Darkness

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What were they like the first day?

The way we all were.

What was the first thing they did?

What we all did: opened the window. Helen opened it, the bedroom window; the lace curtain fluttered out into the cold air like a waving handkerchief and they saw it.

What did they think it was?

A mistake of their clock; a power outage in the night; the work of Louise's diabolical sleeping pills (that felled her nightly like an axe to a tree), making her into a sleepwalking clock-changer; a cloud. They spent half an hour trying to figure out if they had lost their minds; they were old women, so it was not impossible; each of them had lost things before, had spent a secret hour in a hotel room searching for keys, only to discover them right in her pocket. But very soon the radio told them they had not gone insane. The sky had.

"How could particles in the air do this?" Louise wanted to know. She sat on the sofa, perhaps too frightened to look outside again. Every light in the house was on, a parody of morning.

Helen sat bravely by the window. "They say it happened after Krakatoa, all those years ago," she said. "The ash was so thick that for three whole days it was utter darkness."

"But nothing's happened. They don't say anything's happened."

"They said it isn't dangerous. The sun just isn't out."

"Are you going to school?"

"I don't think so. Were you going to work today?"

"I don't know."

Helen stared out at the gloom, shivering. All down the street the young people wandered beneath the still-unlit streetlights, some with flashlights or lanterns, laughing. No old people out on the street at all, not in this kind of confusion, not with sidewalk as loud as a carnival and the crash of police lights everywhere. In the apartment across the street, Helen could make out a couple sitting down to a candlelit breakfast. And below, in front of the building, stood an old Russian woman and her son, hand in hand, nearly indistinguishable in fur hats, looking straight up at the sky.

It was nine o'clock in the morning and as dark as the inside of an eye.

"It's nothing, I'm sure of it," Helen said. "It isn't time to worry yet."

But she looked over at Louise on the sofa, her dear Louise, her sweet white-haired girl, rubbing a spot out of the coffee table; and though it was not time to worry yet, she began to cry, because there was no helping it.

What did they do the second day?

Called friends. They could not be alone—Helen said it felt like her grandmother's house in the war, with blackout curtains and the roar of jets along the California coast and the threat of something happening—and so they invited friends over for lunch and made what they could from the pantry; for some nameless reason they did not dare go outside, though the city had put the streetlights on and the throngs of young people had lessened with the dimming novelty of it all. Louise made pasta by dropping eggs into the crater of a flour volcano. She did this in silence, flour puffing into the air as if she had burst the seeds of a milkweed. Helen thawed and roasted a chicken. Then, her hostess's instinct intact, she thawed and roasted another.

At noon, she heard a rattle from the living room, which was Louise drawing the curtains. She understood; they were not Aleuts; they could not bear constant night. Then she heard—like an exhalation of relief—the sound of a match. Candles.

Only two people came: an elderly colleague of Helen's at the college and a kindly, nervous painter Louise had met at an artists' colony. They were good, intelligent talkers at a party; neither was suitable that day. They had clearly come out of loneliness. Helen and Louise found themselves smiling and dutifully filling wine glasses and listening for a doorbell that never rang. What was meant as an afternoon of solace had become one of duty.

"I hear they are turning to rations," said the colleague, a professor of Victorian realism with a waxed gray mustache.

Louise wanted to know what kinds of rations.

"Gas," he said. "And fresh food and meat. Like in the war." He meant World War II. "Who knows? Maybe nylons, Helen."

Helen would not have it; "Ridiculous," she said, regretting the company of this pompous man. The curtains blew open to reveal the unearthly blackness, like the Roman servants who marched beside victorious generals and periodically reminded them of death.

Louise said she could not remember the war.

The painter spoke up, and what she said chilled them: "I think they've done something."

Helen quickly said, "Who? Done what?" Louise gave her a look.

The painter winced at her own thoughts, and her jewelry clanked on her wrists. "They've done something and they haven't told us."

The old man salted his chicken. The optimistic second chicken still sat in the kitchen, glistening and uncarved. "You mean a bomb?"

"An experiment or a bomb or I don't know. I'm sure I'm wrong, I'm sure—"

"An experiment?" Louise said.

