The night the lights went out

The whole block went dark on Wednesday, and Linda started giving away ice cream.

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5 MIN READ

Wednesday night around nine-thirty, I was at the kitchen table working on a story, and there was this sound outside. Like a big hollow boom. Not loud like fireworks. More like someone dropped a dumpster from the sky. And then everything went off.

Lights. Fridge. The laptop screen stayed on but the wifi died. The little hum that the building always makes, the one you don't notice until it's gone, that was gone too. It was so quiet I could hear my own ears.

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I went to the window. The whole block was dark. Not just my building. The streetlights, the bodega on the corner, the apartments across the street, even the water tower looked darker somehow, which doesn't make sense, it's a water tower. Then I saw the next block over still had lights. So it was just us. Our little rectangle of Brooklyn.

People started coming outside almost right away. You could hear doors opening all up and down the street. Phone flashlights going on one by one. Someone yelled "is it just me?" from a window and like four people yelled back "no!" at the same time.

I found out later from a guy on the corner that a transformer under the street had blown, near the end of the block, and that was the boom. Con Ed showed up about twenty minutes later. Two trucks, orange cones, a guy lowering himself into a manhole like it was nothing. He looked very calm about it. I wanted to bring him a coffee

but I couldn't make coffee. That was the first thing I realized I couldn't do. It was not the last.

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I have exactly two candles in my apartment. One is a fancy one somebody gave me that smells like "fig and cedar," which I'd never lit because it seemed too nice. The other is a birthday candle. A single birthday candle. The number six. I don't know why I have it.

I lit the fig one and put it on the kitchen table where my lamp usually is. The loft looked completely different. All the corners went soft and gold, and the big windows turned black, and I could see myself in them, just a guy and a candle. It was kind of beautiful honestly. For about ten minutes. Then it got hot, because no fans, and I went down to the street like everybody else.

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The whole block was on the stoops. People I've walked past for two years and never talked to. The guy from the third floor across the street who always has a bike on his shoulder. The two girls next door who I'm pretty sure are in a band, because sometimes at 2am I hear a bass through the wall. A family from down the block with three kids running in circles with flashlights, screaming like it was the best night of their lives. It probably was.

Someone had a speaker with a battery and put on old soul music, kind of quiet. Somebody else brought out a camping lantern and put it on top of a car. It started to feel less like a blackout and more like a party nobody planned.

The stars came out a little, too. Not a lot. It's still New York. But I saw more than I've ever seen from my block. Maybe eight. I counted.

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Then Linda came out.

Linda lives downstairs, if you're new here. She's been in the building longer than anyone, like thirty years, and she knows everything that happens on this street. She came out holding a cooler bag in one hand and a stack of plastic spoons in the other and she said, really loud, "Okay, everybody. My freezer's going. Come help me."

She had ice cream. A lot of ice cream. Like five pints, a box of those orange creamsicles, two boxes of ice cream sandwiches, and a whole tub of rainbow sherbet that I'm pretty sure was from 2023. She said she always keeps the freezer full "for emergencies." I didn't ask what kind of emergency needs that much sherbet. I think this was the emergency, actually.

She walked down the block handing it out to everyone. Kids first. Then the band girls, then the bike guy, then the Con Ed guys, who said they couldn't, and then took two each. She gave me a pint of mint chocolate chip and one spoon and said "you finish that, it won't keep." So I sat on our stoop and ate a whole pint of ice cream by candlelight, which is maybe the most childish thing I've done as an adult, and it was great.

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We sat there for a long time, Linda and me. She told me about the blackout in 2003, the big one, when the whole city went dark and she

walked home from Manhattan over the Williamsburg Bridge with like a thousand other people. She said strangers were handing out water on the bridge. She said it was the only time she ever saw New York be quiet.

She also told me about her old dogs. She's had them her whole life. A beagle named Pepper who used to sleep on her feet, a big shepherd mix who was scared of the mailman and nothing else. She talked about them like people. I told her I want a dog someday. Like, really want one. When the timing is right, when I'm home more. She looked at me for a second and said "the timing's never right, honey. You just do it." Then she went back to her creamsicle.

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The lights came back on at 5:12am. I know because I was still awake, obviously, sitting at the kitchen table with the fig candle burned down to almost nothing. Everything came on at once. The fridge started humming, the router blinked, the overhead light I'd left switched on lit up the whole loft so bright I yelled. And outside, all up and down the block, I heard people cheering through their windows. Little tired cheers. Someone yelled "yeah!" and someone else yelled "go to sleep!"

I threw out the milk. Everything else was fine.

On Thursday it was like nothing happened. Everybody back inside, back on their phones, walking past each other again. But the band girl waved at me on Friday. And the bike guy said "hey, ice cream." I'll take it.

– Shay

Thanks for reading. There are more of these on my site, one every couple of weeks.