

Blackout

Henry lay in bed reading the latest novel he'd bought. *Creepers* by David Morrell. He'd only recently discovered the man could write a whole lot more than just violent stories about war veterans crossed. Henry didn't feel too badly about it, though. He figured most folks didn't know the man who had written *First Blood*, his character, John Rambo, later immortalized by Sylvester Stallone, was a cross-genre genius.

So far, he was enjoying this work by the author immensely. Henry's cat, Mace, lay at the foot of the bed, pretending to sleep but mostly just ignoring the world in general. Henry reached out a foot and rubbed Mace on the back. The big cat stretched his front legs and then proceeded to continue ignoring the world.

On page one hundred and eleven, the lights went out.

"Damn," Henry said. To no one in particular.

There was no storm, and as far as he could think back, it had been a long time since there'd been a blackout.

Now, he was faced with three problems. First, he'd just moved into this place and hadn't bothered to buy a flashlight or any candles yet. Second, he had to use the bathroom. Third, he hadn't used his inhaler all day and he could feel his in his breathing that his asthma would kick in at any moment.

First problem to tackle? Emptying his bladder.

He felt his way out of his room toward the bathroom down the hall. He hadn't lived in this apartment long enough to learn it by memory, and as such stubbed his toe rather violently on the door frame as he entered the bathroom. A stream of obscenities left his lips. He felt he was justified in using them.

He sat down on the toilet (not certain if he could aim that well in the dark) and answered the call of nature. He heard Mace jump down off the bed and begin to paw in the litter box.

“You too, huh, buddy?”

He stood, flushed the toilet, pulled up his shorts and began to negotiate his way out of the bathroom, very mindful of his throbbing toe. He normally had a fairly rigid routine at night. It included always putting three things on the nightstand next to the bed: his car keys, cell phone and the inhaler. Tonight, he'd varied the routine. He'd called a woman he had met earlier in the week and the call had gone well. Very well. So he had forgotten to bring the inhaler into the bedroom and place it on the nightstand. But he did remember where he left it. On the floor next to the chair in the living room.

But without a flashlight, finding it was going to be a doozy.

He gingerly walked down the hallway, unable to remember if there was anything in there that he could slam his toes against. So far, so good. Feeling along the wall, he kept wondering how long the damn hallway really was. Seemed he had been walking forever. Finally, the wall ended and he knew he stood in his living room. The chair would be about five feet to the right.

But he wasn't about to risk hitting his toe on something, so he knelt down and began to crawl toward the chair. It was so dark (not even a streetlight was left on outside) he could not see anything. For the hell of it, Henry lifted his hand in front of his face.

“Nope. Nothing.”

He reached out and found the chair in front of him. So he began feeling around the floor for the inhaler. His bronchial tubes had closed a little more on him since the power had gone out.

His hand landed on something cold. “What the hell?”

Then he remembered. He'd also left his cell phone laying there on the floor.

“How the hell do women do it? One phone call and I just leave my shit laying around any where.”

Then, it dawned on him: flip the phone open. Wouldn't be much light, but it would show him enough to see the inhaler, at least.

He flipped the phone open, but the inhaler wasn't in front of him.

“Damn. It was right here. Mace, you messing with my stuff, cat?”

He moved to the left to go around the chair and the automatic timer turned the display on the phone off. Henry flipped it closed and then back open. He looked in front of the chair. Nothing. He went around the other side of the chair. Wasn't there, either. He flipped the phone back open, leaned down and turned it away from him, lighting underneath the chair.

“Gotcha!”

As he reached out to get the inhaler, movement caught his eye.

The phone's display shut off.

His bronchial tubes shrank a little more. He wheezed a bit.

He flipped the phone back open, still leaning down, and his asthma began to take over his respiratory system.

There was something on the other side of the living room. In the corner of the wall separating the kitchen from this room, he'd seen a vague shape. His heart sped up slightly. He needed to take a hit from the inhaler, but he needed to know if he was seeing things more.

Henry flipped the phone back open. He looked into the blunt, opaque light the phone emitted.

“Oh *shit*.”

There was something there.

It moved slightly.

The phone display shut off.

Henry's bronchial tubes shrunk to no more than tiny canals. He tried to breathe in but could only pull in a raspy, tiny breath. His lungs felt almost no oxygen for his effort. The inhaler! He remembered it was in his hand and held it to his mouth and pressed the top, the medicine rushing down his throat with a hiss.

A louder hiss rose from the side of the room where he had seen that shape. Henry's heart went into high gear, beating a march in his chest.