Just then, they heard a roar. Instinctively, they went to the window, where in her haste to open it, Helen knocked a little terra-cotta pot over the sill and into the afternoon air, which was as red-dark as ever, but they could not hear its little crash above the din: the streetlights had gone out and now the city was alive with cries.

Why did the streetlights go out?

It's unclear. Perhaps a strain on the system; perhaps a wrong switch thrown at the station. But it was a fright to people. That was when the blackouts began, the rolling blackouts, meant to conserve electricity. Two hours a day—on Louise and Helen's block it was at noontime, though it made little difference—with no lamps, no clocks, just flashlights and candles melting to nubs. It was terrifying the first few days, but then it was something you got used to. You knew not to open the refrigerator and waste the cold; you knew not to open the window and waste the heat. "Temporarily," the mayor said. "Until we can determine the duration." Of the darkness, he meant, of the sunless sky.

When he said this over the radio, Helen glanced at Louise and was startled. As a child, she had noticed how sometimes, in old-fashioned books, full-color illustrations of the action would appear—through some constraint at the bindery—dozens of pages before the moments they meant to depict. Not déjà vu, not something already-seen, but something not-yet-seen, and that was what was before her: a woman in profile, immobile, her hair modern and glacially white-blue, her face old-fashioned as a Puritan's in its fury; her eyes blazing briefly with the demonic retinas of a snapshot; her hand clutching the arm of the chair in a fist; her lips open to speak to someone not in the room. A picture out of sequence.

"Louise?" she said.

Then it was gone. Her girl turned to her, blinked, saying, "What on earth does he mean by 'duration'?"

Why did their good friends never come?

They were afraid. They were all waiting for someone to come to them. They sat alone in the darkness, reading by candlelight, panicked as pigeons, waiting for someone to come, and yet they would not stir an inch. Young people will never understand this.

When did they decide to leave?

After the riots, about two weeks later. Louise and Helen were out to dinner that night, Midtown, only the second time they had gone out to eat since the first day of the darkness, and they were still unsure if they were right to do it— if it was frivolous to be seen in a room with chandeliers and mirrors and poor people fussing over wealthier people. Louise felt everyone should be in mourning.

"The mirrors should be covered," she said to their dinner companions, who were Louise's agent, her husband, and their friend Peter. "Our garments should be rent. Don't you think? Shouldn't there be wailing somewhere?"

"If you covered the mirrors we'd have nothing," Peter said. He was an antique sort of comic-type still seen only in old movies: the amusing bachelor. Despite his fastidiousness and absolutely secret private life, he seemed convincingly heterosexual; and despite the gray in his conical Victorian beard, and the lines now permanently tooled across his forehead, he appeared all the more boyish, as an adolescent actor appears all the more innocent costumed as an old man.

The agent shook her head. Light gleamed off her glasses. Light gleamed everywhere: off cutlery and plates and crystal, sequins and earrings and pearls; it was indescribably beautiful. Perhaps like the aviary of some rare bird, the last of its kind.

"We have a blind friend," the husband said. He was a scientist, a physicist working with lasers.

Helen found herself laughing. "Oh I hadn't thought about the blind! Aren't they lucky?" She absently drank from Louise's wineglass and Louise gave her a look.

The husband went on seriously; he was a very serious, very emotional man. "She says she can't help it but it's satisfying. She says she hates herself for feeling it but it amuses her that the rest of us think the world is going to end. Because it's the same world for her."

"It can't be," Louise said. "She can tell there's no sun, and the plants—"

"For her, it's the same world."

Peter raised an eyebrow.

"That's stupid." Louise said. "I'm sorry, Frank. But it is."

Her agent put her hand on Louise's wrist. "Louise, don't be a bore."

Louise turned to her lover. "Helen?"

A moment later there was glass all around them in great shards and a hundred, much more than a hundred young men running down the street, and . . . it seemed like torches, and lanterns, and certainly things were already set on fire in the street before the awestruck diners had the sense to stand up and run to the back of the restaurant. It happened all at once and yet took an extraordinarily long time; there was no way to remember it right. All that Louise knew was that, when she awoke from the scurry of action, she found herself against the wall with Helen and all of them, her napkin in one hand and her fork in the other. Like the net and triton of Neptune, she would later say to others. *I am a useless woman,* she told herself.

