

“*LIGHTS OUT!*” ©

A short story by, JK Savoy

Based on my actual experiences during the New York City blackout of 1977 as depicted in my novel, “Somewhere In Brooklyn”

Bessie, who was without a doubt the greatest server in The Purity Restaurant’s long history, poured the rest of my coffee into a take-out container as I shoved the last of my bagel into my mouth. I was a young man in a hurry since Angie, my realtor, had just located the apartment of my wildest dreams! So it seems that Kenny, Park Slope’s favorite start-up mover, may be moving on!

While initially enjoyable, the thrill of my current living situation, residing at the Garfield Place commune, was wearing thin. Since living space had been at a premium, the hallway area leading to its sole bathroom was my dominion. An unusual outcome of that situation was, my writing was showing too many references to the sound of a flushing toilet or, a hurried urine release followed by the customary “*Aaahh!*” More often than not, a night while I tried to sleep in that allocated space was interrupted by the hallway door creaking open and one of my four roomies saying, “*Hey Kenny, please excuse me while I step over you bro, but doody calls!*” Whether excused or not, they’d carelessly step on various parts of my body or politely drag one foot followed by the other across my chest while I lay there wishing they would hurry the hell up and get whatever it’s to be over with!

On the spot, I followed my realtor’s advice and snatched up the apartment for the same price as my cost-share for the

hallway at the Garfield commune. My new space was the rear garden studio in the historic Luden Brothers' mansion on Eighth Avenue near President Street. Following years of paring cavernous rooms down to tiny apartments, the building was reminiscent of a scene from the 'Doctor Zhivago' flick, where palaces for the privileged were seized by the Bolsheviks and subdivided to house Russia's newly liberated masses. All of that aside, I was to be billeted in a room somewhat larger than a pleasant tasting Luden cough drop. My entire living space was once a part of their kitchen. After I stacked my ten or so boxes by a wall, all of my other things landed in a small adjacent area that had been their pantry. And so, Kenny The Mover had been definitely moved! Wow! An entire apartment just for me, and a spot where I could put my brand new used mattress! The studio was so bloody decadent with space galore. Its former pantry would be where I'd rest my weary tush after a day of lugging other people's crap up or down four flights. The remainder of the place was set aside for my one truck company's World Headquarters. All of this was just a day after I had secured a parking spot at a local gas station for my new, well-used moving van. Finally, there I was totally living the American dream. Undoubtedly, Pavlov himself would throw me a biscuit for a job well done. Speaking of dreams, could this be the answer to my fantasy of sharing a place with Anya? Dream on, boy!"

New day, new brain and a brand new living space! And so, it's back to the business of business. Typically, after my beeper would go off I'd run for a public phone and call my answering service to learn how the rest of my life was shaping up to be. They'd proceed to tell me that either an opportunity

is at hand, or a load of shit had chosen my head to plop upon. What was my latest opportunity? I had to stop booking more work so I could fill in for my only driver, Barfin' Billy, who was spewing the night before's errors of his ways in the privacy of our customer's alleyway. As if that wasn't the load of falling shit, then what could it be? Worse followed by even worst yet, the delivery was to be at an Upper West Side Manhattan high-rise for me and my part time helper-friend, Fireman George, to carry out during a sweltering ninety-nine degree July day! *"Hey Pavlov, so where's my biscuit?"*

Living on the edge of my ever-evolving reality is where the buck not only seems to stop, but as an entrepreneur this body in motion seems to be doomed to live on the edge as its default setting. Resolved and accepted as being my starting point, the survivor I've learned to become quickly grows from one stressful task to another, achieving one and then quickly reverting to the previous while always prepared to accept the unexpected: A lesson learned from my most recent existence as being the obstacle to a roomie's quest for relief that only a toilet, just a tripping distance away, could provide. On a personal note, I was hoping that Anya would be equally open to change when I told her that I'd be a bit late for our eight o'clock date, yet again! Sadly for me, there never seems to be enough time for personal choices while in hot pursuit of that ever-elusive American Dream! And so began a day in my life that had its start, as if from a flick of a switch...

