.

Eliza, sitting next to him, saw Cate's carpet flit across her mind's eye. The matted-down patch by her bed. Her daughter had been sleeping on the floor for weeks, maybe months before anyone had had noticed. At this point, Eliza didn't know what to do about it. So she did nothing.

The guy with the khakis also had an oily crew cut, a green flannel shirt, wire-rimmed spectacles, and a shadow of stubble spanning the lower half of his face. When he smiled, he revealed two rows of pristine white but crooked teeth. He went on: "So. The purpose of this group is to discover, together, how to *cope* with these feelings. And to deal with them in *appropriate* ways. Ways that will not hurt others."

The guy turned to the woman sitting on his right. "Let us," he said, "go around the circle. Share your name and the name of your lost one."

The woman looked surprised. She chewed her lip for a moment, and said, "My name is Brenda and my son's name was Andrew."

"Andrew," the guy with the hands noted solemnly. "Good. Next?"

The balding man on the woman's right answered, "My name is Thomas and my son's name was Dominic."

Down the line: "My name is Susan and my daughter's name was Charlotte."

"My name is Bill and my daughter's name was Jane."

"My name is Bruce and my son's name was Michael."

As the pulse moved around the circle, closer to Eliza, her heart beat faster. She hadn't said his name aloud since he went away. She wondered what would happen now, if she brought it out here, in the dim back room of this church, surrounded by strangers. When it was her turn, she stared at her feet. Pete looked at her. Several moments passed. No one moved.

Finally, Eliza mumbled to the floor: "My name is Eliza and our son's name was Alan."

The guy at the head of the circle nodded. He shifted slightly, making the metal folding chair underneath him squeal horribly. The pulse moved all the way around the circle back to him. He smiled. "Good. Now, we can start. Let's say a prayer together."

As he led them in a devotion meant for a God Eliza neither believed in nor cared about, her mind touched again on his name. Hanging there in the space just under her nose, where she had left it. She wished she could take it back. She wished she hadn't said anything. Because now, as far as she was concerned, here he was, floating in the middle of the circle, lost with all the other names. Suspended in dead air. A full circle of lost children and parents who pretended they were coping. Twenty chairs. All with names and stories. She knew only the tip of the iceberg. *Her* tip of the iceberg. Whatever her emotions, whatever her struggle, it was only one out of a hundred. A thousand. A million. Whatever pain she felt, she could imagine it amplified a hundred-fold and just *there*, floating around in the world. If it had just been her, if it had just been Alan, maybe that wouldn't have been so bad. Maybe she could live with the fact that at

least there was only one, no matter how horrible it was. Now there were at least twenty? That, she could not abide.

Across the circle was a man with a large gut and a thick beard. He eyed Pete and Eliza and they did not notice.

#

Their town is nestled in the middle of a big hilly valley at the tail-end of the Catskills. In the fall, they're all on fire. October colors bloom out in a beautiful fire across the landscape. From the town square, you can see the side of a large mountain, all lit up orange and yellow. There's a road up there that leads to the rich people's suburbs, a little Levittown-esque place where families like the Rourkes live. The town square has an impressive patch of well-kept grass, a pristine white gazebo, an old and gorgeous church, and today—a projection screen strung up at one end, tables with kettle corn, face painting, candy, coffee, cider, pie, donuts. Globe lights hang in icicles from the trees around the square. Tonight is the town's biggest annual event: Ghoul Fest.

There are events like it in the town square a couple times a year. But Ghoul Fest is the one that always gets the biggest turn out. The Snow-Palooza does pretty well, but is mostly for children. The town-wide Easter brunch is always a hit, but is mostly for veterans and poorer families. Ghoul Fest has a black magic quality to it that attracts everyone. The townspeople like things that are just out of the ordinary *enough*. But not too far. Consequently, Ghoul Fest is spooky, never scary. A gentle reminder that the veil between the worlds of the living and the dead is at its thinnest this time of year. That Hallow's Eve is close.

When the lights went out, it was as if the veil had been torn to shreds.

The first minute after the power went out, everyone more or less standing around, wondering what had happened. One second, the square had been filled with light and activity. An oasis of brightness and company in the middle of a vast, empty October night. And the next...

Finally, someone turned and looked up at the church. The emergency light inside was still on. The only light they could see. A ripple spread outwards through the square as more people saw. Eventually, more than six hundred heads swiveled towards the light. They tilted towards it, just to have something to see by, even if it was just a dull red buzz. Some clutched their chests and somehow knew. They felt something but couldn't quite say what it was. They thought it was God. The rapture. He kept his own light on, maybe, in the hopes that they would come and repent before the end.

It was a small church. With a typical congregation of only a hundred or so, there were just enough pews to comfortably seat a third of the people who were jammed into it. They spread out across the deep maroon carpet and over the raised platform at the head of the room, whispering, murmuring, panicking. The press of warm, anxious bodies was making the room start to smell. Within the first half hour, the piney, reverent tang of the church's usual odor was slowly but surely being replaced by a sour, frightened stink. It oozed restlessness and uncertainty.

The pulpit sat in the middle of the platform, in front of a bronze cross and an enormous blue, red and green stained glass window. Off to the left was the back hall, the kitchen, coat room, and Sunday school room. Everything back there was dark. The only two lights in the place: pallid moonlight filtered through the stained glass, and the red glowing emergency light to which everyone had flocked like idiotic moths. Once everyone who wanted to be in the church

was in, someone joked—some dad—“We should close the doors so the spooks can’t get us.” He turned quickly and tickled his kid in the ribs. She squealed giddily.

They closed the church doors half-seriously, trying not to feel how cold the air was outside, and trying not to feel as scared as they really were.

The emergency light glowed brighter once they got used to the dark.

For the first half hour, everyone was talking at once. Instinctively, they kept pulling out their phones to look something up, check the time, see if there was any news. Inevitably, they found there was no internet. No telephone wires. Inevitably, the panic grew.

For the first half hour, their fear was exciting. It was a jolt of the unexpected, an adrenaline jerk akin to that of a haunted house. People were *spooked* more than anything. Parents jabbed their kids in the ribs and hissed, “Very spooky”. Children ran back and forth, lost in the glamor of it all, of something different and shadowy and actually happening.

In the back, around the emergency light, were two dozen or so people, heads dipped to the floor. At the head of the group, Father O’Malley stood with his head bowed, his eyes closed, praying. Some of them had their eyes open. They gaped up at the ghostly red light as if it would bestow upon them some great and irrational answer.

It only buzzed.