They spent the night at her agent's place on an inflatable bed. Peter slept on the living-room couch. Outside, they could hear the low moan of the rioting streets as if a monster were being tamed. "It feels like intergalactic warfare," Helen whispered, kissing her lover.

"I've never felt so much like an old woman."

"Enough. You're five years younger than me."

"Do you know the Byron poem?"

"Get some sleep. We'll see how things are tomorrow. If they've suspended classes, we can drive out to Nathan's." This was Louise's son.

"'I had a dream,'" Louise said quietly, "'which was not all a dream. The bright sun was extinguish'd, and the stars . . .' Something. I can't remember."

"Hush now."

"'I had a dream, which was not all a dream . . .' Oh, what is it?"

"Hush."

In the morning, things were no better, and so they left.

How did they meet, Helen and Louise?

They met twice before they fell in love. The first time was when they were very young, in their twenties, and they both taught at an all-girls school in Connecticut; they had the brief kind of passion trapped young women have, kisses in a back room of the library, then it was forgotten. The second time was many years later, when Louise was married to Harold Foster, the composer, and they saw each other at a fundraiser for Helen's college; Helen wore a black spangled pantsuit and stared at the woman in the pink dress who, although clearly in the midst of an argument with a tall, sour-looking man, smiled merrily; Helen stared at this woman as if called upon to perform a feat of memorization, and at last Louise turned, startled, and met Helen's eyes for a breathless moment—it was almost, for Helen, as if she held something bright and fantastic in her palm, a thimble of mercury—until the president began to speak. When it was over, Helen discovered that her former colleague had been taken home by her husband because she had not been feeling well. Only the sour old man remained.

The third time was on the street in New York City and it was winter, the air as cold and tense as the skin of an apple; the leaves had already brightened and browned and fallen, so the trees that had shaded the avenues in summer were now invisible—and this is how Helen thought of herself as she walked down Second Avenue, the kind of woman who could not seem to hail a taxi, was always leaping of out the way of trucks, getting knocked aside by young people racing down the street; this is how she thought of herself: an invisible old thing in a brown plaid coat.

The light changed; a car leapt right for her, and she braced herself. And then there was Louise.

She did not see Helen at first. Louise was standing on the corner in a long white wool jacket, with embellished little buttons, holding a bouquet of out-of-season irises and trying to hail a cab. Short little Louise, her tiny hand dangling from that great coat sleeve, like a butler ringing a dinner bell in a too-loud room, so hopeless.

Helen said her name.

Louise did not hear her or, more likely, didn't consider that anyone on Second Avenue could be talking to her.

More loudly: "Louise. I found you."

She turned. Astounding how life is, how it will shift ever so slightly and reveal something in the fold of its garment that you hadn't noticed before, something there all along, how it will turn just like a person turns and show you a face you once had memorized amid the chatter of a tedious party, memorized as if for a test, and here it comes, years after you expected it: the test.

"Helen," she said. With no surprise at all. A pale, polished face with the craquelure of age, that haughty upturned nose, the brightly-colored lips no longer full as a boarding-school teacher's, and all of her gone soft with a little fat, a trick photograph of the woman to whom Helen had made a promise so many years before. She would no longer have cared to meet that young woman, that foolish young woman who turned away from her in a snow-bright room, married an older man, and wore a pink dress to a formal party like a fool; Helen was too old to care about a woman like that. But of course that woman no longer existed. Only this woman existed, Louise, here on the sidewalk with a bouquet of flowers and no surprise in her face at all: "Helen."

"Who are the flowers for?"

"For me." She laughed. "No good reason."

A month later she moved into Helen's apartment. They did not explain themselves to anyone; when friends asked, in private, how they had met and joined their lives so suddenly, each acted as if it were something that had been decided long before.

And in these memories, of course, they would always later place one more object in the scene. Ridiculous to have thought of then; almost like remembering that your lungs filled and emptied themselves of air each moment, or that your heart dutifully pumped its ration of blood. Glowing dimly in every memory: the sun.

When they left, what did they leave behind?

Helen left her knitting, her records, her running shoes, her files, her research, her plants (already dying), her stones and shells picked up for no reason on foreign beaches and kept, lovingly, purposelessly, and every glittering necklace and earring and bauble

anyone had ever given her. She could easily have taken these things, but the mood was rush-rush, and she was the kind of woman who prided herself on efficiency, fortitude, decisiveness; so many small, easily taken things were left behind in the too-proud spirit of the refugee.

