

# There Is a Light

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**Y**ou're driving us up Whiteface Mountain in the rusted van that came with the house we bought from the cat lady. The mountain is around 5,000 feet above sea level, and we keep climbing, the air growing colder as we go. It's raining, the scrub pines going past and wisps of fog like smoke blowing all around. My sister and I are in the back, wearing shorts because it's summer, sitting in beanbag chairs because there are no seats, the shiny blue and yellow vinyl sticking to our legs. Mom is up front with you, my little brother on her lap. You yell something over the loud groan of the engine about the weather station at the top and a castle that was built with the stone they blasted away to make a path for the road. Then you look over at Mom and smile, and she smiles back.

This is my birthday, August 21, 1981, and you haven't been fired yet. This trip happens just before you lose your job. Before the things that will change us for good. Before you leave us and then come back and then leave us again. Before my first car accident and the drugs Mom will find. Before our fistfights begin, bloody and breathless. Before the time I am hitchhiking home from high school and take a ride from a man who puts his hand on my leg.

In ten days I will enter La Salle Institute, an all-boys Catholic military school twenty-four miles from home on the outskirts of Troy, that small, ugly city across the Hudson River from Albany, the state capital where you still work. All I know of Troy is the college radio station from Rensselaer Poly that I can pick up on good weather days if the antenna I string out my window onto the roof and duct tape to the chimney is pointed in the right direction. This is the station that introduces me to *Sandinista!* by The Clash, and I've come to believe that Joe Strummer can save me from life in our suburban neighborhood. The burnt lawns and gypsy-moth-eaten trees, the stinking creosote utility poles, and the mosquito trucks that spray DDT.

There are no windows in the van except up front. Maura and I have nothing to look at except each other. I'm making faces at her, trying my best to look like Matt Dillon from *Over the Edge*. I check the HBO schedule they send us in the mail to find out each time it is played, sometimes sneaking downstairs after midnight when you and Mom are asleep. I wish I was Richie White, and I've started cutting the sleeves off my T-shirts, which pisses you off. My hair is long like Richie's, and soon I'll have to buzz it off in accordance with the new school's rules. I pretend that our subdivision is the dystopian New Granada of the movie. We have a community pool and a nine-hole golf course with a building that the adults call the Clubhouse, even though there's no golf shop. Inside is a large parquet dance floor, with a mirror ball hanging from the ceiling, and a long mahogany bar. Just like the movie, I imagine my friends and I padlock the doors at night while the adults are disco dancing in polyester and rayon, and then burn the cars in the parking lot.

When you do get fired, it will not be a surprise. You will know for some time that it's coming. You will come through the door one night and announce that they took away your phone, the big black one with the multiple circuits and the little red and green bulbs that light up for incoming calls. A week later they will move you from your office with the neat wood paneling to a broom closet on a lower floor. Finally you will come home and not go back to work, sleeping past the time I wake in the dark and begin the long commute to school.

At this point there will be two mortgages with 13 percent interest, and we will be rushing to finish fixing the old house we bought from the cat lady so we can move in. What little money there is will dry up. You and Mom will talk in grave terms and hushed tones at the kitchen table or in bed at night, and I will sneak quietly around the corner to listen, desperate for details to piece together what is happening to us, falling asleep on the cold wood floor outside your door until early morning when I crawl back to my room.

La Salle Institute is the place you've been threatening to send me since the sixth grade, after I turned eleven and started fighting, shoplifting, sneaking sips of your Wild Turkey or your Hennessy, and failing classes. This was about the same time we first went to look at the house. The cat lady sat in a corner by the short propane cooking stove. Yellowy skin, lost under a pile of blankets, the cancer having taken almost all of her. The smell was too much, and finally you and Mom sent me and Maura outside to wait while you looked around the place. There was a small church across the road with stained-glass windows and hipped roofs, a white spire pointing to the sky, and a cemetery on the darkening hill behind. Maura and I were in the road walking toe to heel on the painted yellow line trying to balance, not a car for miles in either direction, an October moon rising behind the bare trees. Dry leaves skipped across the pavement in the breeze.

"Are Mom and Dad buying this house?"

"No."

"Are we moving here?"

"No. We're not moving."