Throughout the church flowed a constant stream of older women, bouncing back and forth and trying to help in any way they could. They offered water and coffee from the kitchen, snacks from the Sunday school. Anything. They just couldn’t sit still. They were middle-class and belonged to the church. The elder Rourkes never would have *helped*.

The projection screen billowed in the night breeze. It rippled against the gazebo. On the patch of grass, a few bodies ambled between the tables. They tried to figure out if they should

walk home. If it was safe (What if there were...aliens? Terrorists?). They felt immediately and completely lost. They were nothing more than blurry shapes drifting about in the shadows. Like zombies or ghosts.

Since the blackout, Ghoul Fest had officially and unapologetically fallen apart. The town had never been faced with such adversity before. The townspeople were used to just gliding easily through their lives. Now everything was visibly crumbling.

Ben was there. Cate was there. It meant different things to both of them.

#

Five years ago:

At the end of the meeting, the guy at the head of the circle finally removed his hands from between his knees. It took Pete a second to understand what was happening—he had been staring at them for so long. When the guy raised his hands, clapped them together and announced that the session was coming to a close, Pete had to blink several times before he fully processed what had been said.

Everyone stood silently. They took their coats off the backs of their chairs. The only noise in the room was the gentle rustle of fabric and leather. Car keys jingled. Joints cracked.

“If everyone could put your chairs in the corner, that would be great,” the guy said.

The quick snaps of folding chairs were what brought Eliza back to the room. She breathed in deeply, watching the circle disappear. The names trapped inside it dissipated. Floated away. She wished she could catch just one. Just suck it back in and hold it tight...

“Alan,” she whispered.

“What’s that?”

She looked up.

Pete was standing next to her. His coat was already on. His chair already folded. He held it in both hands. He stared down at her with wide eyes. His knuckles gradually turned white. “What is that?” he said again. His voice came out wounded and old.

Eliza shook her head. “Nothing.” She stood. “Would you mind going out and warming up the car? I’m going to get some coffee.” She gestured vaguely to the plastic table pushed against the wall. A sad pile of stale donuts and a dented aluminum pitcher stared back at her.

Pete nodded numbly. “Yeah. Alright.” He brought his chair over to the corner, shuffling past a mob of other people. No one made eye contact.

Outside, it was snowing. Pete could smell it before he saw it. The crisp, wet chill. When he opened the door of the church, flakes brushed against his face. The town square was covered in scattered swathes of white. The dirt was disappearing. The moon, reflected against the gazebo, looked beautiful. The globe lights along the trees hummed mournfully. Those kinds of lights always seemed to evoke a different time. One happier and younger, with exposed brick, sunken couches. Money problems that felt artificial because there was always a magical space and time *after law school*, which allowed him and Eliza to laugh everything off, clink glasses, never cry, and to only *dream* of children. One where the future was distant and warm.

Now here they were.

Pete pulled the collar of his coat closer about his neck. He went down the steps to the church door. A voice called to him from behind: “You live in the house on the hill.”

Pete turned. Standing just outside the door, leaning against the wall, was a tall figure. Pete squinted. It seemed somehow familiar, but he couldn’t quite place it.

“Sorry?” he said.

The figure snorted. “We’ve crafted a culture so polite that you feel the need to apologize...for so much.” He stepped forward. The wind kicked up. The man’s long black pea coat whipped at his ankles. The globe lights and the moon cast just enough light for Pete to make out his features. The man with the gut and the beard.

“I don’t know what you mean,” Pete said. He took an instinctive step back. “Sorry. What hill?”

“I live in your neighborhood,” the man explained. “I’ve seen you in your house. On the hill. The white one?”

“Oh. Yeah.” Pete stiffened. He held the car keys firmly in his pocket. Something about this wasn’t right. He felt it. The menace of this man, illuminated on all sides by the comfort of the globe lights. The church looming behind him. It didn’t all fit together right. Its pieces didn’t match. He felt this. Knew this. And yet, he remained.

The man took another step forward. He jerked a thumb over his shoulder. “Bullshit. Isn’t it?”

“The group? I don’t know. It...helps.”

“It doesn’t.” His voice was colder than Pete expected. Harsher. “I’ve been coming here for a while. Lost my kid a couple years ago. Doesn’t make me feel any better.” He reached his hand into a pocket in the folds of his jacket. Removed a pack of cigarettes. Stuck one between his lips. He extracted a Zippo from another pocket and lit it. Pete watched him without moving.

“*This* helps,” the man said. He blew smoke out his nostrils. “Booze helps. You want to grab a drink?”

“Can’t. I...have to take the wife home.”

The man took a lingering drag. He shook his head slowly. “Yeah. Booze helps. Drugs. Noise. *Chaos*. Keeps your mind...off. I guess. Just off. I don’t know. Here.” He held out a business card. Pete took it reluctantly. “Call me if you ever want to get together outside of group. To...I don’t know. Create some noise. Yeah. Keep your mind off.”

The man shuffled away. Just as he vanished around the corner, Eliza appeared in the church doorway. She looked off at the departing shadow.

“Who was that?” she asked.

Pete shrugged. He looked up at her. “He wanted to have a party with us.”

Eliza couldn’t stop a scoff from escaping her mouth. “A party?”

“For people from group, I guess. To...*keep our minds off.*”

Eliza came down the stairs. She considered this. She looked at him. “Okay,” she said.

He frowned. “Okay?”

“Yeah, okay,” she said. “Let’s throw a party. For people from group.”

Pete took a breath before he answered. “Alright,” he said. “Let’s do it.”

That was the last time they ever went to church.

Over time, the parties grew. People from other groups started hearing about them, showing up. Almost every night, the Rourke house shook. Its two smallest members stayed hidden upstairs in sound-proofed rooms, trying not to feel the vibrations.

In the mornings Eliza and Pete went to work sober and sad and they never spoke to each other before noon. Ever.

Their tolerance for numbness increased. The parties needed to be bigger, more chaotic until, finally, Eliza and Pete felt their entire world consumed by them. Which is why, when he

was surrounded by people, noise, light, drugs, booze one moment, and by darkness, murmurs, memories in the next, Pete Rourke felt desperation creep in at the edges of his mind.

#

Six hours earlier:

Ben watched the bus drive away. He walked through his front door and dumped his backpack on the runner in the entryway. Down the hall, from the kitchen, came the pitter-patter of his mother preparing for a party. Upstairs, the dull thudding of his father's footsteps around the master bedroom. He was probably walking around in circles, trying on ties. Sometimes, this process took hours.

They were both probably high out of their minds.

