

THE BIG DARK

Rodman Philbrick

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THE NIGHT THAT CHANGED EVERYTHING

Where were you when the lights went out?

I was in Harmony, New Hampshire, on a night so cold you could sneeze icicles, watching the aurora borealis break-dance across the Milky Way. It was New Year's Eve, of course, we all remember that, those of us who survived. Most of the folks in Harmony (population 857 at the time) were out on a snowy baseball field, in the night shadows of the White Mountains, watching the sky go nuts. Me and my mom and my sister and most of my friends, we all saw it. Our science teacher, Mr. Mangano, had set up his telescope, but really you didn't need a telescope. All you needed to do was open your eyes and look up.

My name is Charlie Cobb. Everybody has their own story about the event or the pulse or whatever you want to call it. Must be, what, seven billion stories? This is mine. What happened when the big

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dark came to our little town, and what King Man did in the crazy cold, and the long trek down the mountain, all of it.

Like everybody else that night, we thought we knew what to expect. The so-called northern lights would be visible as far south as Cuba, on account of a wicked big sun storm. Something about the solar wind hitting Earth's atmosphere and putting on a light show. Mr. Mangano explained how it was a stream of hot gases belched out by the sun, and something about charged particles, whatever they are. All we really needed to know, me and my friends, was that we had a great excuse to be out late on New Year's Eve. Outside in the dark of night, and not having to watch the stupid ball drop on boring old TV while they droned on about the cute, sad things that happened over the past year.

Except it wasn't dark that night. Me and my best friend, Gronk, we planned to set off some cherry bombs at midnight, but the sky was so bright his mom caught us before we had the chance to take off our mittens. It was so bright there were shadows on the snow, like in the daytime. It was so bright it almost hurt to watch, except you couldn't not watch because you might miss something spectacular.

When I think about it now, looking back, it was, like, super spooky, but at the time we thought it was really cool. People were *ooing* and *ahhing* like at real fireworks. *Oh did you see that one*, and *Wow that was amazing*. And it *was* amazing. There were sheets of shimmering green and shivering purple,

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and weird little flashes of red along the horizon, and colors no one could quite describe because we'd never seen anything like it. Imagine a lightning bolt hitting a box of crayons and turning it into colored steam. Like that. Electric colors rippling and pulsing as if they were alive. Colors so insane you almost forgot how cold it was, or maybe the cold made it more intense somehow.

Like I said, most of the folks in Harmony were out on the baseball field that night, watching the light show and trying to keep warm. Moms and dads and little kids in puffy snowsuits. Some of the cars and SUVs had been left running so the owners could duck in and get a blast from the heaters. Everybody seemed happy to be there, witnessing something strange and beautiful.

When it got to be ten minutes to midnight, somebody started shouting out a countdown and we all joined in. Ten minutes to the New Year! Nine minutes to the New Year! Like that. We'd gotten to seven minutes or so when it happened. A flash. Okay, more than a flash. Way more. A burst of light that filled the entire sky and whited out the stars, like the universe was trying to take a picture of planet Earth.

I heard Mr. Mangano shout, "Close your eyes!" but it was too late, and for a couple of awful seconds it was like I'd gone blind. But I wasn't blind at all. The lights had gone out. The lights from the sky, the pulsing northern lights, they were gone. And the red taillights and the soft dashboard lights from the cars and SUVs, and the lights from every

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house and building in Harmony, all suddenly switched off.

It happened so fast that everybody gasped in surprise. And then some little kid started crying, and we could all hear his mother saying not to worry, it was just a blackout, a power failure like happened during the last snowstorm.

"They'll fix it soon," she promised.

Just then someone tugged on my sleeve. My sister, Rebecca. Also known as Becca or sometimes the Beckster. She's not quite a year younger than me, but we're both in the same grade because Becca is wicked smart. I mean scary smart sometimes, like she can figure out what I'm thinking. Or let me know what she's thinking without having to say so.

It was too dark for me to see her face, but I could tell she was worried.

"Charlie," she said in her husky voice. "My flashlight doesn't work. Something is wrong."

Boy was she right about that.