

Lights Out

Nathan Alaniz

Our father is in the living room discussing politics. Of course, he's drunk. Our mother is in the kitchen debating religion. Of course, she's stoned. Joshua and I are in our bedroom playing with Lincoln Logs.

"Joshua!" Father shouts from the living room. Joshua gets up and walks into the living room.

"Yes, father?" Joshua asks.

"Be a good boy and get us another round," father says, while shaking an empty beer can. His friends are all smiling through a thick haze of smoke. Their eyes are red with passion. They like how father talks.

"Yes, sir," Joshua says. He walks toward the kitchen. Father turns back toward his friends.

"Four more years of this s—t?" Father laughs. "It might just as well be."

"The end of the world," mother proclaims, "is just around the corner."

An unlit cigarette dangles from mother's mouth. Joshua steps into the kitchen and opens the refrigerator door. Mother and her friends stare at him as he grabs four beers. Their eyes are wide with wonder.

"It's getting late, Jay. So, brush your teeth and get ready for bed," mother says, "and tell Nate to do the same."

"Yes, ma'am," Joshua says.

Joshua heads back into the living room awkwardly holding two beers in each hand. He gives each of father's friend a beer and in return, each gives him one dollar. When Joshua hands father a beer, father gives him two dollars.

"One is for you and the other for Nathan, okay?"

“Okay!” Josh joyfully says and runs back into our bedroom. “We got five bucks!” he yells.

“Yes!” I shout.

“Baseball cards or comic books?”

“Umm . . . comic books!”

“I’m getting Ghost Rider,” Joshua says coolly.

“I’m getting . . . hmm . . . Captain America.” I say.

Mother stumbles into our bedroom. “Brush your teeth, say your prayers, and go to bed,” she demands.

“Yes, ma’am,” we both say with a sigh.

We stand in front of the bathroom mirror vigorously brushing our teeth. It’s a race to see whose gums bleed first. I win, again. We rinse out our mouths and go back into our bedroom. Joshua grabs the stopwatch from our toy box and climbs up the ladder to his top bunk. I’m jealous of how high he is.

“Ready?” he asks.

“Yes,” I reply. He clicks the stopwatch. When we hear the BEEP, we recite the Lord’s Prayer as fast as we can.

“Time!” Josh yells. “Not bad,” he says, “seven seconds flat . . . my new world record.” He wins, again.

Josh doesn’t turn off the light. He knows I’m afraid of the dark. As I drift off to sleep, I know he’s awake. I know what he’s thinking. If God is really real, then turn off the bedroom light. If God is really real, turn off this bedroom light. Please, turn off my bedroom light.

I know mother will be in shortly to turn off our bedroom light. It happens every night. Faintly, I hear father say, “There’s no more beer?” then shout, “G—d— it!” Father’s footsteps echo throughout the house like a ghost’s shackles, hitting every step up and down a staircase. The back door slams. His car door slams. The screeching of tires sound like a newborn baby. If God is really real, please –

POW!

BANG!

POP!

The lights go out. Everything goes out. I can't tell if my eyes are open or shut, it's so dark. Mother peeks into our bedroom and lights her cigarette. The orange amber is the only thing that I can see. "The lights went out," she says calmly, "don't be afraid."