Ben abandoned his backpack in the hall. He made for the stairs, hoping he wouldn't be spotted and swooped up in a temporary and superficial drilling. Sometimes this happened, where suddenly his mother would spot him coming home from school and descend upon him in a red-eyed, pot-induced fever. She'd ask him a few questions, forget where she was, and complacently amble away. Ben didn't want her pretending to care about his day. Not right now.

Upstairs in his room, Ben collapsed onto his bed. He had a few hours before he had to be in the town square. Until then...what? He should do some homework, read maybe (he had been really into Kafka lately), eat some dinner...

He heard a car roll into the driveway. Ben got up and walked to the window. He could see the red Tesla for just a moment before it turned off and the driver's door opened. Cate climbed out and sauntered into the house. It might be the only time that day that Ben would see her.

Cate was a high school senior now. This put her at the peak of her career as a sulky, reticent teenager. She had short black hair down to her jawline and green eyes that seemed to see you for what you were. Maybe what you wanted to be, deep down. Too many people in her grade told her her eyes made them uncomfortable. So Cate hid behind her hair as much as possible. She often walked through the halls with her head dipped just enough so that all you could see were the shining black blades of her bangs.

Ben knew as little about her as a younger brother could. To him, she was like a wild animal. You could hold your breath all week for one majestic look, one shard of conversation. He couldn't be sure that he loved her, but he knew he admired her. Sometimes, late at night, he could put his ear against the wall and hear the gentle burble of music. He fell asleep that way more times than he cared to remember.

He had no friends at school.

He listened to Cate come up the stairs. There was a muffled silence as she padded down the hall. And, to his surprise, there was a knock at his door. Ben waited a moment before he moved. He wasn't sure how to react. This hadn't happened in a long time. He went to the door and opened it. Cate stood there, picking at the dark blue polish on her nails. She looked past him as she spoke. "Hey."

"Hi," Ben replied.

"Are you. Um. Do you need a ride to Ghoul Fest?"

Ben cocked his head. "That... would be great. Yeah. You're going?"

Cate nodded. "I got roped into tabling for some conservation thing. Save the forest. Stupid."

Ben couldn't help himself. He smiled. "How did that happen?"

“They made an announcement to my chem class. And. I don’t know. It sounded kind of cool. Whatever.” She stepped back. Her voice took on an edge. “Don’t question my civil service. Look at you, mayor’s boy.”

A few months ago, Ben had taken the initiative to find himself a job. He couldn’t be in the house too long anymore. Couldn’t waste away. He went out looking and, within days, found an internship position with the town’s mayor, Mrs. Haze. Haze was a kind, older woman who always wore pant suits and had her hair cropped neatly above her jawline. Ben mostly kept her schedule in check, got her coffee. She felt to Ben like a retired aunt. He cared for her more than he might readily admit.

Ben blinked. “Sorry. I was just asking. Yeah, a ride would be awesome.”

“Okay.” Cate inched away from the room. “Leave at seven?”

As soon as Ben answered in the affirmative, she slithered back to her room.

At six forty-five, Ben stood in front of the mirror in the bathroom, inspecting himself. He prided himself on his wardrobe. His black slacks looked clean and unwrinkled. His white shirt, too. The grey blazer he had on was lint-free, as was the red and black striped skinny tie he had loosely about his neck. His eyes were tired and brown, like they always were. The weird little shadow over his upper lip kept on keeping on, and the coulic on the back of his head wouldn’t calm down. No matter how hard he tried, it always sprang back up in a thin coil of reddish-brown hair. He looked kind of silly, kind of childish, but at least he wouldn’t look like an asshole standing next to Mayor Haze. If he thought about it, he kind of looked like his father.

“You look nice,” Cate’s voice sounded from the doorway. He turned. She was wearing a red dress and the polish on her nails had turned black and orange.

“You, too,” Ben said.

“Didn’t mean to startle you. Was just waiting for the bathroom.”

“Sorry.” He squinted, leaning closer. “What’s that on your neck?”

She swung her hair quickly to cover up what looked like a bruise or wound. Something.

“Nothing. Why?”

“I was just curious.”

He noticed now that her eyes looked red. “Are you okay?” he asked.

“Just a rough day,” she answered.

“Do you want to talk about it?” Ben felt his heart lurch. She maybe sensed his eagerness to speak with her, his drive for some kind of contact, *anything* with *anyone*...because she moved back.

“I’m really okay,” she said. “You helping run the costume contest?”

“Yeah. Well. Haze is reading the names and judging. I’m just...helping.”

She nodded absently. “Gonna be fun.”

“Hope so. You gonna have fun with the Conservation Society?”

She shrugged. Grunted. “Probably not. People fucking hate having buttons and pamphlets and shit shoved down their throats. But it’ll look good on a college app. So.”

Ben felt his throat tighten. *That’s right*. He had almost forgotten that Cate was leaving for college the next fall. He didn’t even know where she was applying. And he couldn’t ask *now*. But what would he do? She’d be leaving him alone in the house. Utterly, completely...alone. He swallowed and put the thought out of his mind again. Maybe if he didn’t think about it, it would simply go away.

When they were both ready, they snuck downstairs into the living room. Their mother stood holding a large glass of water, sucking it through a thick straw. She chewed manically on

the end of it, and ground her teeth otherwise. Their father was arranging plates of food on the table. His eyes were red. Cate and Ben stood in the hallway, looking in.

“We’re going,” Cate said. Mr. and Mrs. Rourke looked up blankly.

“Have fun there,” Pete said.

“Don’t get eaten,” said their mother.

The Rourkes stared at them, mouths slightly ajar, until they left.

As they drove into town, Ben gazed out the passenger side window. He yawned.

“Tired?” asked Cate.

“A little.”

“I don’t think I’ve ever slept as well as I did when mom would drive us to the drive-in over in Blakesville. You remember?”

Ben did. They were so little. They went to that drive-in a lot during the summer. On the way home, they’d all lie down in the back of the car and nap. All three of them.

Alan was still alive then.

Cate went on. “Whenever we’d drive home, I would look up through the windows at all the lights passing by. I would dream that I was being kidnapped and taken far, far away. By *nice* kidnapers. Some, like, scurvy lads who would take us in and teach us how to live. We’d go on adventures and have a...just a good time.”

Her voice wavered. Ben realized she was holding back tears. Her fingers tightened on the wheel. He wondered if it would be too much to reach over and touch her. He wondered how far away she really was. Before he even moved, though, she shook her head, gave him a sharp look and said, “If you fucking ask me if I’m okay, I’ll crash this car, okay?”

They drove the rest of the way in silence.

