

The storm began as I reached the store, lightning carving across an angry sky, thunder rumbling in answer.

The woman at the door, her eyes red-rimmed and bloodshot, freed a shopping cart for me.

Another flash, followed immediately by booming thunder, and the store lights died.

I returned my cart.

"I'm sorry," the woman said. "You can't leave."

"What?"

A white-haired lady, her topcoat bulging strangely, tried to slip out past her. The woman stopped her, too.

"Security system's electric. 'Til the power's back, no one leaves. Store policy."

Before I could argue, I heard sobbing. A small girl approached, tears on her face.

"What's the matter, hon?"

"My mommy's gone."

"Don't worry about it," I reassured and extended my hand.

But there on the edge of the light she stopped, apparently as afraid of me as she was of the darkness behind her.

"Where'd you see her last?" I asked her and knelt down on one knee in front of her.

"I don't know," she whimpered and took a step backward into the growing shadows.

Outside, the last trickle of light drained from the clouds as they draped the front of the store like a thick woolen blanket.

"Don't be afraid, I'm going to help you find your mommy. It's okay."

The child took an awkward step backward as she seemed to disappear into the dense blackness beyond.

“Wait a minute, I...”

And then she was gone, like a puff of smoke wisped from the air by a gentle breeze. I squinted and tried to get my eyes adjusted to the dim light, but was barely able to make out faint shapes in the distance. Strange outlines dancing and bobbing through the darkness. Probably just a trick played by a light deprived optic nerve.

As I turned to the woman at the door, a clap of thunder and a lightning strike that seemed to explode at the same time making me crouch like a dog hiding under a table. It was so close that it felt like it was inside the store. For an instant, the woman’s form was a pitch-black silhouette, outlined by an orange-ish glow.

“No one shall pass.”

My ears were still ringing from the intensity of the strike and the woman’s voice sounded garbled and gravelly. I shook my head to clear my ears and, from deep inside the store, I caught the faint whimper of a child. My head spun on my shoulders, trying to locate the origin of the sound. I was still blinded by the flash of light. I could see nothing, nothing except the woman’s silhouette, still visible, and dancing in front of me like paper cutout.

Then another lighting strike. This one knocking me forward onto my hands. I turned back, expecting to see the eerie silhouette behind me as the lightning continued to dance in the distance. But the woman wasn’t there. Only the empty lobby.

“Help me...somebody.... please help me...” a thin voice pleaded, lost deep in a sea of reverberated echoes.

Somewhere inside the store was the child, still looking for its mother. My eyes searched the darkness in vain. Only the ominous shapes and imagined movement of black on black could be seen.

I glanced at the storefront again and still, no woman. My instinct was to run, to bolt for the door and just get out of this place.

“Help ...”

Again, thunder. A deep paralyzing sound that seemed to be holding me down. As if an invisible malevolent arm had been grasping me tightly and was trying to suffocate me right there on the floor. My lungs felt tight, I couldn't breathe.

Again and again the lightning hit and the thunder echoed through the store like a rounds being fired from a cannon. I tried desperately to get up but my hands seemed stuck to the floor.

“Please...help me...”

Her voice was so frail.

“I'm coming,” I yelled, “Hold on, I'm coming.”

I sucked in a deep breath that filled the corners of my lungs. I forced myself to my feet. My heart was pounding so frantically it made my throat hurt. I looked around, desperately trying to see something, anything, through the blackness.

“Please...”

I had to help, so I ran forward, stumbling through the darkness, knocking into racks of clothes and abandoned shopping carts.

“I'm coming. Where are you,” I screamed as loud as I could, spinning blindly and pushing over everything in my way.

Click-click. Click. Click.

Metal-halide emergency lights came on in a pre-designated pattern starting from the back of the store, blinding me with their brilliance. As my vision cleared, I could see a dozen people standing around me, staring forward with petrified looks on their faces. All around me were scattered clothes and overturned shopping carts.

Behind me I heard the child crying softly. As I turned, I saw the red-eyed cart woman standing behind the little girl with her hand planted firmly on the girl's shoulder.

“You can never leave here.”

And with that, the lights went out, leaving me lost in blackness.