

Blackout

Tired and way too sober, Elizabeth slides onto the barstool and sets down her wallet. Her ponytail feels heavy and her jeans too tight. The bartender tops off a few shots of tequila for a plain-looking brunette and her boyfriend several stools down. Somehow, the girl reminds Elizabeth of Meredith, though her older sister is anything but plain.

She realizes belatedly that the bartender is in front of her, looking expectant. An earring glints in one of his ears. “Sorry,” says Elizabeth, “I’ll take a vodka soda.”

His nametag identifies him as Joseph. He nods. “No problem. That’ll be \$12.50.”

“I hate New York,” she mutters darkly, sighing. She rubs at the dry skin on her knuckles while the bartender turns to make her drink. He sets the cool glass on the bar and Elizabeth slides him fourteen dollars worth of crumpled bills. By the look on his face, he’d been expecting a better tip. *Whoops*. She takes a long swig and wipes her mouth.

“Liz?” says a surprised voice on her left. It’s a scruffy-looking guy with a sweaty forehead and a mostly-empty bottle of beer.

She stares at him, bites her lip, takes another sip. As the vodka bites the roof of her mouth, she realizes. “Steve?” He looks different than she remembers. He has an unchecked neck beard and red eyes like he’d either been crying or smoking a lot of weed.

He touches her shoulder. His fingertips are sticky and smell like beer. “You remembered!” Steve signals Joseph, who glowers at him. “A shot of Fireball, my man, and one for my girl over here.”

“I’m not *your* girl.” she says, clenching her fingers under the bar.

Steve laughs. “I know! Jesus, you’ve still got that stick up your ass, huh?”

Elizabeth raises her eyebrows. Joseph brings two overfilled shots of Fireball. An amber bead slips down the side of her glass.

She wants to say, “No, thanks,” get off this cold stool, tell Steve to go fuck himself, go outside, and get a cab. Her self-disgust rises as she realizes how flattered she is that he remembered her, wanted to talk to her and buy her a drink, like she was any pretty girl at a bar.

Steve watches the bouncing breasts of the brunette a few stools down as she laughs at something her date says. Elizabeth mechanically throws the Fireball to the back of her throat, trying not to cringe. She hasn’t drunk this stuff since college. Sharpness and cinnamon flood her mouth.

Returning his attention back to her, Steve smiles broadly, and leans in. “How you been, honey?”

Elizabeth stirs her vodka soda with her straw, then sips. “Oh, you know.” She waves her hand vaguely. *Oh, you know...nothing...just trying to get promoted out of my low-level position I’m overqualified for to pay off my student loans and still have time to run lines with 25-year old sister so she doesn’t freak out before her auditions and edit my 16-year old sister’s American History papers so she can get into college someday. Just, regular stuff, you know?*

Steve nods empathetically. “I feel you.” Elizabeth knows he’s got two parents who paid for his college at some prissy liberal arts school, who pay his rent so he can be lazy and stupid and buy \$70 gin at the fancy liquor store across from his apartment on the Upper East Side, that every Christmas he drives up to the Hamptons wearing \$250 shoes.

Elizabeth rolls her eyes, but she doesn't say anything. Steve motions Joseph for another round as she finishes her vodka soda.

"So what do are you doing at Smith's?" asks Steve, wiping his mouth. There are tiny black smiles of dirt under his fingernails. "Here to see the band? My buddy's the bassist, I can hook you up."

Elizabeth glances behind her. "Oh, I hadn't even realized there *was* a band," she admits.

He laughs again, and suddenly she has an itchy feeling that she is embarrassing herself. "Good ole Lizzie."

Don't call me that, she thinks, but she takes her shot instead. She is starting to feel it, and she embraces that wooziness, the lift of that choking anxiety, that weight on her chest she always feels when she wakes up, when she's in the shower, when she's doing Grace's laundry.

"How's Mere doing?" he asks with forced casualness.

"So that's why you're talking to me," she realizes aloud. It comes out petulant, and her stomach tightens.

"No, no," says Steve, looking awkward. "We're friends, right?"

She stares at him. "You dated my older sister for over a year, and then she dumped you."