When they arrived at the town square, the sun had just set. The rows of saplings around the sidewalks were lit up with globe lights and paper decorations. Halloween had touched down. Cate parked the Tesla next to the curb by the church. Ben hadn't even climbed out of the car before she left him to go stand by the Conservation Society's table.

He walked across the grass towards the gazebo. Slung between its roof and the wall of the bank, the projection screen fluttered in the wind. "The Monster Mash" played lightly in the distance. Kids ran back and forth, faces painted, outfits all done up for the contest. There were witches and goblins, heroes and villains. The air smelled like maple leaves, pumpkin spice, popcorn and the chill mystery of autumn. To Ben's left, there was a table from Jude's Tavern, laid out with sandwiches and cider. To his right, a popcorn cart was filling with golden, gleaming kernels. There was a story circle set up in front of the book store. People had blankets and lawn chairs set up on the grass. Others milled about with plastic cups of Jude's beer and cider.

Haze was leaning against the gazebo. As Ben walked up, she greeted him warmly with a wave and a firm clap on the back. She was stronger than Ben expected. She smiled at him. "Hello, Benjamin." Her voice was warm and a little raspy.

"Hi, Mrs. Mayor," Ben said quietly.

"Benjamin, try to speak up. Don't mumble."

"I try."

Haze looked at him and, Ben felt, *saw* him. Something inside of him turned warm and spread down his arms.

"Benjamin," Haze said, turning from him and holding up a clipboard. "Help me with this, would you? I can't memorize a damn line from this speech."

Ben was happy just to feel needed.

Across the square, Cate held out a stack of pamphlets. She urged people noncommittally to save the forest. No one took a pamphlet. No one cared.

From the distance, a tall man in a nice suit eyed her, and she didn't notice.

#

Three minutes before the blackout:

The costume contest had ended. Ben had stood by Mayor Haze's side throughout, helping her read off names as each contestant was introduced. He felt *good* up there on the gazebo, near the center of attention. He felt bright, seen and *above* so much else. He felt needed. He had looked out into the dark expanse of people staring up at him. The church loomed in the distance. Somewhere out there, too, was Cate. But he couldn't see her.

He had narrowed his eyes and tried to find her amongst the crowd. But she was nowhere to be seen.

"Benjamin," Haze had broken his train of thought. She was showing him something on the clipboard. "Can you help me pronounce this name?"

As Ben took the clipboard, he realized that he could only have been there if he was alone. There had been only one job opening. Only one way out. He had managed to save himself. But Cate was still down there. Out on the grass. Alone.

He tried not to think about it.

They started the evening's movie a half hour or so after the contest winner was announced. The opening cords of the *Halloween* theme plinked from speakers around the grass. The projection screen lit up. Cate stood watching from the back of the square. She loved horror movies. She loved the rush they gave her. The hard, harsh jab of each suspenseful scene, each random teenager killed. The thrill of it all.

Her neck throbbed.

Behind her, she heard the swish of his coat. Felt him there. He whispered something to her, beckoned her into an alleyway with him, where he fondled her sweater and unzipped his pants.

The hard, dull pain of being numb. The thrill of it all.

Maybe, she and Ben realized at the same moment, she was too far gone.

#

When the house was dark, Pete kept walking in circles, clapping. Eliza watched him from the window. He was trying to get it rolling again. But it was too late. People had already paused. Had already been stuck in the dark. In their minds. They were beginning again, after a long time, to think.

“Alan,” she said softly. She watched his name spiral up over her head and crash against the ceiling. What would happen, she wondered, if she never sucked it back, like she always did when she murmured his name to herself. Would he stay up there? Would she forget?

Or, too horrible: Would she be trapped in remembering?

This was, of course, what it all was for. The party. The people. The back room... The rows of cups, filled with dark-colored juice. Ready to whisk them all away. The reason they had all come that night. They knew what they were getting themselves into. They knew they wanted to be *done*. To stop having to think, or avoid thinking. They wanted *out*.

Hence the back room. And hence the cups.

#

Two days ago:

Eliza ran into her at the grocery store.

Their two carts almost touched. Brenda's was filled with microwavable meals and frozen foods. Eliza's was packed with party supplies. Bottles upon bottles of juice.

"Having a big blowout?" Brenda asked.

"A big party for special guests," Eliza said. "Don't feel like you have to come. But here's the invitation." She handed Brenda a sealed envelope. Inside were very specific details about the party. An hour later, Brenda would read it with shaking hands. She'd nod to herself and say, "Yes. I suppose... Yes. It's that time, I think."

In the store, Brenda took the envelope without understanding what it was. She put it in her purse.

"Lotta juice," she commented.

"Yes," said Eliza. "For the party."

"Going to big?"

"It has to be. It's the last one."

Brenda looked sad. "Last one? Are you...quitting?"

Eliza frowned. "Not exactly."

Brenda cocked her head. "You don't go to group anymore."

Eliza laughed. "Darling, we made our own."

The two women parted ways. They laughed because there was nothing else to do.

#

Three minutes before the blackout:

There was a glass coffee table by the south-side window. Running down its center were six fat, neat white lines. Without really looking, Eliza knelt over them, one nostril puckered out around a tightly-rolled hundred-dollar bill. She felt her knees wobble a little beneath her. She

was getting old. She inhaled. Her head shot back. She dropped the bill and rubbed her nose. Now, she looked down. Her fingers were bloody. The party seemed to grow quieter around her. Her face buzzed.

“Jesus,” she said. “Maybe I need to...”

“It’s not yours,” a man with a large gut and a beard said. She couldn’t name him if she tried. He pointed at the table. “Somebody else fucked it up.”

She followed his finger. She hadn’t seen the razor blade lying on the glass. There was a bright red streak along the metal, a perfect translucent flake of skin at one edge. Whoever cut the lines had bled all over them.

“Someone bled on the blow,” Eliza observed. She ran her tongue over her teeth. The words felt odd and foreign in her mouth. She stood. “Whose hand is bleeding in my house?”

Nobody answered.

Eliza scratched her cheek, wiping more blood over her face. “Does anyone have a cigarette?”

Pete was by the other window, nodding absently to a forty-something woman with curling blonde hair. He held a tumbler of whiskey in both hands, resting against his chest. His jaw twitched as she spoke: “Andrew was the best artist in his class. Nine years old and he was drawing things that I... I’m just a stick-figure kind of a... You know, don’t you? There were things, I’m sure... Every kid has their odd talents. I bet your Alan was—”

Pete shot her a look and cut her off. “Really, we don’t talk about those kinds of things here.”

