

Diane and the Storm

When the power went out, Diane thought she'd finally died. The instant blackness was so encompassing and disorienting. Did it happen? She thought. Is this what it's like?

Even when she came to her senses and knew, really, that she was being foolish, she continued to humor the idea. What could take her that suddenly? An aneurism? A heart attack? God knew there was history of both in the family. But her joints still ached and so she sighed and heaved herself from the recliner in the living room.

It was the storm, of course. An enduring summer storm that had started up in the late afternoon and was only getting worse. Dark clouds and wind in the trees. Rain pummeling against the roof. A branch must have gone down on a power line somewhere, and out here so far from town it surely wouldn't be fixed until tomorrow.

Beneath the pattering of the rain Diane could hear the old wooden clock above the entryway. It was ornate and grand and powered the old-fashioned way, with many small gears turning inside. It ticked its slow, monotonous tick into the blackness — a ticking that had been there Diane's entire life, had ticked away every second of her existence in that old farmhouse on the hill. Through three children and a husband, through one failed career and countless bouts of bad health, there it had been. Suddenly she found the sound infuriating. She thought she might just rip it off the wall and bash it against the bannister, if only she could have reached it up there above the front door.

Even so, the clock served as a kind of auditory lighthouse for Diane, and she could use it to gauge her distance from where it sat facing the dining room. She waved her arms out in front of her and moved in tiny half-steps towards the sound, taking her time. She didn't want to risk

tripping and breaking her hip, again — death might have intrigued her but there was no allure in pain. When the carpet gave way to hardwood beneath her, Diane knew she was in the dining room.

By dragging one hand along the wall, Diane made it to the secretary desk in the corner. Her knuckles bumped against a brass knob and she began pulling open drawers to rummage inside. She knew there was a pack of matches in there somewhere, a large one from the hardware store in town. Sure enough, Diane's fingers found a soft cardboard box that rattled when she shook it. She slipped out a match and fumbled to light it.

The small burst of flame made finding the candles on the dining table easy enough. They were always there, after all, perched atop a pair of antique candle holders and waiting for the next big holiday dinner. As Diane held the match up, she realized the candles would probably be waiting forever — since Jerome's death, the kids no longer wanted to spend holidays at her home, and instead asked Diane to make the trip into the city. The old wicks sputtered a moment before coming to life.

Diane lifted one of the candle holders and spent the next half hour carefully hunting for more candles. She found a few under the kitchen sink and more left stacked in the broom closet. One already in the wash room. In the end, Diane had enough candles to throw a decent ring of light around the dining room and leave one on in the kitchen should she need a glass of water.

That chore finished, Diane sat in the high-backed chair at the head of the table and wondered what to do. She watched the wonky shadows shivering about, felt the odd atmosphere her home took on under candlelight — like something not her own. And always there was the tick, tick, ticking of the clock.

Diane would have pulled out her copy of *The Lovely Bones*, that month's controversial book club selection, but she knew it would be a wasted effort. These days she could only read while sitting under the brightest lamp in the living room, and even then it was tiresome. She might have pulled out her pen and paper to write a letter to her granddaughter, but her writing would only come out sloppy and crooked and then her granddaughter would have another thing to worry about. So Diane was left to sit and watch the wax melting.

Translucent drops pooled around the flame and descended the tall candle, and Diane began to remember things. She remembered blackouts of years past when Jerome would wrap a blanket around the both of them and they'd watch the storm from the porch, sometimes even share a glass of scotch together. Back then blackouts were never boring — they were a sliver of time outside the normal swing of things, a time to drop everything and be giddy together at the thrill of something unexpected. Diane felt an ache bloom and start to spread through her chest. She pushed the chair back and got up from the table, irritated. She went to the front door and opened it, looking past the porch at the storm outside. The rain was still a steady drum. Diane decided to get her knit blanket from the couch and take a candle out onto the porch.

Though the air was damp, Diane was perfectly warm with the blanket draped around her shoulders. She sat in her rocking chair and placed the candle on the small side table beside her. The porch was screened in but Diane still felt the wind gently pull and push at her hair. It felt nice, felt refreshing, and candle flame danced but stayed alive.

Staring out, Diane could see the hazy shadows of pine trees in her yard swaying to and fro against a dark gray sky. She listened to the rain and waited for the bright flash of white that

would come every few minutes, briefly illuminating the glistening road and the wheat field beyond with its stalks undulating as one. Then the thunder would rumble.