If you asked Louise, years later, what she had left, she could have only stared at you angrily and said: "My books."

And the neat shoeboxes untidily crammed with photographs. And the nubbly, Ovaltine-colored couch that they had bought together before Louise had her teaching position and always meant to replace. And the jam in the fridge that a friend had made that summer: strawberry jam. And Louise's old wedding ring. And the art on the walls, made by friends in unfashionable artistic circles. And the mouse under the dishwasher. And the boy upstairs who had finally, loudly mastered "The Entertainer" on the piano. And the early morning shadow of the window falling across the bed, a neat cross with one broken pane, the first vision of every day, which they could have inked from memory on the coverlet. But of course shadows were already a thing of the past.

Who drove?

Louise drove; it was her car, bought for a teaching stint at Yale that was accepted with fantasies of autumn drives during which she would make long speeches to her enemies, her parents, to people from her past who hadn't loved her; but the drives had been crowded and rainy; the stint lasted only a year; and the money, in the end, just barely paid for the car itself. It was German and plum-yellow and she loved it.

They left early in the morning, not that it would have made a difference. That same shade of dim red at all hours, like a flashlight held inside a mouth. Stepping out of their apartment house into the gloom: every time, it was like a deep-sea dive.

"Where are we going?" Helen said at the first wrong turn.

"I talked to Peter while you were in shower. He's in a state. He's all alone."

"He's across town, Louise, it's going to take—"

"Hel, I said we'd take him. I'm sorry."

"Phone him now and say no. We can't. Phone him now and say no."

They both knew this was nonsense; cell service had stopped nearly a week before. Besides, they did not even own a cell phone.

It was an hour of traffic and police barricades until they reached Peter's building; his street itself had been a horror show of streetlights blinking in and out of sleep, shadowy crowds of young men smoking outside early-open bars—nightmare creatures to the no-longer-young—and, in the shifting spotlights of the lamps, things that looked like baseballs rolling along the road, which were simply rats with no daylight to fear.

It was all too much for Louise. She sat there with her face bruised by the dashboard light and said she couldn't get out of the car; Helen had to do it.

Helen said, "You goddamned old woman. You brought me here and now I've—"

"Oh Helen."

And of course she did; of course Helen kissed her dear Louise on the cheek and slammed the door and went inside; but Helen planned to remember this, to save it in her catalog of hurt.

It was only five minutes before she came down with Peter, who had not finished his packing. He insisted on bringing books, twenty of them, because he said the three of them were basically anchorites locking themselves in a holy room, taking vows, sealing the entrance, and they needed their bibles; and that took longer than Helen would have hoped. Still, it was only five minutes, yet so much was different. They could barely see Louise for all the broken glass.

What had happened?

She wouldn't say. "Let's go!" she kept shouting, motioning them inside, huddled now in the passenger's seat, unharmed except for a small cut below her eye and a wild look. It was her window that was broken. "Go! Let's go!" Helen tried to touch her, tried to coax a story from her, some version to explain the glass, some of which still clung to her like ice, the animal flush in her face, but Louise would not answer. The lamplight shone in streaks through her thinning white hair, on her lips open in an unnamed fury, and it

glowed in the bones of her face; she was like a painting, Helen thought later, a great beauty in a painting who will never tell, who will never reveal a thing. A brooch and a ring and a stark madness in her eye. Helen had loved this vain, private, exasperating creature for so long. They were wives, in their way. "Go!" Louise shrieked, "Go!"

So they went.

Where did they go?

Deep into Pennsylvania. I cannot describe how long it took to leave Manhattan, the eccentric streetlights, the stifled, bottled-up feeling of the traffic, the complete blackout of the Holland Tunnel as if they were drilling (in slowest possible motion) into the diamond-hard center of the world—and Helen's eye was ever on the fuel gauge, a neon miniature pump, because it had already come over the radio that gasoline was to be rationed, along with firewood and vegetables, beginning the next day. And so that explained the crowds, the panic. Peter, smoking out the broken window, picking a piece of tobacco from his upper lip, said: "Oh it must be madness at the farmers' market." And on they went, mile after dark mile.