Taken aback, she brought her drink to her lips and took a long sip. Vodka burned down her insides. The two of them stared out the window. Rain beat against the glass. She shook her head. “This rain...”

Pete jerked his head back. “Thank God someone invented the weather,” he said, “or else we’d have nothing to talk about.” He spoke with his hands. His whiskey sloshed onto the floor.

The two of them laughed eagerly.

#

His name was Douglas Frayne.

Frayne was the principal at Cate and Ben’s high school. His office overlooked the town square. From his window, he could watch over everything that happened down there. In the distance, the church stuck up against the sky. And despite or perhaps in spite of the view, Frayne never once looked out his window. Instead, he spent most of his down time sitting rigid behind his desk, staring straight ahead at the mirror on the back of his door. Staring at himself, staring back. Sometimes for hours.

Frayne’s office was immaculate. When you walked in, you could feel your feet sink a little into the lush maroon carpet. The desk was an oaken monster, with nothing on it except his computer, shoved mercilessly off to one side, a green desk blotter and a silver cup filled with blue ballpoint pens. In front of it was a single orange plastic chair. He had positioned his desk directly in front of the window, so that the glare from outside prevented anyone sitting in this chair from reading his face too closely. The shelves along the walls were lined with old hardcover books. The Harvard collection of classics, the Oxford collection, the Russian Modern Library, the Cambridge library, etc. The pages were all gold-edged. The gold edges were all uncracked. There was a simple golden mantel clock on one shelf. The base was a miniature boy in a

straw hat, extending his hand to a small dog. Frayne had gotten the clock in high school at a garage sale, and had fixed it up himself. He polished it, got new wiring for the mechanism inside, and replaced the glass covering over its face.

One day, he showed it to a friend. “Do you like it?” he asked. The friend said, “Sure. But why does it entertain *you* so much?” To which Frayne had answered, “I like the multiple interpretations it lends itself to.”

The friend cocked his head. “What interpretations, Doug? He’s petting the fuckin’ dog.”

“Or,” Frayne suggested, “he’s reaching out to strangle it.”

Frayne’s attire was just as immaculate as the room around him. He wore a black three-piece suit, a bleached white shirt, a black and red tie. His hair was slicked straight back in one fine sweep. Except the coulic leaping out of the back. His face was all hard edges and acute angles. He was tall and thin. When he walked through the halls of the school, it was like watching a slender shadow drift amongst the students. You could hear his mirrored black shoes shrieking across the linoleum for what seemed like miles. He never wore them in his office, so he could feel the carpet against his bare feet.

In his office, you could never hear him coming.

#

Six hours ago:

There was a knock at the door. Frayne stood, padded across the carpet. He rested his hand on the doorknob.

“Who’s there?” he asked.

A small voice peeped through the wood: “Cate.”

He opened the door and Cate Rourke walked into the room. He shut the door behind her. Locked it. Cate walked in an aimless circle around the carpet. She slung her green Jansport backpack off her shoulders and dropped it on the seat of the plastic chair.

The clock ticked.

“No one wears Jansports anymore,” Frayne observed.

“That’s not strictly true.”

“I don’t see a lot of them.”

“I like mine.”

“Alright.”

He fiddled his fingers. She noticed, and pointed at them with her thumb.

“You nervous?” she asked.

“Hmm?”

“You do that when you’re anxious.”

“How do you know that about me?” His voice grew pointed.

She eased off. “I just... We spend...*time* together.”

“A lot of time.”

“Sure.”

“Why don’t you just say a lot of time?”

“I don’t know.” She shrugged.

The clock ticked.

“Um.” She cleared her throat. He waited for her to say something else. She turned from him, and frowned a little. “Last time was... weird.”

“I knew you seemed off.”

“I mean, it was *fine*...”

“I meant now. You seem off now.”

“Sorry. I *feel* off because last time was weird.”

“How?” There was genuine concern in his voice. He walked past her and she caught a hint of his cologne—dark and earthy. He sat on the edge of his desk.

A memory came to him, from when he was in college. He was with some girl at a party. They were sitting alone on a couch off to the side. She had bright red lipstick plastered over her mouth. It was smeared on her teeth. He leaned in and whispered, “You’ve got some lipstick on your teeth.” She blushed and ran her tongue around the inside of her mouth. She grinned for him. He inspected her. “Here,” he said, and wiped it away with his thumb. There was something erotic about it. Her lips closed slightly over his finger. He drew back his hand. Her pupils were dilated. He told her, “I suppose that’s what you’d look like with blood all over your teeth, if someone beat the shit out of you.” She started to say something but he grabbed her and kissed her. She kissed him back, struggling only a little, and that had been the end of it.

The clock ticked.

“Just very intense,” Cate said. She hugged her arms close to her chest.

“Too much?” he asked.

“I think I... Maybe something different, this time.”

“We don’t have to...”

“No. Please.”

A flicker of her parents flashed over her mind as the final bell of the day rang in the hall. She didn’t want to go home to them yet, so she said, “Just *different*. Is all.”

Frayne considered. After a moment, he snapped his fingers. He walked around the desk, wagging his forefinger triumphantly in the air. He opened the bottom drawer of his desk, rifled some papers around, and extracted a revolver.

Cate stared at it. Suddenly, the room felt too big. She felt too in the open. She walked to the window, pulled the shade shut.

“It’s not loaded,” Frayne said.

“But I thought maybe...” She stopped. She didn’t know what she thought. She stared at him. Her eyes were blank.

The clock ticked for a long time.

Finally, she came over to him. She leaned her elbows against his shoulders, wrapped her hands around the back of his head, kissed him hard. He tasted syrupy, like warm Jell-O. He held her close. She bit his lower lip. Her hands moved down his back, and over the front of his slacks. He spun her around and pushed her over on the desk so she was facing the mirror. She rested her cheek against the blotter. Hard, so that her jawbone ached. He looked up at himself, standing over her. Her mouth was open, her eyes closed. He pulled her back against him. She writhed around on his crotch. He sucked at her neck until she cried out, then dug into her skin with his teeth. Her fingernails clawed at the back of his head. He pushed her over again. He ran a hand over her spine. Felt its ridges undulating under his touch.

He undid his belt. He looked at himself in the mirror again. He liked watching himself as he fucked her.

He put the gun against her head and she couldn’t figure out if she liked it. Couldn’t figure out why she was here, other than the smothering feeling she felt in her home. The trapped,

lonely, crushing sensation of living in a place like that. She was crumbling. She knew it. She was visibly crumbling. This was rock bottom, or close to it.

She didn't care.

