

It was the sunniest of days when I left the warehouse that morning. The sky was the prettiest shade of blue I think I've ever seen in my life. Even the trees around Lake Copperwheat were showing off their beautiful green leaves and multi-colored flowers. Hell, even Mary the dispatcher had a prettier smile than normal.

That should have been a sign.

The drive was long but I made it to the city of Kingston in just over four hours with enough time to drop off my delivery, grab lunch, and drive back. I remember Mary suggesting a restaurant next to a coffee shop that she enjoyed. I asked the owner of the shop I was delivering to about it.

"Is there a restaurant by a coffee shop near here? ABC-something, maybe?" I asked.

"ADJC? Yeah, it's about a half mile north, by the river." the owner replied.

"Great! I heard the food was good. I can just drive up there easy, right?"

"Eh," the owner replied, her expression giving pause. "If I'm being honest with you, it'd be better if you walked. Traffic going that way might slow you down this time of day."

I thought about it for a minute. It was a lovely day outside and I could use a walk to stretch my legs out considering my four-hour drive back home.

I should have just driven. Better yet, I should have just gone home. I wouldn't be in the mess I'm in now.

The owner said her people would finish unloading the van soon, but if I was leaving, that'd give her more time. I smiled and handed her the van's keys to lock it up when they were done and started walking towards the restaurant near Kings River.

The streets of downtown Kingston were packed with wall-to-wall traffic. Tons of vehicles trying to get down the four-lane road as quickly as the seemingly random parade would allow. The only things more packed than these streets were the sidewalks. I can see why more people walk down here instead of driving. I bet those people feel safe in their cars.

I'm not sure what exactly happened next. Maybe because the sun was high in the sky or because I was walking across the street from a building with glass windows or maybe it was something on the parade floats. Or maybe it was none of the above. Maybe it was just my time. All I know is that I was walking down the street and there was a very bright light that appeared to wash over the entire street. I saw all white. Then I saw all black. I'm blind.

I froze mere feet from the crosswalk. Fear washed over me as I felt people bumping into me from behind pushing me across the street. I knelt down on the side, trying to get out of the crowd. I thought I felt a pole being close to me so I sought it out, a venture that nearly landed me back in the street; a car horn alerting me of my impending doom.

I sat on the ground hugging this pole afraid to move, wondering what I should do next. To go from mindlessly enjoying the sights of a new city to being plunged into absolute darkness in an unfamiliar place is unsettling, to say the least. What was once just background noise has morphed into my entire reality. The engines idle at the intersection, the sound of shoes hitting the cement, the sound of horns honking from the clown parade, but the most jarring sound of all and the sound that filled me with the most fear was that of a child, more specifically, a little old lady.

I'm on the ground, near a street, against a pole, overwhelmed by the sounds in the distance, hearing the sound of a little old lady right in my ear was terrifying. I could feel her breath blowing against the hairs on my neck. I could smell her old lady perfume assault my nostrils so much so I could taste it.

As sweet as her voice may have been, what the old lady said left a bitter taste in my mouth and chills down my spine.

“Mister, there is somebody watching you.”

Everything around me stopped. Every sound was suddenly sinister. Every scent is a threat. I tried to reach for her, but I just managed to feel the hem of her dress as she walked away. I've never felt more alone in a crowd of people.

Moments later, I feel someone next to me. Before I could convince myself that I was being paranoid, I caught a whiff of something old and rotten. Maybe even putrid. I remember a smell like this before after coming home from vacation and learning there was a power outage after I had left, being restored before I came home. The smell of rotten meat and spoiled milk is unforgettable and I'm reminded of it now. The smell gets stronger and stronger, circling me like it was about to take me to Oz.

God, I wish it was Oz.

The sound of a lighter flicking and catching flame. The smell of tobacco and menthol. The feeling of whoever this is exhaling against my skin. I don't know who or what this is next to me but I'm not sticking around to find out. I hop up and run in the opposite direction of the smell, knocking over several people in the process.

I'd never paid attention to the difference in the sound between running on concrete and running on asphalt until then. Truly noticed the heat change when the sun is shielded behind a building. The city smells of sewer and cigarettes. The difference between pushing through crowds of people and being pushed by a crowd of people. The sensation of being hit with fists and being hit with a bat. Between falling on concrete and landing on the seats of a vehicle after being thrown in. Just how painful a needle in the neck is when you can't see it coming. The unfathomable fear, as your mind starts to fade to the same level of darkness your eyes have, not knowing if you'll wake again.

I had never paid attention to those kinds of feelings before. It's all I can think about now.

It's cold now. My clothes and shoes are gone. I feel exposed but there's nothing I can do about it. My hands and feet are chained, I assume to a wall, with shackles that rub away at my skin anytime I move around creating open sores that feel worse against the cool air.

I can still smell the smoker from time to time. They never speak, they just get close. I almost vomit whenever the dead meat smell hits my nose. Once I managed to hold back until the smell faded away and I assumed the putrid smoker had left.

I can hear chains rattling when I'm not moving so I don't think I'm the only person here. I've tried to call them but they never reply. I might just be hearing things. I don't know anything anymore. I feel like I'm losing my mind more and more with each passing... day? Week, maybe?

I also haven't slept since I've been here. There's no way of knowing if it's day or night. All I can do is sit and wait for...

"Sir, are you okay?"

The sudden voice of a young man was a shock in and of itself, but not as much of a shock as the light from the paramedics' penlight going back and forth from one eye to the other. I blinked repeatedly as I could see the face of the man in front of me.

"Oh shit, I can see!" I said to the paramedic.

"Sorry, Sir. Just checking your eyes," he replied as he put the flashlight away and removed the blood pressure cuff from my arm that I hadn't noticed.

I looked around me, my eyes struggling to adjust process vision again after... how long have I gone? Was I gone?

I tugged on the paramedic's sleeve to get their attention. "What happened to me?" I asked, terrified of the answer.

"To be honest, Sir," the paramedic answered, "we don't know. Someone found you on the sidewalk about a block away from here. You didn't have a phone on you, but you had an invoice in your pocket. They said they called the store and they knew you so they brought you back here."

"I've been on the street this whole time?"

"Until they brought you here. You were unconscious and you just woke up."

The paramedics insisted that I come to the hospital with them but I told them I'd much rather go home and I'd check in with my primary care doctor as soon as possible. They let me go and I was on my way back to the warehouse.

Day turned into night on the way back home. The sky was clear and the stars twinkled away against its navy blue backdrop. I could even still make out the flowers on the trees around the trees in the moonlight. The night air was crisp which prompted me to roll up the van's windows. After a few seconds, a stench hit me like a wave along the coast. My heart began to race and panic sat in all over again.

Cigarettes.

Rotten meat.

Spoiled Milk.

The sounds of chains rattled from the back of the van, but before I could pull over a pair of hands came from behind my seat and covered my eyes, sinking me back into darkness. The van swerved and as I felt the van leaving the pavement, right before the crash, I heard the voice of a sweet little old lady whisper in my ear.

"We're still watching you."