Three hours later they stopped at the brightest-lit restaurant they could find and ordered a gravy-soaked lunch, suffering the suspicious glances of a downy-mustached waitress who clicked her retractable pen like a switchblade. In the corner sat a silent family, dressed for church, and their teenage daughter (in flour-sack floral) with her eyes closed, wincing, as if recent events had happened just to ensure her personal humiliation.

Peter said, "You know what Gertrude Stein did?"

"What?" said Helen, dipping her fries into an impasto of ketchup. It was a relief not to care, not to pretend to care, about good food. Louise, on the other hand, looked childishly shocked at her sandwich.

Peter: "What she did in a time of disaster."

"I'm not sure I'd take Gertrude Stein's advice on disasters—"

"They lived in France when the Germans came in," he said, smiling at the waitress, who had brought his milkshake in a sundae glass, the leftover in a canister, in

the old-fashioned pretense that she had made too much and was giving him the rest. The canister wore a shimmering chain mail of frost. "They would listen to the radio," Peter said, "and every Tuesday the announcer came on telling of some new city that had been taken, and it was horrible; she said it was so horrible that they laughed. Every Tuesday, it became comic. And what she did when the Germans did arrive, when she saw the planes, when the French boys all hid in the hills because they feared being taken into the German army and people left bread and cheese for them in secret places—when it was over, and they were occupied—what Gertrude Stein did was she trimmed her hedges."

Helen noticed Louise eating just the bacon from her sandwich. "Metaphorically?"

"No, it wasn't poetic, it wasn't metaphor. She was done with metaphor," he said. "And with news. She wouldn't listen to the wireless. I think it was . . . the truth was a gorgon, and she could see it only reflected in others' faces, in Alice's, or in the girls' from the village who gave her illegal butter; but if she looked directly at it she would turn to stone. So she trimmed her hedges."

Helen looked away, to the teenage girl in the vinyl booth, who now seemed mortified almost to the point of sainthood.

"Then she was a coward," Helen said.

"We never hear what Alice did," Louise said softly.

Peter smiled and pulled on his beard. "She trimmed her hedges and she thought when she had finished trimming, then the Germans would leave."

Louise started to say something, but Peter opened his hands ecclesiastically: "She was very superstitious. She and Alice thought their car would take them to places it wanted them to go, places they belonged."

Helen's laughter rose in shining rings around them, and it was the carelessness of her voice—just as when she had laughed about the blind—that made the people stare. The gray-featured family, the anxious daughter, the waitress whose hair glowed from the light behind her. It was too wrong and strange, with the sky outside, and the world the way it was. It was a luxury. She might as well have brought out a diamond tiara and worn it just to spite them.

Louise entered loudly into the conversation: “I’ve been learning French.”

Helen said, “You have?”

Peter said, “Their car had a flat tire and so that’s why they didn’t leave France.”

Louise sat up very straight. Her eyes were on Peter, and with one hand she clipped and unclipped her Turkish earring (her ears had never been pierced). She said, “I’ve decided that when I learn to speak French, really speak it, then this will all be over.”

Peter spoke to no one in particular: “Gertrude also had a prophecy book.”

Helen said quietly, “I didn’t know you were learning French.”

The family in the corner folded in together, listening to their daughter, who had begun to whisper with one eyebrow cocked. She glanced only once at Helen, bitterly, cleverly, before joining back into her family.

And Louise, too, looked at Helen as if to say: *Yes. I have a stupid, secret belief, a magic belief. Yes. Aren’t we vain, ridiculous creatures?*

Tell me, what happened to Louise in the car, surrounded by broken glass?
She never did say whether it was young men out with crowbars, or a stone thrown by rioters, though these explanations were very possible; perhaps she could not remember what happened, but Helen and Peter both wondered silently why the glass was outside the car and not inside.

Did they spend the night in that town?
They could not imagine it—there was something hard and wary in the people’s faces there, a look that Helen had seen only out West in desert towns—and the one motel sat uncomfortably far from the cluster of shops, two cars alone in its parking lot, its front office trembling with a purple glow that Peter identified as marijuana grow lamps. He also warned them that he was known to sleepwalk in strange places, ever since he was a boy. Any place would have been too strange, though, any motel or rooming house, with thin sheets and an amateur oil painting above the dresser, and brief-lived mayflies

seeking the bathroom’s incandescent sun, and the darkness poking in at every window like a burglar.