"Kenny, that thermometer's up to a hundred and three!" declared George. As a seasoned New York firefighter, George would routinely rush into buildings under far hotter

conditions. Thick blistering air shot across our sweat soaked clothes as we exited the truck at the Manhattan hi-rise destination on Broadway and West 108th Street. Upon noting the fact that the delivery was on the 20th floor, George said, "Hey bro, thank God for elevators!"

Walking to the building I shouted, "Dammit George, it's gotta be at least a hundred and ten out here!" Then, things got a bit better. Hot as it was outside, inside we had the luxuries of a cooling basement and a chauffeur-driven elevator. Having that stairway to heaven as our immediate objective, the two of us emptied the truck in record time.

While confined in the elevator's steel cage, the last of the tote boxes, chairs, folded carpets and a mattress bearing the stains from years of missed toilet endeavors became an eclectic mosaic girdling our contorted bodies. Dismissing memories of my nights as a barrier to the relief of others, I held my nose and said "George, this is our last trip, and this shit is totally finished!"

"Kenny, it ain't never over 'til it's all over. Eye on the ball, bro!"

Marvin, the elevator operator, who was also the building's super, seconded the motion saying, "Boys, done ain't done 'till it's *all* done! Now if I could only move my freekin' arm, I'd push that button an' get us to your goddamn floor an' call this bullshit a day!" Then Marvin laughed at us while shutting the elevator's door with his cane.

The instant he succeeded in doing that, the steel cage door flew wide open to the sound of, "Yo! I need me a roll of tape, pronto!"

"If there ain't none left in the supply cabinet then

improvise, boy! Now get your sorry-ass the hell outta my way! Can't you see I got a shit load of shit layin' all over my face? Last thing ol' Marvin needs is some dumb-ass kid messin' with his dumb-ass door!"

As quickly as Marvin could secure the door, it was reopened via the assistant's persevering hand. The kid restated, "You ain't fuckin' getting it at all! The electric is fluttering and I need the tape when I go to take care of the bare wires in the hallway that you said yourself, looked like shit! Hey, I'm just doing my job, man!"

Having had enough of their back and forth bickering, I reached to move the helper's hand away from the door. Just as I grabbed it, the entire basement went pitch black including the elevator.

Marvin shined a flashlight into the kid's eyes while shouting, "Ya dumb-ass shithead! Now ya see what ya did?"

"I did? What the hell...?"

"Yeah, ya dumb-ass! Ya shorted out the elevator and all the lights down here with your bullshit while ya held my goddamn door open!"

The fearless New York's Bravest that he is, Fireman George pried the three of us from the household goods' python-like grip. After he pointed to our way to the exit, George and I walked toward the light of day. Then, like a shot from within the darkness, the kid ran right past us and swung the door to the street wide open. Suddenly, he stopped and shouted to a huffing and puffing Marvin, "Shit man, now ain't you the goddamn genius! So, you tell me, how many times did I plead with you to let me fix that fucked-up wiring? Dammit! Just look around you at what your stubborn ass did! I mean ...

Look! You even managed to fuck up all the traffic lights and that big-ass electric clock on the hotel next door! Marvin, some building super you are! So, hey boss man! Now, who's the dumb-ass shithead?"

"Yo Kenny!" shouted George, "Ya gotta take a look all around us! Damn! This crazy power outage shit sure as hell doesn't stop here!" Then he laughed and said, "My guess is, the fucked up wiring problem isn't only where we happen to be standing but ..."

"But? But then where, George?"

"Shit! It seems like the whole fucking city just blew a fucking fuse!"

As the sun began to set, panicked New Yorkers ran chaotically from one unlighted building to another and back, again ... and then, again! Suddenly, a massive old sedan crashed through the steel gates of an appliance store. Like droplets of mercury forming a fast moving blob, a crowd assembled and followed the battering ram of a vintage Buick Electra inside. As quickly as one group went in, others ran out toting air conditioners, televisions, sofas, washing machines, dryers and anything that wasn't nailed down. If it happened to be nailed down, it was ripped from the floor by looters, bypassed check-out and quickly found itself a new home.

As the roar of the anarchy increased, Marvin slapped his assistant up the side of the head a few times while yelling, "Boy, don't you call me no shithead! It was your dumb-ass messin' with the elevator door that caused all this bullshit ..." While they blamed one another, all that George and I could do was to stand mesmerized by the din of sirens, breaking glass and shouts from throngs of newly minted plunderers.