With his hands shaking now, he slowly opened the cell phone. He pointed it towards the corner of the room and the shape was still there, in the same

position it was when he'd first seen it. The shape looked human in a twisted sort of way. Like an old man or an emaciated person on their knees with their head on the floor. It didn't look right. The light from the cell phone was only enough to play tricks on his eyes. The display shut off again and Henry was almost too terrified to open it again.

But he had to, didn't he? That's the nature of the beast.

The beast must be *seen*.

So Henry raised himself so that he could look over the arm of the chair and flipped open the phone.

And the thing had moved. It had lifted its head from the floor, and now was upright, on its knees. And it didn't look quite human.

Henry was frozen solid with fear. He could hear the blood pumping in his ears. He could feel every hair stand on end. The shadows twisted and whirled around the thing in the corner as Henry's hand shook the phone. He had been afraid once or twice. He'd been caught once in a massive parking garage in a rough part of town, very late, and could not find his car. That had frightened him a bit.

But he had never felt anything like this. He had to imagine this was true terror. Every chemical in him was coursing through his veins at lightning speed. Fight or flight was the message being pounded through him like Morse code being sent with a jackhammer.

But Henry found he could do neither.

All he could do was open and close that goddamn phone, staring at that thing in the corner. When he opened the phone and pointed it in the corner this time, whatever the hell that thing was in the corner was looking at him. He couldn't see it clearly enough to make out any features. Only that its face looked deformed. Wrong.

Henry dropped down behind the chair, breathing heavily, a faint rasp already creeping into his lungs.

And then the lights came on.

For a moment, he couldn't move. Finally, Henry had to force himself to raise up and look over the arm of the chair.

There was nothing in the corner.

A burglar. Someone in the house. "Has to be," Henry said to himself. What he thought he'd seen in the dark was just a trick played by the dim light of the cell phone and his frazzled nerves. Whoever it was had moved as soon as the lights had come back on. Hiding somewhere in the house now.

But why hadn't he heard anything? That was most definitely a mystery.

He remembered he had no weapons, save an old shotgun in the closet. But no fargin' shells. Chalk another item up to procrastination. He went to the closet and got the old .12 gauge anyway. The burglar wouldn't know it wasn't loaded, and, at the very least, he could knock someone in the head with it.

The closet was closest to the north side bathroom, so Henry went in there first. Slowly, he walked to the shower. He gave himself the count of three to pull the curtain open. One, two...

He yanked the curtain back. Nothing.

Next was the other closet in the hallway. No one. Nothing there at all.

Henry searched the entire house but there was no sign of anyone. He checked all three exterior doors and there were no signs of entry—forced or otherwise.

It didn't make sense. Either someone had broken in or he really had been seeing things. Because any other explanation for what he saw was not possible, and he couldn't let himself entertain that kind of thinking for too long.

Henry opened the refrigerator and pulled out a beer. A cold Corona was what he needed at the moment. Maybe four or five of them. He pulled the bottle opener out of a drawer and popped the top and drank almost half the beer in one pull. He felt the warm tingle in his toes and began to relax a little bit. But

the shotgun leaning next to him and the sweat-soaked hair on his head kept reminding him of what had just happened.

Why hadn't he just gone to the damn store when he'd moved in and bought a flash light? At least some candles? Taking the lights for granted just like any person does. And why not? How often does the power go out? For that matter, how often does someone see some thing like that huddled in the corner of their living room?

The thought of it made him shiver. He put it out of his head.

"That's it," he said out loud. There was a 24-hour Wal-mart a couple of miles from here. He was going to get a flashlight.

And maybe some shells for that shotgun.

Henry went to his bedroom and pulled on a pair of jeans and a button up shirt over his tee shirt. He sat down on the edge of the bed and tied his shoes and realized that there was another thing he hadn't seen since the lights had come back on.

Mace.

He called the big cat's name, but he didn't come strutting around the corner like always. There was food in the bowl, so Henry lifted it and shook it, making the bits of dry food tinkle in the ceramic bowl.

No Mace. Something was very wrong when that cat didn't come running at the sound of food. Henry looked around the room. The closet door was open enough for the cat to slip through. Henry grabbed the door handle and then stopped.

Dark in there. Would something besides Mace be in that closet?

"Stop acting like a kid, Henry," he told himself. "You already checked in here anyway."

He pulled the door open quick, bracing himself just in case.

Nothing. No Mace, either. Clothing and unpacked boxes, nothing more.

He was getting a little worried now.