When she was against this desk, face pressed into the blotter, her mind was a total, painful blank. That was all she wanted.

Her neck was bleeding.

This was when she rolled up her pants, just as Ben was getting off the bus, just as Eliza mixed several gallons of juice with rat poison and just as Pete set up rows of cups in their back room.

Meanwhile, Ed and Annie stood in their kitchen.

“Are you going to Ghoul Fest?” she asked.

#

Near the beginning of the school year, Frayne had stepped out of his office. There on the curb was a girl sitting hunched over. Staring at the ground. Her hands rested on the pavement. Frayne stepped closer. As he came up behind her, he expected her to move. Expected her to hear him. If she did, she didn't show it. He stepped even closer and saw that her hands weren't resting at all. She was dragging her knuckles across the pavement in slow circles. Rasping her skin over the ground. There were bloody flaps of skin hanging off her hands. Frayne looked at her face. She looked bored and sad. Whatever pain she might have felt, she didn't show that either.

“Why are you doing that?” he asked.

She didn't answer. Frayne shifted his weight from foot to foot.

“I'm not going to report you or anything,” he said. “I'm just curious.”

Cate looked at him. She felt something pull at her. Seeing him there, backgrounded by the looming monster of the school, his hands on his hips. All sharp edges. Seeing this made her feel some kind of inner tug.

Which was exactly why she held up her hands and beckoned him to her.

“I’m bleeding,” she said simply.

He licked his lips. “You...want some help?”

He led her into his office. Locked the door behind them. He started to offer her a bandage but she cut him off. She pushed her body into his. Kissed him. He thought about resisting.

Thought about it.

She probably wouldn’t have kept it up if his office hadn’t been so goddamn *clean*. The Rourke home was in such a constant state of disrepair, the post-apocalyptic daylight remains of a long-dead party scattered everywhere, that to see a space like Frayne’s office...

Maybe it kept happening because he reminded her of a time back when life itself was clean.

#

Alan.

Alan was seven years old.

There is always one kid in large families who has to deal with the “You’re adopted” joke. Alan was that child for the Rourkes. Cate and Ben both loved him. They made fun of him, of course. They were the ones who told him he was probably adopted. He *did* have a mess of dirty blonde hair that matched neither of his parents’. But then he would join in with them. He would make fun of himself, and craft elaborate stories about how, yes indeed, he *was* adopted. They could spend hours together, making up adventures about Alan’s adoption.

He had a quick, loud laugh that traveled through the house in odd ways. You could be in the furthest, most isolated corner of the place and still here he was, wherever he was. He had crooked teeth and green eyes and was too good at impersonating a Dickens character. In the summer, he would go outside sometimes, cover himself in dirt, come back in, and dance around, asking for tuppences. He didn't know what they were. But he liked the way the word rolled off the tongue. *Tuppence*. Eliza and Cate, sitting together in the kitchen, would laugh as he danced.

Alan loved soccer. He began playing as soon as he could walk.

His room was right next to Ben's. At night, Ben could see the light from Alan's nightlight stretching across the pink carpet outside. A little purple flower that pulsed as if alive. A week or so before Alan died, the bulb burst. For some time afterward, Ben kept the flower in his nightstand. The broken bulb he carried in his pocket, to and from school. Occasionally, when he was alone, he would hold it up to his ear and shake it to hear the rattle of the snapped wire inside.

When Alan died, the house was filled with police for several days. They left behind nothing but questions, muddy boot prints, and stacks upon stacks of unwashed coffee mugs. The whole time, Ben stayed in his room, clutching the bulb. A few times, officers would come in and speak with him. But he didn't know anything. Soon they left him alone.

One night, Pete knocked on Ben's door. There was no response from inside, so Pete just opened it. When he did, he saw Ben perched on his bed, hands between his knees. Pete could see the metal stem of the bulb poking out between his fingers.

"You shouldn't hold on to that so hard," he said. "You'll break it."

"I don't care," Ben mumbled.

Pete sniffed. "It's broken, Ben."

"I don't care."

“Why don’t we get a new one and you can just put the nightlight in—”

“I don’t *want* the nightlight,” Ben said. He sat up. “I just want the lightbulb.”

Pete lurched across the room and snatched the bulb from his hands. Ben screamed. Pete yanked open the nightstand drawer and shoved the bulb inside. He slammed it shut. Ben cried, “I hate you! I hate you!”

Downstairs, Eliza sat by the window, smoking. She listened to the shouts from above with a blank kind of apathy that was new to her, and which she sort of liked. It was easy to do nothing these days. It was easy to just smoke and ask herself, *Who? Why?*

For a fleeting flash of a moment, Eliza’s mind touched on Ed, the soccer coach. But she shook her head and thought, *He wouldn’t. He’s too nice. It couldn’t be.*

#

There were hundreds of people in the square for Ghoul Fest. Despite the cool mist of rain that had been falling all night, families milled about between the tables, picking up snacks and candy and ads for haunted houses. Children sprinted back and forth across the grass. For a few hours, the town was filled with life and light. Haze led them through the costume contest. She assured them they were all winners and nobody really cared about who won. The contest winner, a spoiled girl dressed as a cow jumping over the moon, disagreed. Loudly and to anyone there in her fourth grade class who would listen. There was more cider than anyone could have hoped to drink in a single evening. More cotton candy and popcorn and fried food than people could manage to eat. Music echoed outwards through the dark streets beyond. The town had created a bubble in which, for just a few hours, everything was fine. No one had any worries or preoccupations. No concerns. No one *thought*.

When the blackout hit, Ben was stepping down off the gazebo. He placed his foot on the grass and felt it before he heard it. There was a boom and a ripple. It spread out over the square. First the popcorn cart went dark. Entire threads of globe lights popped and turned black. The projector gave off a quick crack and a whir. The screen went blank. For several seconds, people blinked at each other, wondering what had happened. Suddenly, all the life had gone somewhere else. They joked around for a while, wondering if somebody had plugged in one too many cords. Someone was sent to check the fuses behind Jude's Tavern. Collectively, the town slowed down and waited for something to happen.

When they discovered the light in the church, the townsfolk split into two definitive groups. There were those who saw it as a blessing and flocked towards it. Those who were unsure or bored followed suit. Two hours later, when the lights came back on, they mostly forgot about the whole thing. They forgot what they had just heralded as a miracle. They went back outside and Ghoul Fest picked up more or less where it had left off. The blackout, over as suddenly and mysteriously as it had begun, was happily forgotten.