“I think,” Louise offered once they were on the road again, with a plastic bag taped over the broken window, where it howled like a ghost, “I think we can make it to Nathan’s.”

Peter said, “I’m fine. I had too much coffee but I’m fine.”

Louise said, “Maybe also we should—we should be careful.”

“What do you mean?” Peter said.

She put up her hands to arrange her hair against the loud wind. “Maybe Helen and I shouldn’t mention we’re gay.”

“Oh Louise,” said Helen.

“You felt it. It’s dangerous now, somehow. I don’t know why. I don’t know why just darkness would do that. But please.”

“We’ll get to Nathan’s,” Helen said. “We’ll get to Nathan’s in Pennsylvania and everything will be OK.”

And no sooner had they crossed the state line, rounded a bend, than they came upon the incredible: a bright patch of day.

“Oh God!” Peter said. “Oh God!”

But not day—it had only the brightness, the clear ordinary delight of day, shifting and waving in the wind like a sheet pinned to a clothesline. What it was: it was a whole forest set on fire.

The cars moved in a sluggish row past this awesome thing, while helicopters busied themselves in the flames like bees in their flowers, and fire trucks sprayed long gleaming fountains that turned, instantly, to smoke and to steam. Everything was bright and hot at last, and in some terrible way they were grateful; it was hard not to applaud whoever had done this. Peter was driving now, so slowly that he said, “Get out, you two, get out and look at it and I’ll pick you up around the corner,” and they did. They stood there with dozens of other people with their hands up in the air as if they were all ready to catch something, looking behind themselves and laughing at their shadows, which

were back briefly from the dead and could wave at them; then the people looked at last on what their eyes could hardly bear to see: what Helen, smiling (while Louise groaned), called "the prodigal sun." It took a minute or two to make out, in that sublime light, hidden among the crackling pines, the cross-paned windows of a house.

You never told Louise's version of their meeting.

If everything were saved from life, nothing forgotten, then she would have with her still the scent of Helen's hair in 1968, when they were both in their twenties and teaching at St. Margaret's—Helen history, Louise the language arts—standing very still in the back room of the library (lit only by one window and its fluorescent snow-glow) as Louise announced her engagement to Harold Foster. They were leaving for Harvard. The blonde scent of Helen's hair as they embraced. And of the room's airborne dust immobile in its web of static, and the odor of ancient, unread books and moldering maps of places that none of their students would ever visit and whose citizens would one day, not understanding why, awaken to a sunless sky. The watch in Helen's breast pocket, pressing like a tumor between them. The shiver of passion in that nubile body—gone, all of it, gone or misremembered now. But how could even an old woman forget what Helen whispered to her in that time when they were very young? What she hushed into her ear before she walked out the door—that she would find her one day—and Louise was left alone in that unused room, looking out at the snow's mounded brightness with the sensation of someone going blind?

And at the party: the feeling of someone tapping on her shoulder, and then a furious woman staring at her from across a room; it made her ill and she had to feign a migraine to get her husband to leave.

And on the street after his death: windblown leaves scratching along the sidewalk, the wet scent of the flowers, the light staring Cyclops red, and, from behind her, a voice: "I found you."

Did they stay at the fire?

They had to get to Nathan's, though it was hard to pull themselves away, even after they saw the burning house among all the burning trees. "Well aren't we all mayflies?" Helen whispered, giggling. Back in the car, they described the fire to Peter, what it felt like to walk a little ways down the hill to where the grass was dry and crackly, to have the hot wind on your face like a day at the beach—"God I always hated the beach," Helen added—and he nodded and they drove like that, in silence, for a long time until even looking back they could not make out the blaze except as a shimmer in the clouds, and ahead of them were blank unburned forests and the fistfuls of light they knew to be houses.

"'I had a dream,'" Louise said softly after a while, "'which was not all a dream.'"

Peter made a pleased noise in the front seat. Helen said nothing, only watched the black-on-black of the trees against the sky, and what she took for bats flying above, or perhaps birds, because they must wake up at last, mustn't they?