After searching both bathrooms, all the closets, the kitchen and the living room (Henry found the prospect of looking under that chair quite daunting), Mace was nowhere to be found. There were no open windows, and, so far as Henry knew, no places anywhere that Mace could have gotten out of the house. The cat simply had to be in here somewhere. Henry thought of one more place. In the small area next to the entrance to the garage. Where the washer and dryer were. It was closed off with wooden louvered doors, usually shut. He'd checked it in a hurry for a burglar, but there was room for Mace where Henry might miss him.

He walked down the short hall from the living room to the washer and dryer .

“Hey, pal, you in there?”

Henry opened the door, but he did not see Mace. But he did hear something. A rustling sound on the right side of the washing machine. There was a space about a foot and a half wide between the machine and the wall. Henry had to twist his head around a bit to look into that space. Sure enough, Mace was tucked in there, shoved up as far against the rear wall as was possible.

“Hey, man! Come out on! The lights are back on and all is well.”

Mace hissed loudly and began to growl.

“Whoa, hey now. It's just me. The guy who feeds you, remember?”

Mace continued to growl.

“Shook you up pretty bad, too, huh? Come on; let's get you out of there.” Henry reached down and tried to pick the cat up, but was rewarded for his efforts by Mace clamping down on his wrist and then scratching Henry profusely before bulleting out of the small space toward the bedroom.

“Hey, *SHIT!* DAMN IT, cat!” Henry looked at his wrist and arm. He was bleeding and the scratches were already turning red. “Shit. Feed that hairy furball and this is the thanks I get.” Henry rubbed his arm and realized he'd also forgotten to buy first aid supplies. Best he could do until he got to Walmart was to wash his wounds thoroughly.

In the kitchen, Henry turned on the water and let it run for a minute or two, letting the hot water catch up. He tried to put the thing he'd seen in the corner out of his mind, but found it almost impossible. Each time he thought of whatever the hell it was, and how the last time he'd seen it, it had sat upright, his heart began to race. Arguing with himself was pointless, because it always came back to two possibilities. He was seeing things, or something unexplainable really had been there.

And he just wasn't going to entertain that possibility. In the warm, fluorescent light, reality was the order of things. There was nothing else. That's how the world works. That's what Henry had to believe.

He reached down, picked up his cell phone and inhaler from the counter, put them in his pocket and walked toward the garage door. His keys hung on a small hook next to the door.

"Last time I ever procrastinate," he told himself.

And he probably meant that, too.

Four feet from the kitchen and the lights dimmed and came back up. Henry froze for a moment.

Then he ran.

Fifteen feet from the garage door and the lights went out completely.

Henry stopped in his tracks.

"No, no, *NO!*" he said. He slammed his fist into his other hand.

The growl that Mace let out from the bedroom was one of the most terrifying things Henry had ever heard.

Something hissed loudly behind him. It wasn't Mace. No cat hissed like that. None that Henry had ever heard. Sweat began to bead and run down his face. Henry already knew what was behind him. But he could not bring himself to turn around, open his cell phone and use the dim light to see. His heart was

already racing. Having seen what was behind him once before, he needed no time getting scared to death this time.

Make yourself move, damnit, he thought. Anywhere. Just go.

He put his left foot in front of his right, and willed himself to move toward the garage. *But what about Mace, Henry thought. Mace knows a lot more places to hide safely than you do. Get out of the house, man!*

Henry screamed as something touched his foot. He yanked the phone out of his pocket, flipped it open and pointed it toward the ground. There, in the light, was a gnarled, twisted hand. Very long, spiderlike fingers with sharp nails. If it was human once, it sure as hell wasn't now.

Henry ran.

He began to wheeze. His rapid body functions required more oxygen, and his asthma was reluctant to give it away so easily. He could feel his bronchial tubes closing, but he ran anyway. He was certain that any moment he would crack his own skull on the door jamb to the short hallway that led to the garage, but he manage to make it through. As he drew within just a few feet of the door leading to the garage, he heard the sliding sound of the louvered doors closing off the washing machine and dryer being opened.

Something grabbed Henry's arm. Something very, very strong. He was stopped cold.

Henry wheezed and felt the oxygen coursing through him getting thinner and thinner. His heart felt as though it would explode from his chest at any moment. He knew—somehow he just knew—that this, for him, was the end of all things.

He flipped open his phone and pointed it into the small alcove that held the washer and dryer. The dim light revealed something awful. A thing that Henry had never seen—not even in his own nightmares. Henry screamed. It was barely a scream at all. There was no air in his lungs to scream with.

Henry never made it to buy a flashlight.

Turned out he'd never need one again, anyway.

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Dothan, Alabama