"She made a mistake." he said evenly. Like he had practiced?

"It was months ago." she points out, and laughs. "Get over it." She likes feeling bitchy instead of diplomatic.

"Do you even know why we broke up?" he asks, looking at her hard.

She shakes her head. “It’s really none of my business.” *Look at you, Elizabeth. Just a parrot for whatever Meredith says.*

He laughs sharply. “Yeah, right. It was about *you*.”

“What?” Elizabeth whispers.

She remembers the day she found out about the break-up. Meredith’s back, the way she stiffly stirred Grace’s pasta on the stove, the harsh line of her shoulder blades through her T-shirt, like wings.

She’d known immediately. “What happened?” Her keys clanked together loud in the quiet of their apartment, only interrupted by the hum of the TV from behind Grace’s closed door.

“Mmm?” Meredith turned, looked at her blankly. She’d always had quite the poker face; it made her such a good actress.

“You’re upset.” Elizabeth took off her coat, one arm at a time, and hung it next to Meredith’s favorite, a red trench coat she’d found at the Goodwill on Broadway.

“Oh. I just broke up with Steve.” Casual. Fished out a bowtie with the spoon and squished it against the counter to check if it was done.

“Really? Why?” Elizabeth rummaged through her bag for her journal and a ballpoint pen.

“Honestly, Lizzie, it’s really none of your business.”

Now, he pulls a worn pack of Camels from the pocket of his jeans and offers it to her, but she just shakes her head. He laughs as if this reaction was completely expected, and pauses to light up.

“Anyway, Liz, I’m sorry Mere never told you anything. That’s bitchy of her, but she’s always like that, isn’t she? Kinda hot, but fucking stupid. Always jealous of other girls, the ones at the auditions, and even you.”

“Me?” she echoes, then silently admonishes herself for not sticking up for Meredith.

“Sure. You’re hot, right? Well, sort of.” he amends, appraising her. She stiffens, her ears burning. “Anyway, I told her what we did at James’ party—”

Elizabeth feels her brain instantly burn through every ounce of alcohol in her system. She’s suddenly on her feet, but she doesn’t remember getting up. She can hear her heartbeat in her ears, pulsing with the auto-tuned bass behind her.

“That was you?”

Now he looks faintly annoyed. “Seriously? We had such a good time that night.”

Dizzily, she remembers the party. Well, before she was blackout, that is. Meredith had invited her, and she’d felt honored. Elizabeth remembers hovering, arms crossed, as Meredith danced with her friends, the music too loud and apartment too dark to know if the girl who handed her the plastic cup was her sister or not. To this day, she wasn’t sure if someone had spiked her drink or she had just overdone it, like she used to in college. All she remembers was waking up around sunrise on a beer-stained couch, the light bleeding on her face, surrounded by a nest of sticky bottles and dripping plastic cups, hunting for her clothes in the half-darkness. Getting a cab home. Showering in the apartment for what felt like hours, Grace and Meredith asleep in their rooms, dreaming and oblivious. Mere had asked her for details about the party the next day, of course. She’d frowned worriedly when Elizabeth told her all she remembered.

Now, she says tightly, “I have to go,” and reaches for her wallet on the bar.

“Hey, what’s the hurry?” He tries to grab her wrist but she shakes him off. “I was hoping we could go get out of here.”

She finds her voice. “I’ll pass, thanks.”

At the door, though, she turns. Steve is still staring at her, dumbstruck; the bartender looks faintly pleased. Hoping he sees, she gives him a relieved almost-smile and then she is outside, her breath steaming in front of her as she flags down a cab.

Back at the apartment in Brooklyn, she unlocks the door, hangs her keys and jacket, and peels off her wet boots. She feels heavy, but not sleepy.

“Hello?” she calls, hoping Meredith might be up.

She can hear the faint murmur of Grace’s voice from her room, and she feels a flash of frustration. Elizabeth sends the door careening open.

“What the hell are you still doing up?” She glances at her watch; it’s past 2:00. “You’re supposed to get up early to work on your reading before your shift!”