Then there were those who remained outside. They saw the light in the church and thought nothing of it. It was neither miracle nor omen to them. They were the ones who had seen real darkness before and were not phased by it now.

Ben and Mayor Haze stayed by the gazebo. Ben waited anxiously for the lights to go back on. For a long while, it seemed like they never would. He chewed his fingernails.

"You'll chew your fingers off altogether," Haze warned him.

Ben shrugged. "I'll be fine."

"You shouldn't be so nervous all the time."

He shrugged again. "I'm fine."

Ben didn't know what to do with himself. While the lights were out, there was nothing *to* do. He simply had to wait. And while waiting, he was forced to keep himself occupied. Since he was mostly standing still, this involved letting his mind wander. It involved remembering.

Alan.

Across the square, Frayne pushed Cate against the wall of the alleyway. She ran her hands roughly over the brick. Not quite so hard that she bled. But hard enough.

#

Alan.

Alan had a hard time sitting still.

Over dinner, he would squirm back and forth in his chair. He ate by swinging his arms in circles. He brought his hand back and around, scooping a piece of chicken tender, a cluster of peas, whatever. Then he windmilled it up and over into his mouth. He never chewed without smiling. Sometimes, Cate would join him. They would have contests. Who could spill the least food. Who could move the fastest, swing their arms in the widest arcs. Pete was the one mediating these contests. He would judge fairly and honestly, and he made sure that nobody won too many times in a row. Eliza and Ben would laugh and applaud.

If it was spring or summer and still light out after dinner, Alan would run outside off the back porch, onto the wide expanse of grass behind the house. He spent as much time as he could amongst the warmth, the flowers in Eliza's garden against the porch, the buzzing of insects. The bees darting between the daffodils, hydrangeas, sunflowers. Cate was the one who taught him how to play soccer. She was the one who played outside with him. She went to all of his games. Waited for him after practice to ask how well he played, how his teammates were doing.

One day, he didn't come home. And nobody could find him.

Cate spent a few weeks on the back porch afterwards, hugging her knees to her chest. She felt little else except the growing cold, the hard wood against her backside. The emptiness of the back yard.

One day, Eliza came out and stood, wringing her hands, gazing at her garden. Cate didn't look at her. They stayed silent for a long time.

"I think I'll allow the garden to die," Eliza said suddenly. "No one's going to see it, really, will they?"

Cate said nothing...

"It's kind of hidden beneath the porch, isn't it? Nobody's going to notice it dying."

Nothing...

"Your father and I are going to group. Can you...you watch your brother?"

Nothing.

There was the smell of snow in the air. Soon the porch would be buried in it. Cate took to sleeping on the floor in her room. She wore a deep groove in the carpet, packing it down with endless restless nights. Her shoulders twisted and hunched. They hurt while she was at school. But she needed the hard surface. She needed to feel something.

When Alan was gone, Cate started having dreams. She thought about his body, alone underground. Trapped in a small wooden box. In her dream, she saw him alive even though she knew he was dead. Her mind gave her a kind of compromise between the two. It showed him with his eyes open but rotting. His skin warm but peeling away. She saw him scratching at the underside of the coffin with drooping fingers. Bones jabbed through his fingernails.

Finally, one night, she was in the coffin with him. She couldn't move. She felt the dirt all around her, felt it pressing in. She felt him there with her. Felt his small body pushing against her

side. And that was it. For eternity, here she was, unable to move or speak. Just *being* next to him. She woke up from this dream crying. Not because of the dream. But because she had to wake up.

Company, she thought. *He needs company down there.*

She had the dream just before dawn. She sat on the floor, holding herself, watching the sun rise behind her curtain. Its horses illuminated, the grass fields rolling out under their hooves. She watched the growing light brighten them. After a while, she stood. And tore the curtain down.

She knew the floor wasn't enough anymore. She knew it had to be something *more*.

Cate began standing still with her back against the wall. She pushed her spine against it, rubbing each disk against the hard wallpaper. Eyes closed, she dreamt standing up. Until her legs grew numb and she collapsed to the floor.

She drifted further and further away.

Then she started her senior year of high school.

#

Sure enough, Ben made himself bleed. He bit through the skin right next to his fingernail, letting loose the fluid inside. A few miniscule droplets of rain fell on his finger, blotting the blood. A thin, red, watery streak ran down his wrist.

He looked up at Mayor Haze, who was sitting on the step of the gazebo. She was leaning back so that her head was under the gazebo's roof, out of the rain. She looked at him and clucked her tongue.

"You hurt yourself," she said.

"I...did," he replied numbly. "I am." He put the finger in his mouth and sucked at it.

"Come here."

Ben obeyed her meekly. He walked up to the step and she held out her hand.

“Let me see,” she said. He gave her his finger. She examined it in the dim light. “You shouldn’t injure yourself like this.”

“Sorry,” he mumbled.

“Benjamin, *please* don’t mumble.” She gave him back his hand. “That, too, is a form of hurting yourself. Why is it that you chew your fingernails?”

“I get nervous.” He stuck his injured finger back in his mouth, kept sucking at it. Haze watched him curiously.

“What’s there to be nervous about?” she asked. “Nothing’s happening.”

“The blackout,” he said vaguely.

“Blackouts aren’t frightening.” Her face cracked into a smile. He could see now how warm it really was. He could see how the wrinkles crisscrossing her skin went into making a smile, and could see now how they had been formed. Years of exuding warmth and kindness dug them into her flesh. How many smiles, Ben wondered, did it take to do that to yourself. His own face was smooth and unharmed.

He found himself staring at her and looked quickly away. He felt like he needed to say something, to fill the space between them. She beat him to it: “So why is the blackout scary to you?”

“It’s not so much the blackout,” he answered, talking around his finger. “It’s the not doing anything.”

“How do you mean?”

“My family is always *doing*. We’re always moving. If we stop... We get depressed. And scared.”

Mayor Haze looked at him for a long time. The smile disappeared. In its stead was now just an old, wrinkled face. Looking at it, Ben had a hard time remembering what the wrinkles were there for. The thought startled him. Made the hairs on the back of his neck stand up. He had just had it. Seconds ago, he had known. Now the thought of her smiling over and over, for decades, until the lines were worn down into her features, felt distant and impossible. He needed to see her smile again. Needed to see her smile for *him*.

Just at that moment, a boy about Ben's age came up to them. He had long blonde hair, a large sweater with a Jack o'lantern on it. He gave Ben a passing wave and walked up to the mayor. Ben had the distinct feeling he knew who he was but he couldn't quite tell...

Haze gave the boy a hug and suddenly, Ben had it. This was Haze's son.