At some point, the storm intensified — Diane could see the magnificent streaks of lightning as they broke across the sky and could hear the rhythm of the rain picking up. The wind became a dreadful howl against the side of the house. Diane counted five seconds between the lightning and the thunder, then three, then she could barely count to two before thunder clapped like God was cracking open walnuts in the sky.

Diane was just about ready to go back inside. The storm was too loud, now, and giving her a headache, and she thought she might manage to sleep if she climbed into bed. But when she stood with the candle in her hand, a gust of wind blew through the screened-in windows and put out the wick with a puff. In the same moment, Diane heard a sound beneath all the ruckus of the storm.

She paused to listen, and there it came again. A kind of moaning or crying coming from the yard. Diane moved closer to the screen and peered out. At the next flash of lightning, she saw it: a small white cat drenched to the bone and meowing into the rain. It was trying to climb out of the ditch by the road, claws dug into the dirt, a river of run-off rushing by beneath.

Diane might have paused at the thought of going out into such a storm. She might have thought of her rusted joints, of her weakened body, of her slow-moving limbs. But Diane didn't think much of anything. She didn't even take the blanket off her shoulders or put the candle down. She just pushed on the screen door and walked right out into the wind and the rain.

Diane was soaked in a matter of seconds. She dropped the water-laden blanket from her shoulders and tilted her chin down so she could go on breathing without inhaling water. How

long had it been since she'd let herself get rained on like this, really rained on? The water felt kind of nice banging against her shoulder-blades, running down the backs of her arms. She inched her way across the yard, thinking of her hip, thinking of how slippery the grass was. When she could hear the cat meowing somewhere below her, she waited for a flash of lightning.

The next one came and for a second there was the cat, tiny and disoriented, hanging on for dear life at the edge of the ditch. The crack of thunder came just after and Diane felt the Earth vibrate. She dropped the candle and knelt down slowly, reaching out for the cat.

When she got one hand around its wet body, the cat bit her. Diane grabbed it by the scruff of its neck and pulled it up into her arms. It bit her again, but it was a weak bite and didn't draw blood. Diane stood up and started back across the lawn. She was walking hurriedly this time when a flash and a crack came simultaneously, and instead of vibrating the Earth quaked. Diane lost her footing and went down hard on her back. She felt the wind go out of her and rolled onto her side to gasp.

Diane lay there in the grass and the mud thinking that the rain didn't feel so good anymore. There was a pulsating pain in her back, a pain reminiscent of her broken hip eleven years ago, only eleven years ago Jerome had been there to run over and carry her to the car. Now Diane was all alone in the middle of a storm in the countryside, all alone with nothing but a wet cat meowing loudly at her.

Diane was ready to start crying into the ground about her back, about her dead husband, about the sad little animal in her arms, but there came another bolt of lightning. It felt just as close to Diane as the first one had — as if it had pierced the Earth a mere inches away — and immediately Diane's pain was overridden by another sort of feeling she hadn't experienced in

years. It was fear, simple and demanding. The kind of fear that doesn't wait or reason, and in that second of blinding light Diane had seen her fear in the dilated pupils of the white cat. With the same hypnotic movements that had brought her out of the porch minutes earlier, Diane rolled onto her knees and hauled herself up. She limped through the pelting rain and wailing wind to the porch, then through the front door and into the calm of her candlelit living room.

The door banged shut behind her and storm was reduced to a muffled hum. Diane stood in the entryway dripping, a small pool forming at her feet and flowing out across the hardwood. She was breathing hard. Her back was afire. The candles stood around and softly flickered at her. She would limp to the wash room to get as many towels as she could carry for herself and the cat. She would get blessedly dry again and she would make herself a hot compress, feed the cat some milk and ham slices. Eventually, she would take the cat upstairs with her to the warm, soft bed that awaited them, and she would attempt to sleep. As soon as she awoke the next morning she would be immobilized by her back — but she would call the doctor and he would give her pills and the pain would slowly subside.

But before all that, Diane had to stand there wet and panting for a while longer. She had to let the fear pump itself out of her chest, let herself come back down. And she had to spend a few more minutes listening to that great wooden clock above her head, quietly ticking into the night.