Grace, in braids and a huge T-shirt that had probably once belonged to their father, sits cross-legged on top of her rainbow comforter, earbuds in, apparently Skyping with someone. She removes one earbud, eyebrows raised. “I’m sorry, what?” She turns to her screen and whispers, “Sorry, the dictator’s back.”

Elizabeth feels like a bottle of Coke someone just shook full of Mentos. “Okay, enough.”

She steps forward, and Grace says hastily, “Okay, okay! Give me a second, jeez.” She returns to the screen. “I am *so* sorry. I know. I *know*. I feel exactly the same way,

babe. She's terrible, right? Yeah, be glad you have a *real* mom." She laughs; Elizabeth feels empty. "Yeah, yeah. Love ya!" She blows a kiss to the screen, slams it closed, then turns a furious, burning gaze to her older sister.

"What the hell?" Grace yells. "You're not my mom."

"Damn right, I'm not!" Elizabeth shouts back. "I'm 23! Stop forcing me to babysit you." She snatches Grace's laptop and stalks out.

"Hey!" Grace screams from her doorway as Elizabeth retreats to her own room. "I *need* that!"

"Should have thought of that before you were a little shit," Elizabeth snaps, closing her bedroom door. "Go to bed!" she yells through the wall.

"Suck my ass!" Grace shouts back, slamming her own door.

She sets Grace's laptop—orange and covered in stickers—under her bed and collapses on top of her duvet, fuming. She imagines, not for the first time, a life where she has her own apartment, where she is not babysitting two unruly sisters because that's her parents' job. Maybe she visits them on Thanksgiving: she is the cool, successful sister, not the overworked mom who is constantly washing dishes, always lecturing when Grace stays out past curfew and won't answer her phone or Meredith gets so upset and existential that she buys a \$150 cake and eats it, sobbing in her bed. She imagines her father at the stove, the wafting oniony smell of veggie stir-fry (his favorite), laughing when their mother teases him about how much soy sauce he put in. Maybe her mother helps Grace with her homework or braids her hair. Elizabeth can remember nights as a little girl when her father would read to her in a long, slow voice, sitting on top of her blankets. After his warm voice slowed to a stop, she lay in that liminal space between

dreaming and waking, blinking slowly. Her mother would smooth her blankets up to her chin, brush her hair from her forehead with dry fingers, and kiss her temple. Now, she has the strange floating feeling as if she dreamed it. Her mother is a ghost in a blazer, a detached voice on the telephone, blank and always unsurprised.

She wonders, not for the first time, whether her mother still thinks their father is missing. Thinks about him at all, anymore. She hasn't brought him up in years, not even on his birthday or their anniversary. Their mother had always been convinced that something terrible happened to him.

Elizabeth was eleven and every afternoon, she walked from middle school and picked up Grace from preschool. Every morning, as she helped her father pack their lunches, her mother would carefully braid Grace's tangly hair, before kissing their father on the cheek and taking the subway to work, coffee in hand.

On the day he disappeared, like most days, Elizabeth picked up Grace from preschool and they walked to The Strand to meet their father. She always left her sister among the picture books. Grace would peel off her jackets and sweaters, pool them around her in a nest, and pick out a stack of books to read on the floor. She liked to flip through the pictures, sucking absently on her thumb.

Elizabeth met their father in nonfiction. They read science books side-by-side on the bench under the second-floor window, occasionally sharing something interesting they'd just learned. The week before they had decided to study astronomy. Her father had selected a thick volume relating Einstein's theories to supermassive black holes while she paged through one on galactic categorizing, full of pictures from the Hubble Space Telescope. Sometimes, when they finally got bored, they would go to The Bean next door

and get an Americano and a strawberry lemonade. Sometimes she would try his coffee and make a big show of spitting it out.

It's not my fault my blood is 80% coffee, Lizzie, he always said, laughing.

Grace, devouring a shortbread cookie, her feet dangling from her stool, would demand to try his coffee, too, but he always told her that coffee was for grown-ups.

That particular day, she stood uncertainly among the shelves, reading spines, then looked down at Meredith's hand-me-down sneakers. After twenty confusing minutes, she walked downstairs to find Grace nested with a picture book about talking crayons.

