

Blackout

by Kyle Hemmings

BLACKOUT

The blackout lasted longer than anyone thought. From my fifth story window, the whole city seemed to shut down. I heard noises above me. How could it be? The tenant who lived over me, an elderly woman, was found frozen to death in her apartment. According to rumors, she hadn't paid her gas and heat for months. Many of us shrugged off the guilt. We just didn't know. At night, with the brain's light bulb powered off, I dreamed who this woman, only one floor up, might have been.

But now footsteps over the ceiling and a voice coming from the far wall, or perhaps inside it where pipes formed a geometry of intersections.

In the dark, I stumbled towards the sound. It was the voice of an old woman: cracking, tinny. Open the hatch, she said, there's a dumbwaiter. My hands groped along the walls. There. I opened it.

What now, I asked.

I'm cold, she said, do you have any old sweaters you can send up?

Wait there, I said. I fumbled for my flashlight. The batteries were dead. I hadn't changed them in months. I lit some old candles. The light was weak, but enough to allow me to make my way between rooms. I stacked several sweaters on the dumbwaiter and pulled the cord.

You're so kind, she said, you could freeze in this winter.

I didn't know anyone lived upstairs, I said, when did you move in?

She said she couldn't hear me.

I repeated myself. No answer. I became worried.

Honey, she said, my feet are cold. I have no shoes. Could you send up some socks, anything?

I searched for some woollen ones I never wore. I sent them up. You're a life-saver, she said. And just one more thing, she said. Some blankets. I have none. Just some sheets. No wonder I'm always catching colds.

I sent up some thick blankets. And a pillow. Maybe goose feather. We had a conversation near the pipes. She said as soon as the lights come on she would make herself some tea. Only she had no sugar. I said I have plenty. You do? she said. There was silence. I heard something pacing above me.

It's the longest blackout I've experienced, I said. I wanted to make sure she was still there.

Finally, she answered. She said, Just one more favor. Send me up my son.

What? I said.

My son, she said, I know he's down there. It's past his bedtime.

Your son isn't here, I said.

No? Well, where could he be?

A few minutes passed. The power came back on. Outside the window, traffic began to move. I stared at the empty dumbwaiter. It did not speak back. Not a sound. I was cold. The room swelled. I felt small, helpless. I wanted those blankets back.