The quiet was odd and unsettling to us. Not at all like the subdivision where we lived, with the sounds of the neighborhood kids on their bikes, the cars coming and going, barking dogs, distant voices, lawn mowers. I wanted to be back in my bedroom with my records and my drawing pads and my comic books and my copies of *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, *I Am the Cheese*, *Slake's Limbo*, *The Outsiders*, *The Wanderers*. A window from my room steps out onto the garage roof, where I like to sit, especially at night. I lie there and look up at the stars,

sometimes smoking cigarettes that the wrinkled blind man will sell me at Rosen's general store. Riding my bike, I can be at any of my friends' houses in seconds. The baseball field where my team plays is just a few blocks away, me behind the plate sweating happily in shin guards, chest protector, face mask. The strange throwback village you brought us to feels a million miles away. Resembles a set from some bad horror flick I would see on HBO.

"It's scary here. Are you scared?"

"No. I'm not scared. Stop worrying. I told you, we're not moving here."

The van is a long-retired Bell Telephone repair truck. The bottom half of the outside is painted army green. The top is a scarred, pale white. Someone sprayed a brighter white paint over the powder-blue Bell Telephone logo, which you can still see faintly underneath. Orangey rust eats at the bottom of the quarter panels, which look like burnt pages of an ancient map. There's just corrugated metal subflooring inside and metal braided shelves in the back affixed to the walls that tend to rattle like a machine gun.

As we climb the mountain, Brendan, who is up front in a white plastic car seat that isn't tethered to anything, keeps sliding backward toward me. I put my foot out to stop him and kick the car seat back toward my mother. He smiles and laughs, graham cracker sludge smeared across his face.

The van's muffler is missing, and when we accelerate out of gas stations and parking lots and ice cream stands, people turn their heads and cover their ears. We're on our summer camping trip to Rollins Pond in the Adirondack Mountains. You're the deputy commissioner of the state's Department of Environmental Conservation, and yesterday when we pulled into the campground, I could see the park ranger on the porch of his cabin looking confused, like he expected a nicer car, maybe a Wagoner with that fancy faux wood-grain paneling as door accents. He stepped down off the porch, put his tan-felt ranger hat on, said, "Hello, Commissioner," his voice raised above the loud growl of the idling engine.

Today was forecasted rain all day, so instead of sitting in the tent playing cards, you're bringing us up Whiteface to tour the weather station at the top.

Later tonight we're going to see the bears at the dump. You say we'll pull into the dump at dusk and wait quietly in the van for dark to come. Then, after a while, we'll turn on the headlights, and there they'll be, having moved in silently while we waited, and we'll get to watch them eat the garbage. I'm curious to see these bears, but for some reason I don't believe this will work. I wonder if the bears will show. I wonder how long we'll have to wait. I get bored easily, struggle to concentrate at school, and there is little that holds my attention for very long except for music, comic books, movies, some novels. I probably have ADHD, but it's the early '80s, and this isn't something that people diagnose kids with yet.

I have an image of turning on the van lights to see the bears and seeing nothing but mottled piles of crap. Or the battery will die, and then we'll be stuck in the dump without any sign of the bears until they're breaking into the van to maul us. You come up with a lot of crazy ideas: projects, experiments, hobbies that end up costing a lot of money and create a vortex that the family gets pulled into, and oftentimes these things go badly. You obsess over your ideas, get fixated, and no one can talk you out of them. I wonder if this thing with the dump and the bears is another calamity we should see coming but are powerless to stop.

The house is like this, although we haven't moved in yet. Originally you bought it with what you said was the intention to make basic fixes and then sell it or rent it, turn a quick profit to pad your government worker salary that doesn't seem to be making ends meet. Then your impulses took over, and you imagined all the changes that could be made to the country house you always dreamed of living in. One day you announced you wanted to move there. But it's become a money pit. And you keep dragging me to the house on weekends and nights to do demolition or hang drywall or lay insulation in the attic or install roofing in the cold rain. I have grown to resent you for this since I miss going to Little League baseball games or football practice or playing with my friends or watching HBO.

We get out of the van at the top of the mountain. A parking lot's cut into

the side of a rock wall and a set of stairs with a sign that directs us to the summit proper. The wind is blowing and there's a sideways rain. The temperatures are the coldest we've had since early spring, and people are walking around in shorts but folding their arms and lowering their heads away from the spitting rain. This is the way it usually is on my birthday—a foretelling of fall, the first chill in the air, a sign that things are changing, like that song by Van Morrison, "Cold Wind in August", although I don't understand yet the kind of heartbreak he's singing about.