"Come on, Gracie," she said angrily, sticking out her hand.

Grace uncorked her thumb with a popping sound, spit on her chin. "Why? Daddy hasn't gotten here yet. I'm *reading!*"

"I said, we're going. Daddy's not here." she explained impatiently. Grace sighed and stuck her books on the wrong shelves and clasped her sister's hand with a sticky palm. There was a stain on her dress that looked like applesauce. Her nose was pink.

They walked home, and from the apartment, Elizabeth called her mother at work.

"Well, I don't know, sweetheart." said her mother, "He probably got held up someplace. I wouldn't worry."

Elizabeth opened her mouth to respond, clutching the landline with white fingers, wanting to articulate the unfounded panic she felt twisting in her stomach, but she heard Grace's shrill cry of "Lizzie!" so she said instead, "Okay, Mom."

She found Grace beside the balcony that overlooked the Chinese restaurant across the street, sucking on a purple sippy cup of apple juice their mother had left in the fridge, tiny toes clenched on the carpet.

“Lizzie, look!” Grace cried. She pointed to the open sliding door; a light breeze from the street wafted her sister’s braids and carried the stale scent of car exhaust.

“That’s weird,” she said slowly, “That’s always locked.” Grace nodded vigorously, braids bobbing.

Elizabeth opened it wider and stepped outside. The concrete felt freezing against her bare feet. Sitting out of place on the cement was their father’s favorite pair of leather shoes, and Elizabeth could have sworn they were smoking.

Her memory tapers off from here—she can remember calling her mother again, days passing, her mother’s crying through the walls of the apartment, Meredith’s panic and constant complaining, the Missing Person’s Report, the exhausted NYPD officer interviewing their sobbing mother, then Grace and Elizabeth. The police officer did not believe her when she said her father’s shoes (all they could find of him) were smoking.

The police eventually concluded he’d left. Her mother screamed that his things weren’t missing—all his shirts and boxers were folded in the bureau, his wallet and keys left on the kitchen counter. After that, their mother took time off and did not leave her room. Their father used to make them lunches, take them to doctor appointments, go to Meredith’s ballet recitals. He worked on his stories while they were at school. Without him, Elizabeth made cereal, jelly and cream cheese sandwiches, boxed Mac N Cheese, and peanut butter toast for her sisters. She remembers feeling alternating bouts of despair and hope. She kept expecting to hear his footsteps in the hallway, his keys unlocking the door, a sheepish smile on his face. Every time the telephone rang, she expected his voice on the other end. It was years before that faded. Grace slept in Elizabeth’s bed for

months, sniffing and confused, in footed pajamas, wearing their father's wide gray eyes like twin scars.

When their mother called, her relatives and friends didn't understand. Their grandmother said that their father was probably off with some "fucking tramp," starting a new life. As far as Elizabeth knew, their mother had never believed them, and for a long time, Elizabeth felt the same. As a child, she imagined her father kidnapped and held captive like James Bond. As a teenager, she imagined him abducted by aliens on the balcony. Somehow, these scenarios seemed more likely than their tired father leaving in search of a better life.

Sometimes, now, she can see him clearly with a brand-new family, reading about planets and stars with a stranger-sister, sometimes she can imagine him, unshaved, shooting up on a ratty couch somewhere, other times she is convinced he was murdered. She likes to think of him in a log cabin on some distant mountain range, working on the short stories he'd always dreamed of publishing. One day, she might open *The New Yorker* over breakfast and read one of them.

Their mother never quite recovered, Elizabeth thought. When she began to leave her room again, she stopped coming home entirely. She was distant, she refused to make dinner or do her own laundry. Elizabeth knocked on her bedroom and saw dirty socks curled like worms on storm-wetted pavement, coffee-stained slacks, and crumpled blazers. Instead of washing clothes, she would just buy more. It finally stopped when Elizabeth began changing their mother's sheets and washing her socks. Even so, their mother looked empty and deflated, like a popped balloon; it was always hard to tear her attention from the latest case, to get her to sign parent permission forms or make phone

calls to pediatricians and pharmacies. After a while, Elizabeth began to do this instead. Their mother was usually away on business trips to DC or LA, and when she was home, they rarely saw her. Elizabeth counted herself lucky if she ran into their mother at midnight, heating up leftovers in the microwave, just getting home from work.