"'The bright sun was extinguish'd, and the stars did wander darkling in the eternal space.'"

"I love that," Peter said. "'Wander darkling.'"

Helen said, "Go on."

"Something . . . oh," Louise said. "'Morn came and went—and came, and brought no day, and men forgot their passions in the dread of this their desolation; and all hearts were chill'd into a selfish prayer for light.'"

Helen said, "'Men forgot their passions.' I don't see how that could be." There was not a single light on the road, nor anywhere in the landscape. Then they passed a darkened farmhouse and Helen thought she saw a woman in a white apron walking in a field of fallen corn; it seemed like everyone was a ghost now. But it was not a woman; it was a lung-shaped patch of melting snow on a hillside, and then it was gone.

Louise said, "I don't remember the rest. Maybe Nathan will have a copy."

Peter rolled down the window a bit, letting in the cold smell of trees. "I've been wondering, what will they do in New York when they're out of wood?"

"In the fireplaces, you mean?" asked Louise.

"I can't see men ever forgetting their passions," Helen said. "And I don't know what dread is anymore."

"When they're out of candles," Peter explained. From the backseat, they could just see his eyes in the rearview mirror.

Helen told him: "They won't run out of candles. They don't run out of those things in New York."

"Eventually. They've run out of vegetables, haven't they? And gas."

She pulled her shawl around her. "I'm not worried about New York."

In that rectangle of mirror, they could see him blink in concern. "Do you think they'll set things on fire? Like the forest we saw?"

"I know what they'll do," Louise said quietly.

Helen took Louise's hand and shook her head, looking out at the shapes of things beyond the road, things unlit for days. "I'm not worried about that, New York can take care of itself. I'm not worried about dread, either. What did you say, honey?"

"I know what they'll do."

Louise took her hand away from Helen. She put it to her own cheek as if she had been struck by something. She looked into the hatchback where their things lay, piled and gathered, and Peter's things, and then the fingers of her other hand began to curl around the armrest in a fist. Her eyes went forward. A rare passing car lit up the interior and her hair went white.

Louise said, "They'll burn the books."

"Lo . . ."

Louise had a frozen look on her face. "Before they burn their furniture, they'll burn the books. Before the curtains or the sheets or their old letters. They always do."

She sat very regal in the backseat with the headlights illuminating her glacial hair, her furious jagged profile, her parted lips. The look was in her eyes again, a brightness that was not a reflection but its own light, the way the snow on the hillside was its own light, a lunacy, as if this old white-haired poetess were capable of something terrible, in which case we all are.

"They always do," Louise said loudly. "They'll take down the *Moby Dick* they've had since high school, and they always hated how it sat on the shelf and gloated at them, and they'll throw it in the fireplace, there'll be a kind of . . . relief, satisfaction.! They'll light it and put the kids around it and it won't matter." Her left hand gripped the armrest as tightly as a broomstick but she would not look at either of them. "We are truly cannibals. *Don Quixote*. Or just a whole pile of them. *Huckleberry Finn*. Why not? If there's no light to read by anyway—"

"Lo, don't—"

Peter said, "You said that when you spoke French at last—"

She shook her head, talking almost in a shout. "I'm never going to learn it. I'm too old, and of course that's ridiculous. I'm ridiculous. These are the Dark Ages now, and it's going to come to that. All the books! And why not?"

"Louise!"

Louise was shrieking now: "The books! All the books!"

The car rushed by them and they were thrown into darkness again, that old darkness, and Peter could now hear only a movement in the backseat, maybe a struggle of some kind, maybe someone crying, and then silence as his eyes strained to see the two old women in the rearview mirror.

What did he see?

A memory from his boyhood: Two objects in the darkness, fallen into a quiet embrace. Just as he used to come upon his mother's hairbrush at her vanity table, lying on its back, her silver comb nestled into its bristles. A still life to which he often awoke after his sleepwalking trips. An old woman and her lover, clutching one another, the sound of one of them weeping, he could not say who, and nothing behind them but a lightless window, a mirror, a reflection of his wide eyes within it, a memory. A comb in a brush. If he watched them, they would wait. They would wait, the silver things, perfectly still, until dawn.

Tell me: did they make it?

Somehow.