Happy to be out of the van, I sprint to the end of the lot and take off up the stairs. Mom yells after me to be careful. At this point in my fourteen years I've had my head stitched up a number of times, a concussion from accidentally running full speed into a department store's plate-glass door that I didn't realize was closed. I was run over by Bob Ricci in his go-cart that left a six-inch gash in my thigh. You butterflyed the wound with little rectangles of silver duct tape that you ripped with your teeth. I have been burned across my chest and arms and neck. But the burns happened when I was just twenty months old and I don't remember. I only know the story Mom tells me. A pot of boiling water I pulled onto myself from the stovetop. I've never asked you to tell me what happened and you've never talked to me about what you remember. Those discussions only happen with Mom. Never you. I don't know your memories of it at all.

It was March, still cold, and Mom had dressed me in a turtleneck and overalls. The clothing acted like a sponge, holding the boiling water against my skin. You had just gotten home from work, and when Mom tells the story, I imagine you loosening your tie in your bedroom upstairs, unwinding from the day, when you hear me screaming from down below. In my imagination I see you take the stairs three at a time and once you're in the kitchen you try to rip off my clothes but the boiling water soaked into the fabric scalds your hands so you run cold water in the sink and place me under the tap and then struggle with the buttons and clasps on the overalls but you don't notice that the sink is filling up and Mom has to yell at you that I'm drowning and you need to get me in the car, and we need to get to the hospital.

The summit stairs are built into the knife edge at the top of the mountain with metal piping for hand rails slick with rain. It's straight down on either side, but the summit is socked in, and all I see are clouds below me. I reach the top and pause before the scramble up to the weather station and the castle. All at once I realize we're lost to each other in the fog. You're calling my name from somewhere behind me but I don't answer. I've put distance between us. I can hear you out there, your voice growing angrier and frustrated. But I can't make myself call back to you. After a week in a van, in a canoe, in a tent with you, I feel free, like I'm walking through some otherworldly moonscape, and it feels good even though I'm cold and soaked through. Suddenly I'm Ponyboy Curtis or Aremis Slake, parentless and alone, far away from expectations I won't meet, no one to disappoint. I wonder if there's a room in the castle where I might quietly disappear. Like Aremis, I will hide out until winter comes. Maybe never make it to this new school. You and Mom will look for me and worry, but eventually you'll say you have to go home and back to your lives in the suburbs of upstate New York. You'll move on and forget. I'll climb down Whiteface once the snow starts and find a family in town to take me in for the winter. I'll change my name, live in their attic, and make up a story about being an orphan.

I wait for a while in the damp cold for you to top the stairs. The rain is lessening but the fog is still thick and people appear out of the clouds like ghosts and then vanish again and I can't make out faces. All of a sudden you're right in front of me, looking around, but you don't see me yet and I don't say anything. You start to walk toward the castle, and I step in behind you, hanging back a few strides. You call my name again a couple of times. You don't know that I'm right here. You don't see me, and you can't sense me even though I'm this close. I feel like I am a ghost, too, just like the strangers passing by us.

The burns left red, raised scars. Melted skin frozen in swirls and fissures. On my neck, my arms, my chest. My lower abdomen shows striated lines like tattoos where they took the skin grafts. Mom says that in the days afterward, while still in the hospital, my face was wrapped up in white gauze *just like a mummy*. This is the part of the story where she cries. She says she didn't know

if my face would be scarred permanently, forced to wait until they removed the bandages a week later. You slow your steps and then stop, look left and right. Hands in your jeans pockets. The castle rises up in front of us, big blocks of rough-cut gray-and-white granite. The rain has stopped altogether now. I watch to see what you will do. Then, after a while, I say, "Dad," and you turn around, your hair wet and matted down, surprise on your face and you throw up your arms, shake your head.

"Jesus. What the hell is wrong with you? Where'd you go?"

We're all in the van again rolling back down the mountain when the engine turns off spontaneously. It's quiet for a second or two until Mom starts screaming and you rise out of your seat and stand up on the brake pedal, hands white-knuckling the steering wheel. Of all the things wrong and broken on this van, this is the most dangerous. The engine fails spontaneously at times, and the power steering and power brakes go with it. It will not start back up again in drive or neutral; finicky and deranged, it will only start again in park. I've heard you and Mom discuss the crisis plan if this happens while we're on the highway: She will immediately check the convex mirrors and blind spots to see if there are cars in the adjacent lanes while you try to coast to the shoulder. The blinkers don't work, so Mom will roll down her window and signal a right lane shift if necessary.

