

Lucky

A dozen of us are here tonight at the end of Day 2, behind a deserted restaurant, trying to stay warm, huddling in front of a burning pile of furniture from the house next door. I was just thinking: I am thirteen years old, and yet I am not. Yesterday, before it happened, I felt like a man. Today I feel like a little kid.

Evil is all around us. They are everywhere now. The great sweep ... maybe of the country, maybe of the entire earth ... began yesterday morning, a Sunday. I was dressed for church and not in my warmest clothes. I've been freezing all day and tonight I huddle closer to the fire and bring back memories of singing in a circle of Boy Scouts, flames in the middle climbing to the sky.

But tonight the men around the fire with me are not acting like we're on a camping trip. They look scared. They are scaring me, so I keep my eyes down and try not to see them. They haven't asked if I'm all right or told me not be afraid, as they normally would try to make a youngster feel better. They haven't even bothered to say everything is going to be all right, what anyone would tell a kid. It means we are in very deep trouble. Whether I'm a teenager or a little kid doesn't matter. Where everyone is scared shitless there are no children. Everyone is a threat.

I'm really frightened that things will never be all right. Everything will get worse. I'm not going to have any supper again tonight and I may freeze to death before morning. Unless I'm willing to take another kid's food away or beat his head in with the baseball bat I found this morning. Then I could steal a coat.

My father is distant. I think he knows something about my mother and the rest, but he's not going to tell me. When he does speak he calls me Alfred instead of Lucky, my nickname since I can remember. He said my little brothers are out looking for food, but I doubt it. They're too young to be out and about

in the dark on this dangerous night. When he lied to me, he stared into the fire and didn't turn to look at me. I know that means something is very wrong.

We hear them coming now. What an awful sound, a tearing and scraping. Screaming and fire everywhere. An ungodly awful smell. I grab the bat and crouch down low near the ground. My father crushes himself into a ball, I try to pull his head up by his hair, but he is rigid and locked up, his face buried in folds of his old loden coat. His whole body is shaking. I want him to save me, but he won't. He can't. He is terrified. So am I. But he's as good as dead if he stays here. They'll take his coat as a souvenir and then run him through.

Everyone has left but the two of us. I stand up to run and try to drag him after me by his collar. He is too heavy and too paralyzed with fear. He makes no sound but a whimper.

I wish with all my heart and soul to wake and find this is a dream.

Later, exhausted, my chest hurting from the hard breathing and running, I let myself collapse into a pile in the doorway of a burned out sporting goods store. I roll up in the thick coat. Moments or hours later I awaken because of a sound I can't identify, I jump up screaming and lose it for a few seconds. I stop myself and take deep breaths. But I don't know if I heard something or dreamed it. After a few minutes I decide it was a dream. If it was them, I'd be dead by now. And then I remember the sound, exactly. It was my father screaming as the blows landed on him, each destroying one part of him at a time.

Maybe I won't die. Maybe I can stay alive somehow. I'm thirteen, strong and smart. I really am lucky. The old woman went down with one swing of the bat when I stole her box of graham crackers. And my father's warm coat still has the winter lining zipped in.

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