

I'm a fucking idiot, thought the Boy. A fucking idiot.

The streets were quiet. No moon tonight, hidden behind clouds that threatened to expend their rains at any moment. The street lights were spotty at best, but they brought comfort all the same. "Tonk. Tonk. Tonk." The sound of the crosswalk holding its breath before... "Amber lights flashing. Caution: Cars may not slow down." Still working after all this time. The only cars on the road still had open doors, long since abandoned.

Why am I doing this? The Boy was an idiot. There was food and water and light at the shelter, he didn't have to be here. You can go home any time. He just had to see what it was like.

A nearby storm drain was plugged with murky beige-and-red, with bones jutting out like teeth. Human soup. Nearby, a drug store. Perfect. The doors and security gate were destroyed, torn and twisted from their hinges. That was people. To the left, cement, masonry, and glass lie broken and strewn about, a hole smashed through the wall. That was Them.

The Boy walked up and down the aisles. Only his footsteps could be heard above the tinny hum of fluorescent lights. The fridges stopped running a while ago. All the food was gone, water, too. But if he could find batteries, he could keep Them away.

Zzzzt. Zt-zzzzzzt.

The lights began to flutter and buzz. He scrambled to the electronics section. Nothing. Fuck. Bright idea, coming this late, you fucking idiot. No light bulb is gonna save you. He could feel Them under his feet, the hanging fixtures shuddered and swung, the lights flickering angrily.

Go!

The Boy ran as fast as he could, turning down the road towards the shelter. Four blocks; just four blocks and he would be safe. He couldn't tell if the tremors from below were getting stronger, or if it was just his heart trying to punch an escape through his chest.

Running...

Three blocks...

"-!" called a voice. The Boy stopped. His heart was pounding, but he couldn't feel Them anymore. He studied the remaining streetlamps. They were solid. Safe. For now. The Boy looked around.

"-! Over here!" It was S. In pain, but relieved to see the Boy. S was lying on the sidewalk, his back propped up against a building. "I twisted my leg," he strained, and sucked in a breath through his teeth. "Shit, I'm glad you're here. Help me up?"

Why was S out of the shelter? What was he doing here? The Boy didn't get an answer. He heard Them; a discordant orchestra of undulating and buzzing violins rose in a crescendo, all out of tune, all out of time with one another.

Out of time.

“-! What are you doing?! HEY!”

The Boy ran. He did not stay behind to see Them burst from behind S and tear through his body. The Boy ran and did not stay behind to see Them devour S from the inside, out. The Boy ran and did not stay behind to see Them destroy S’ eyes, running down his cheeks like egg yolks, nor see Them pour like blood from a wound, out of their temporary, fleshy nest, and consume it.

The Boy ran.

Two blocks.

He stifled a yelp and lost his footing. It was F... or at least, what remained. A marred face, F was incomplete, the midsection torn away, replaced with entrails and no legs to be found. Half-done. They had come for him.

And then the Boy saw why everyone had left the shelter. The squat, former black-box theatre was engulfed in fire, oily black smoke billowing out from the windows. More bodies. Half-done, too. The Boy fell to his knees. It was gone, all gone.

Suddenly, the flames began to gutter and fail. The crescendo rose once again, Their shrieks and cries becoming so deafening, the Boy could no longer hear the pounding inside his head. It was pointless to run. Like the eye of a hurricane, the Boy was surrounded on all sides by Them, forming surging black walls. How many were there? Thousands? Millions? Grown big and fat on their diet of anything that moved, pitch-black, glowing yellow eyes... rats, scurrying here and there. They were ravenous, but organized by some chaotic law, row upon row upon row of rapaciousness, like masses of Greek phalanxes.

As the din grew, and the walls closed in around him, the Boy saw that the rats at the fore were still slick with blood and human gristle, bone fragments stuck in Their coarse fur. And at last, the Boy understood why They had been given the name that others called Them; this first line of seething hunger and death. They approached faster, faster, and he could smell Them.

The Deadline was here.