But there's no plan for what to do while careening down a steep mountain road. Mom keeps screaming your name as the van picks up speed and you apply your full body weight to the brakes with no effect. The trees and landscapes and road signs saying "SLOW" and "TRUCKS USE LOW GEAR" arrive and pass us at an increasing pace. You can't seem to control the direction of the van. No power steering, it lumbers widely left and then right. We are using the entire road on the way down, and I begin to think of what will happen with oncoming traffic. My sister and I are trying to brace ourselves in our beanbag chairs in the back, and my baby brother is sliding around in his car seat.

I think about death and dying often. You don't know this. But it always



feels very close, like a visitation. It's a comfort most times, this sense that I will be leaving. Mom said they gave me penicillin in the hospital to ward off infection, a high risk for burn victims, not knowing I was allergic, and I went into shock, cardiac arrest. *Your little heart stopped, honey.* I have this memory, a sensation of whiteness, of cool, restful, pleasing air. It's a peace and serenity that I equate with this part of the story when she tells it. If I close my eyes I can sometimes return to that feeling, and then I don't ever want to leave that space. But as I get older, the sensation and the images and the feelings are becoming more difficult to conjure, which makes me sad. I do not want to lose this feeling forever, that safety and simplicity of the white place, but I also don't know how to hold onto it and keep it whole.

Up ahead I see a stone barrier wall coming into view. It looks as though it's been there since 1936 when the road was first installed, only three feet high or so and missing stones in places. It won't be enough to stop us. Over the wall is a precipitous drop. We'll go right through it and I wonder what this will feel like. That moment we're suspended in midair. The falling. I see you reach down and try the key in the ignition as the wall and the empty air rush at us. Somehow the engine turns over and the power steering comes back and you swerve into the right lane of the road again while the van slows.

Mom stops yelling your name finally, and you roll the van into an overlook and we come to a stop. You put the van in park and turn the engine off and lean back, run your hands through your hair. Everyone is wide-eyed and breathing heavy at what just happened. You're looking at Mom, and she's holding my baby brother tightly in her lap now and crying softly. Then you turn and look back at me. I search for something in your eyes, some kind of sign that says we're really okay now, that this kind of danger won't befall us anymore, that this was the last of it. That the heaviness we have come to know about our lives will finally pass with this latest episode. *We're okay now, right?* I say to you with my eyes. *We're safe now?* But you're sweating and there's still panic on your face and you turn away. I look out at what you're seeing. The moody sky and the gray expanse. The

shifting, angry clouds. The rocks and trees and mountains off in the distance looking forlorn and ragged in the rain, the light waning. Future days.

I stay as still as I can in the dark and don't make a sound, just like you said, but it's difficult. In the blackness I think of this new school and the scratchy wool uniform I will have to wear, cadet gray trousers with black piping, powder blue shirt, navy tie, the black leather spit-shined shoes, the copper belt buckle I will have to shine each night. I think of the waking up before dawn and the long trip on the city bus that I will take to get there, the diesel exhaust, blue cigarette smoke hanging in the air, the homeless crazies. I think of the Franciscan priests and the Christian Brothers and the retired Army instructors, shell-shocked from Vietnam, burning time teaching military science to packs of callow boys who cannot understand. I will know no one. That much I will like. *You'll make new friends and still keep your friends here.* But I know that's bullshit. Just another thing you and Mom say to make the new, weird things seem better.

You turn the headlights on and the bears look up from the garbage piles. There are five of them, just like us. We're all up front now: you in the driver seat, Mom in the passenger seat, my baby brother in her lap again, Maura and I with our arms on the dash, pressed up against the windshield. We're all looking out at them looking back at us. Their eyes glow gold, matching the million stars in the Adirondack night sky overhead, their black coats shimmering and iridescent.

We're all together, inches away from one another. So close we can feel each other's heat, hear each other breathing. We are quiet for a long time, and there is a rare stillness and peace. I begin to think that maybe we will be okay. We were just waiting for this moment. Waiting for the bears and their garbage and these stars to set us free. Now everything will be all right. We will be together and we will be okay. Baby Brendan makes little laughing noises and Maura turns to me, smiling. Mom looks at all of us with her mouth open and then you even laugh and place your arm around me, pulling me closer, pulling me toward you.

"Hey, pal," you whisper. "Happy birthday."