Now, their mother is traveling to South America over the holidays with a girlfriend. She'd said that she needed a "break." The girls wondered what from. Elizabeth has not heard from her since she left, but she isn't worried. Their mother would turn up eventually as she always did.

Unsurprisingly, their lives feel absolutely unchanged, even though their mother is on a different continent. Elizabeth kicks off her uncomfortably tight jeans and tosses them in the hamper, replacing them with an old T-shirt, softened with years of laundry detergent. She feels too tired to brush her teeth, so she climbs into bed and turns off her lamp. Grace's angry hip-hop blasts through the wall, but this passive-aggressive protest isn't effective because Elizabeth doesn't want to sleep until Meredith comes home, anyway. She stares at the ceiling in the dark until the music fades, but it isn't for another hour or so until she hears the jingle of Meredith's keys and her soft footsteps in the hallway.

The next morning is a typical Sunday. Everyone is hungry and grumpy and has things to do; Elizabeth scrambles eggs with spinach and sausage while Meredith takes an annoyingly long shower. Grace, as usual, impatiently bangs on the wall, eventually frustrated enough to flush the toilet and douse her in freezing water. Meredith gets out of the shower to scream at Grace, who screams back. Elizabeth refuses to intercede in this Sunday ritual; she stands at the stove in her socks, sipping coffee out of her favorite mug.

Once Grace is in the shower, Meredith joins her at the kitchen table, dark hair soaking the back of her dress, and shovels eggs into her mouth.

“You came home late last night,” Elizabeth says.

“Kind of you to wait up,” Meredith says dryly. Then she hastily applies some lipstick and scoots out to some audition before her sister can go on.

Ten minutes later, Grace sips her coffee (black, with sugar, like always) and picks at her eggs. Elizabeth tries to ask her about school or hint at an apology, but her little sister simply stares stonily into space. At last, Elizabeth gives up and irritably takes her own plate to the sink.

As Grace puts on yellow rain boots over her multicolored striped tights, Elizabeth says, “Grace, I have to know where you’re going. Are you volunteering at the Met today?”

Her sister nods without looking at her, untucks her dirty blonde hair from beneath her hood, and reaches for her keys. Elizabeth notices she’d colored her nails in with Sharpie again. Probably just to annoy her.

“Well, have a good day, Gracie.” she says, turning to dump the frying pan in the sink.

As expected: “Don’t call me that,” her sister mutters, and Elizabeth smirks. The door slams.

Elizabeth grabs her favorite sweatshirt and an old umbrella. Outside the apartment, it is gray and moist and loud and wet. Her sneakers get soaked on the way to the subway. During the week, she works as a paid intern for Random House (an impressive resume-booster, certainly, but the pay is shit), but on the weekends she works

at The Strand for the extra cash. Her sisters have part-times, too. Meredith nannies on the Upper East Side between auditions; Grace waitresses at a diner on Columbus Circle two nights a week around her volunteer hours at the Met and her 11th grade homework.

When she comes home that evening, her hair damp and curling, she finds Meredith on the couch, writing in her journal, wearing the fuzzy socks Elizabeth had gotten her last Christmas.

“Hey, Mere,” she says. Outside the window, the rain pours, haloing the streetlamps like gauzy stars.

“Hey, Liz.” says her sister, “Gracie got home, like, fifteen minutes ago. She’s pouting in her room.” Meredith twists around on the couch to eye her suspiciously. “Did you two fight?”

“No,” Elizabeth lies, unlacing her wet sneakers.

Meredith snorts. “Right. Because I *definitely* didn’t see her rummage through your room for her laptop as soon as she got home.”

“She was in my—?” Elizabeth begins hotly.

“*Anyway*, is that Chinese food I smell?” Meredith interjects.

“Yeah.” sighs Elizabeth gloomily, holding up the brown paper bag. Her umbrella had broken on the way to Red Lantern, so the paper bag is spotted with grease and rainwater.

