The Lights Go Out

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Meet George. He’s thin, built like a grey hound. His knees are more like springs than joints, so when he walks, they lead the rest of his body as if he’s pedalling a bike. When running, George puts his head down, leads with his shoulders, and takes off. At some point after that, he falls down. His foot gets caught under him, he loses his stride, stumbles, and the tan skin on his arms and face gets scraped away to reveal the red underneath. His friends laugh, they can’t help it. So George doesn’t run. He sings instead. His voice is deep, gravelly, and rarely heard. It comes out in his apartment, when the music is blaring and when he’s alone. He looks in the mirror, examines his thin, taut face, complete with dull green eyes, and sings along with the Beatles on the radio. His eyebrows shoot up and down, he runs a hand through his curly, brown hair, and he smiles.

But this isn’t the George that the rest of the world knows.

He swings the shop door open a bit too far, so it smacks against the doorway with a thwack. He holds it there and waves Jake in, before letting it slam behind him. For a brief second, the silence of the bookshop is stifling. The long shelves loom all around the two boys, threatening them with a calm and subdued gaze.

“Well! Look at this! A bookstore! I didn’t realize that boring had the ability to manifest into physical form,” says George to the shelves. His voice carries through the store, winding up and down the empty aisles.

“Yeah, this is boring. Let’s get out of here, I think there’s a Gamestop a couple blocks away,” replies Jake with a tinge of frustration in his voice.

“Chill out. We’ve been here like two seconds. I just need to find a present for my Mom. It won’t take long.” George’s eyes scan the printed section titles. Mysteries? Maybe. Thrillers? No. Memoirs? Possibly. Romance?

“Should I get my Mom a Romance novel?”

“I don’t know. Sure. Chicks love that stuff,” says Jake before checking his watch.

“No. Don’t,” another voice rings out from behind them.
two boys turn; the voice came from the cashier, a girl sitting with her legs propped up against the desk and a book in her lap. She has short brown hair that curls around her ears and a face that screams disinterest. Her eyes are settled on the book.

“And why not?” asks George.

“Would you buy your Mom porn?”

“No.”

“Then don’t get her porn. Go for the memoir section.” She flips a page. Jake and George share a glance, then shrug.


“Well...shit.”

“Come on, man. Hurry up,” says Jake, before grabbing a book off the shelf. “Just get this one.”

The title reads The Liars’ Club. Here we go, something exciting; this should be entertaining.

“Fine. Let’s go.”

“Don’t get that for your mom,” smirks the girl.

“Wha- Why not? You said memoir,” says Jake, clenching his jaw. The girl turns to George.

“Do you want your mom to read a true story about a seven year old girl being raped? I mean, it is a well written scene, lots of veins and such.”

“No,” mutters George as his face turns red.

“If you want, I’ll help you find a book. But you need to take back what you said earlier about the store being boring.”

“Seriously?”

“Come on, man,” says Jake, “let’s go, this is bullshit.”

“Dead serious,” she says. George grimaces and his face becomes even more red.

“All right. I apologize. Books are interesting, book shops more so. Even when rape is involved.”

“Damn straight,” mocks the girl, “come on, I’ll show you some good ones.” She pulls her legs down from the desk, slaps her book down on the counter, and stands up. Jake pulls George aside.

“Listen, I’m getting out of here. I’ll be down at the Gamestop when you’re done. Don’t take too long.”
“All right, later.” George watches as Jake skulks out of the shop.
“Bye! Come again!” yells the girl at the closing door, before turning to George, “I’m June, by the way.”
“George. Nice to meet you.”

The lights go out when they’re in the mystery section. It’s not just the lights either, everything powers down. Even in the book store, they hear the slow shughzzzz sound of the world shutting down around them. George puts down the books he’s carrying and stands up, trying to orient himself.

“Well... power outage, I guess.”
A short scream from outside punctures the silence briefly.
“Looks like it,” says June before promptly plopping herself down on the hard wood floor and leaning back against the end of a shelf.

“You’re just going to sit there? We have no idea why the power’s out. There could’ve been a catastrophe. A mega tornado or something.”
“And what, exactly, are we going to do about it?”

George stops and thinks. He can hear the sounds from the street slowly start to get louder. People are walking outside, trying to figure out what is going on. Their panicked conversations seem to grow by the minute. He checks his phone, the screen lights up and displays the time, but there’s no signal. That’s not right? Maybe a cell tower is down, maybe this is bigger than a blackout, maybe aliens have attacked. His mind begins to speed up, powered by irrationality. Is his family all right? What about Jake? What about...?

June kicks him in the shin.
“I can see your face, quit freaking out and sit down already.”

George sits down next to June.
“My cell isn’t getting any reception. This could be something big.”

“The cell tower probably got knocked out too. Chill out.”
“What if it’s terrorists? Or aliens? Maybe we should go outside. See what’s going on.”
“They won’t know anything we don’t and adding panicked to panicked is not a good equation. Just breath, push it into your stomach. You’ll calm down.”

George pulls air into this stomach, pushes it out. His blood starts to slow, his heart rate drops, and his mind begins to clear.
“Thanks. That helps.”
“Besides, if it was terrorists, we keep a gun locked in the back
and if it’s aliens we’ve got an extensive sci-fi collection. I’m sure there’s something useful in there.”
  “We should probably just accept them as our overlords. I mean, anal probing can’t be THAT bad.”
  “That’s the spirit.”
The seconds tick by.
  “So, are you a student around here, or... what?”
  “Yeah, sort of, I’m taking a semester off.”
They turn into minutes.
  “Paul McCartney. For sure.”
  “Well, I can see why you aren’t in school anymore. Too dumb.
The answer is John Lennon.”
  “John Lennon is dead.”
  “So is Paul McCartney. That man’s a zombie.”
And eventually an hour.
  “I’m worried.”
  “Yeah, me too.”
  “Jake’s not back yet.”
  “Maybe he’s waiting at Gamestop?”
  “Yeah, right.”
  “Thanks for staying here with me, though. I don’t like to admit it, but this freaks me out too.”
  “Shut up. If you don’t get brave now, I might start screaming. It’ll be like a little kid throwing a tantrum. I’ll probably start throwing poop around.”
  “That’s gross.”
They both laugh and George turns his head to face June, looking into her brown eyes.
  She smiles. Then she leans in. Her lips brush lightly against his at first, before she leans in more. She presses her face up against his, her nose against his cheek and her lips against his lips. But George’s face is rigid. So she pulls back.
  “Um, sorry? I guess. I just thought.”
  “No. It’s not, like that. Look, it’s just that. Well. I’m gay.”
  “Oh.”
  “Yeah.”
  “So... is Jake?”
George bursts out laughing.
  “No, he’s my cousin and no, he doesn’t know. Few do.”
  “Oh, okay.”
George grabs her hand. It’s warm and kinda shaky, but it
relaxes into his grip.
   “You know, you’re pretty awesome,” he says.
   “I know.”
   They just sit there after that, holding hands and passing the time. George begins to sing ‘Eleanor Rigby.’ His eyebrows move up and down and he pushes a hand through his brown curly hair.
   The world outside continues to move by in the dark, completely ignorant of the two bookstore inhabitants.