For a moment, the world zoomed out. Ben stepped back as he watched the boy and Mayor Haze talk. His ears rang. He couldn't hear what they said. But he watched with intent fascination. Because here was Haze with another *him*. Her *own* son. He had no part in this. In who she was. He was not hers. She was not his. He watched her smile and laugh, and realized, for the first time, that those things weren't always going to be for him. That he was not where he was supposed to be. He was supposed to be at home. And there was supposed to be someone else smiling with him.

He had forgotten this for a long, long time.

Ben took the finger out his mouth. Wind and rain beat against his wound. He straightened up. "I'm going home," he said clearly and calmly.

Haze blinked at him. She started to say something, stopped. He turned from her and her son, and began walking the two miles back to his house.

Across the square, Cate was still in the alley. Her face rubbed up against the brick wall. When the lights came back on shortly afterwards, she would turn and see Frayne's face in stark, pale light. The harshness of that, the sharp, hard pain of it, would be enough. Enough to hold on to. To cling to.

Ben wouldn't remember she was there until he got home. He would only remember much later, when he was warm and safe in bed, and he heard her car in the driveway. *I had to walk back by myself*, he'd reassure himself as he stared at her headlights, splayed across his ceiling. *She chose her way*.

Of her own volition, one moment she was there, the next she was gone. Her own volition. She drifted further and further away.

#

Alan

Alan was there. And all of a sudden, he wasn't.

There was a field down the road from their house where he liked to play. Sometimes after soccer practice he would go there by himself and kick a ball around. He would lay in the grass and stare at the infinite blue of the sky. He felt good and whole here, amongst the smells and buzzes and warmth of the open field. He felt that everything was right and free and timeless.

One day, he stood after lying in the grass for a long time. He brushed himself off. He listened for a moment to all the birds and insects. He breathed in the rich, dirty wealth of the earth. He...had the feeling that he was being watched.

He turned. There was a flash of something bearing down on him, something big and indescribable. It stretched out for miles and years. Bigger than he would ever be. In a fleeting

moment, he saw it take shape. He saw it become something faintly recognizable. A face he knew. Fingers gripped around a rock.

And everything went suddenly, completely

#

Pete was crying. He went around and around the living room, clapping and chanting. “Keep it going, keep it going.” But no one listened. They backed away from him, moving towards the edges of the floor.

For more than an hour, they remained motionless. Time stopped. Life itself stopped. And suddenly, here they were. Stopping. Thinking about what they were doing. Suddenly, the back room and its rows of cups felt like a nightmare. It felt very near and cold. Suddenly, the room felt harrowingly empty. Like there was nothing above them but dead air and rain.

Eliza’s hand fluttered at her throat. She swallowed. In the sudden dark, she couldn’t stand letting him be out there, floating around on the ceiling, all alone.

“Alan,” she said. She inhaled sharply. A balding man standing next to her heard her. He blinked. Realized what was happening.

“Dominic,” he said.

The person next to her heard. Realized. They shook their head. “Michael.”

The ripple passed outwards, around the fringes of the room.

“Jane.”

“Randy.”

“Charlotte.”

“Mary.”

“Ted.”

“Emily.”

On and on.

Rain pressed against the window.

Pete slouched forward. He was alone in the center of the room. Everyone else had subsided. They pushed against the walls, suddenly sober and regretful. Pete stopped clapping his hands. Crying softly. His palms were numb. His lip quivered.

What now? He thought. *What do we do now?*

Alan crept into the corner of his mind. Pete tried shaking him loose. Tried sending him back to the deepest, most unvisited parts of his awareness. He tried. And failed.

There was a gasp near the entrance to the hall. Pete swiveled his head in that direction. There was nothing there. He swiveled back to say something, but as soon as he did, he heard it. The sound of the front door opening and closing. He didn't move. He listened as slow, deliberate steps made their way down the hall and to the stairs. The bannister moaned as someone leaned heavily against it. Everyone in the living room tilted their heads up and gazed open-mouthed at the ceiling. There were sounds coming down of hands rifling through drawers, the clinking of glass. Silence. The steps moved back down the stairs. A few seconds later, Pete saw it. In the doorway stood a dark, dripping figure. It swayed back and forth. Pete's senses were in an alcoholic disarray and he couldn't quite tell what he was looking at. But for a moment, his ears buzzed. For a moment, he saw a young boy in soccer cleats, standing at the end of a path of muddy prints, leading out the door and down the driveway. For a moment, Peter Rourke saw his son.

The lights came back on. Some of the people cheered, some of them gazed blankly at the doorway. Eliza closed her eyes and, as long as she could, kept the darkness with her. The stereo hummed. Music began again. Ben stood at the edge of the throng of bodies. His hair was wet, his clothes dripping. He stood motionless for a moment, then extended his hand. In his palm lay a tiny, blackened lightbulb. It sat there between them. Pete stared at it.

Ben coughed. "Fix it," he said quietly.

It took Pete several seconds to realize what was happening. To realize that this, too, was his son. And to realize that it was taking him longer than it should have to recognize this. But suddenly, he knew. He saw the bulb and he knew. He made a choking, gasping, throaty sound. He moved to Ben. Ben stiffened. Pete put his hands on his son's shoulders. They were silent. After a long time, Pete said, "I'm going to send everyone home."

Ben didn't know what to do other than nod.

When Eliza opened her eyes, her husband and her son stood before her. She started to say something. Pete cut her off: "We're going to send everyone home."

"Home?" The bearded man with the gut interrupted. His tone began angry, but ended frightened and small. "I don't want to go home. There's nothing happening there." His eyes were wide. The blackout had been hard on him, too. On everyone. The entire room twitched uncomfortably. Ben felt someone clawing at his hand. Turning, he saw his mother, blood streaked over the lower half of her face. She had her fingers clenched around his.

He had forgotten what her hands felt like. She had forgotten his, too.

I'm sorry, she mouthed.

True to his word, Pete sent everyone home. What happened to them is unknown. Some of them killed themselves anyway. Meanwhile, the Rourkes dumped the cups from the back room

into the sink. The three of them sat together on the floor for a long time. None of them knew what to say. Or if anything they said would even matter. None of them knew what the next day would be like. Or if the sun would even rise.

All they could hope for was that it might.

In the town square, the church's emergency light winked out. In the commotion of everything coming back to life, Cate almost considered walking back home. But it just seemed too far away.

#

Ed was never caught. Soon after the power went out, he bled to death while Annie clutched herself in the tub. The water cascaded over its edges onto the floor. She rocked back and forth, shivering and crying in the sudden dark.

END