Meredith is able to coax Grace out of her bedroom with the promise of Red Lantern. They eat their takeout out of the containers, on the couch in front of a documentary about famous serial killers.

“What would you do if you saw the Zodiac Killer?” demands Meredith, pointing her fork at the TV, her mouth full of Pork Lo Mein.

“Die,” Elizabeth deadpans, fishing around in her fried rice for more chicken.

“I wouldn’t be killed by the Zodiac Killer,” says Grace. She stabs a water chestnut from her container of Mongolian Beef. “He only kills couples in cars, and I’ll never have a boyfriend, even if the world ends ‘cause of Global Warming and I’m the last available girl on the planet.”

Elizabeth throws a chopstick at her.

Meredith says, “You’ll get asked to prom, just wait it out.”

“Just ask someone yourself,” suggests Elizabeth irritably, reaching for Meredith’s Diet Coke. Her sister swats her hand away.

“I would, but all the guys at school *suck*.” Grace turns up the volume with the remote.

“How’d the audition go?” Elizabeth asks Meredith. She frowns, brushing a sticky piece of rice off the couch.

Now Meredith looks moody. “Ugh, terrible. They said I was too short!”

Grace interjects spitefully, “Good! *Oklahoma* sucks.”

“I thought it was *Fiddler on the Roof*,” Elizabeth muses thoughtfully.

“Okay, first of all? It was *West Side Story*,” sniffs Meredith.

“You don’t look *anything* like Natalie Wood,” Grace says, which Elizabeth finds a bit unfair. “But you *are* really short.”

“Grace!” Elizabeth moans.

Meredith shoves their little sister’s shoulder, and that’s when the lights go out.

The darkness is quiet and instant. Meredith shrieks. On the television, a criminal analyst stops mid-sentence about the Son of Sam when the screen goes blank. Grace gasps and in the shadowy light Elizabeth can tell she's knocked the soy sauce onto the carpet with her elbow. Elizabeth crouches on her knees to rescue it, but she knows the carpet has a brown stain now, just by the smell.

“What’s happening?” Meredith whispers.

“Oh, Jesus, we’re going to be murdered,” Elizabeth blurts before she can stop herself. It’s too much of a coincidence with the documentary and—

“Cut it out,” says Grace. Elizabeth can see her darkened silhouette at the window, the moonlight winking in her hair. “The streetlights are out, too. Actually everything is. Like the entire city is down.”

“What the fuck!” Meredith cries. She’s flipping the light switch back and forth.

“Stop that,” says Elizabeth, rubbing her temples. The clicking is bringing on one of her headaches. Grace rummages noisily under the kitchen sink for the flashlight. When it won’t work either, she too clicks the switch again and again, then shakes it.

“I just changed its battery,” Elizabeth mutters, confused.

“How did this happen?” Meredith demands. She stumbles to the fridge, clinking and unlit, retrieves the open bottle of white wine they’d bought last week for \$7.99, and sinks on the couch, taking a long swig. She fumbles it over to Elizabeth, who takes it gratefully. It’s not lukewarm yet, but it still tastes like shit. Her mouth puckers, so she gets up to search for the matches.

“Grace, don’t you have a candle?” she asks, feeling around in the dark drawers.

“Yeah, but it’s not very bright or anything—”

“Grace.” say her older sisters in unison, so she stumbles to her room for it.

Elizabeth finally finds the matches, heart hammering in her ears, and lights Grace’s candle. It casts a flickering yellow circle of light that seems to be swallowed whole by the body of the darkness, leaving only a faint citrus scent. Elizabeth sets it on the coffee table and gets back onto the couch. There is something menacing and icy and constricting about not being to see very much at all. She wonders if they’ll be robbed or shot like people in *The Purge*.

“Do you think, if the electricity never comes back, school will be cancelled forever?” Grace asks of nobody in particular.

Questions spin through Elizabeth’s brain faster than she can keep up with. Her breath fogs; it’s like a refrigerator in here. “The heat is off,” she says dumbly.

Meredith silently goes to the linen closet and returns with a pile of fleece blankets. Many of these blankets they’d bought as kids, like the pink cheetah-printed one Elizabeth can barely identify as she spreads it across her lap. She reaches for her phone, not sure who to call, surprised she didn’t think to sooner. The screen is black. *Weird*. She didn’t remember it having low battery, either.

“I wish Dad were here,” says Grace suddenly. It’s quiet enough now that Elizabeth can tell by her hitched breathing that there are tears on her chin, in her mouth.

Meredith says sharply, “You didn’t even know him.”

“That’s not true,” Grace squeaks, but it kind of is.

“You’ve made what you remember up,” says Elizabeth dismissively, taking Meredith’s hand under the blanket. She declares it with enough certainty that Grace doesn’t respond. “Sorry,” she whispers, suddenly feeling guilty.

Without the hum of the radiator, they can hear people yelling outside in the street. Their neighbor's baby screams through the wall. Elizabeth can hear glass breaking. A girl outside screams. Elizabeth squeezes Meredith's hand and releases it. She rises, the blanket pooling at her feet as she moves to the window. It's dark, so dark, darker than she has ever seen the city. Squinting, she realizes that a blue Pinto has smashed into a small pink bike in the center of the street. She can see blood on the sidewalk, shards of broken glass like sun glinting off snow. She listens for sirens, but the night is empty. She can smell smoke, though.

She turns around to her sisters. Grace is curled on Meredith's lap; she strokes her hair, making soothing noises.

"The power didn't die," Elizabeth realizes, thinking out loud.

"What do you mean?" Meredith asks softly.

"Something *killed* everything that runs on electricity," she says slowly. "Like, the heat. The streetlights and the flashlight. The AC. Our phones. Maybe it's even why there are no sirens." A chill runs through her.

"What could do that?" Grace whispers.

"I don't know!" Elizabeth says helplessly. "I went Columbia for *English*."

"Dad would know," Meredith says. It is almost accusatory. Elizabeth thinks of smoking shoes, the stiff breeze on the balcony, the very same goosebumps rising across her arms now. Suddenly she is positive that she had smelled something more than car exhaust all those years ago. Something burning, sulfuric.

“Yeah, well, so would Wikipedia, but neither of those are options right now,” Elizabeth says faintly, her heart not in the reproach. She closes the curtains, checks the deadbolt on the door. She’s scared, but she doesn’t want to admit it.

Burning.

Grace hiccups, Meredith breathes quickly. Elizabeth robotically moves back to the couch, retrieves the blanket. It smells like soy sauce.

“What happened to Dad?” asks Meredith in the smallest voice.

Elizabeth feels like her heart is freezing between her ribs. “I—”

“Something bad.” Grace whispers.

“Grace—?”

“Burning...” says her sister sleepily. “So bright...”

Elizabeth can imagine the little girl with the braids and the sippy cup at the window while her older sister spoke on the phone in the kitchen. She thinks about children noticing things that adults do not. She can’t bring herself to ask; she has to stop thinking about this.

“I saw Steve at Smith’s.” Elizabeth blurts suddenly. The words seem to have come from some hidden space inside her, drawn out by the fear from the blackout, Grace’s admission.

“What?” Meredith whispers. Grace moves off her lap and bites a hangnail.

“He said I broke you up. That we had sex at Melissa’s party while I was blackout.” Elizabeth relays mechanically.

She realizes that Meredith is crying. Elizabeth swears she can even smell the salt. “I knew,” Meredith admits softly, “Lizzie, I knew. I hoped...it wasn’t true. That you weren’t...that he didn’t...”

“Mere—” Elizabeth says sharply, squeezing her hand with stone fingers.

“That he raped my little sister.” In the moonlight, she can make out the planes of Meredith’s face, the sharp angles and soft curves. In that moment, it is like looking into a mirror.

Miles away across the couch, all she can see of Grace is the dim light reflecting off the surface of her teeth and the glint of her eyes—their father’s gray eyes—in the darkness. There is nothing to say, not anymore.

They sit, heartbeats wrapped in fleece blankets, waiting for the lights to turn back on. Eventually, the sun rises instead.