After we unloaded the rest of the truck and secured its payload in the basement, Mike, our customer, shed some light on the situation beyond our immediate view of things. Holding a portable radio up to us, Mike said, "Guys, every damn one of the AM and FM stations is stone dead! It's all just static coming from all of them! My guess is, so is everything else that ain't battery powered out there ..."

"Mike, do ya think it might be the entire West Side or even..."

"... all of New York City? Yeah Kenny, for damn sure! According to what the Civil Defense emergency frequency is saying, all five boros of New York are completely blacked out!" Wiping his brow, Mike added, "Shit! Welcome to our latest living Hell on Earth!"

"What about getting all of your stuff moved in? I mean, to those lunatics outside, one building is the same as... Ya know what I mean?"

"Of course I do, but I'm not ready to take a Buick to the face just to fight for the glory of household goods! So, c'est la vie, and moving on!"

"What an attitude, Mike! Hey, what the hell do you do for a living?"

"Besides whatever it takes to live another day ... hah?" He looked to the sky, and went on to say, "What the hell is the difference what any of us do, as long as we know when what's done is done and we can move on. Ain't that right, Kenny The Mover? Whatever it was or is, here we are ready for the fight of our lives lying ahead of us, the same as it always has been, is or ever will be. Do ya care for a beer?"

"Yeah, uh ... I guess so ... Actually, no! Maybe tomorrow

when we come back and finish moving you in. But thanks! See you tomorrow?"

"Kenny, George: Tomorrow is another day, and I'm sure there will be one for us if we keep our fool heads! Bright side? We're all gonna live through this shit and someday tell our grandkids about how we did it. As for now, get your sorry asses the hell home to Brooklyn as quickly as you can!" To our astonishment, Mike dug into his pocket and said, "Here Kenny, take this cash for all the work you guys did!"

"Hey Mike, what about our getting your stuff up to your new crib? I mean, there's more than enough here to cover that too." said George.

"Do you guys have a helicopter on you, or what?" to which our shoulders shrugged a firm, no. As the unrestrained roar of crowds of looters gone wild intensified, serenely if not philosophically, Mike looked outside and went on to say, "To think, what lurks within the beast we call Humankind? Human, yes. Kind? Take a look around us!"

While we were looking around us, he shook his head then went on to say, "Get this, just recently, I rescued a huge old Doberman pincher from the City Pound. Boomer's waiting for me upstairs, as we speak. Anyway, as soon as Boomer and I heard all of that hell breaking loose outside, like a jackrabbit, that big old bag of fur, bones and gratitude ran right in front of me and growled like all hell at the door!"

"Then what?" asked George.

"Nothing! Unlike those lawless fools outside, Boomer stood guard over who and what was now his to protect! Ain't life great when you make the right friends, and you know that they will have your back?"

“Yeah, in times like this, we actually find out who our friends really are. Glancing at the basement door, George went on to ask, “Mister...”

“Stop right there, George! Please, keep on calling me Mike, okay”

“Uh okay, Mike. What about all of your stuff that’s still sitting in the basement? I mean...” Staring at the cash, George says, “We didn’t...”

“Enough of that guys! Just get your asses the hell on home and kiss the ones you love for good ol’ Mike! As for all the shit downstairs, call me tomorrow, as if there might be one, or as soon as you can. We’ll worry about getting it upstairs then. As for now, go! Get your weary asses the hell on home! Safe trip, fellas!”

“Thanks Mike. By the way, why Boomer? A weird name for a dog.”

Mike smirked, glanced at the dog and said, “When I first brought Boomer home, suddenly he let out this world class fart, jumped up and tried like hell to chase his long gone tail ‘til he dropped! Yeah, people just love to play God and clip that thing off of Dobermans.”

“Yeah Mike, there sure is a lot of metaphor in that.”

“Cool guy!” said George while he stuffed the big tip in his pocket as we drove away, adding, “Hey, all of this shit’s just gotta be Fate, bro!”

“Whattya mean, George?”

“Kenny, the erudite in me says: Fate itself was the dumb-ass hand of a dumb-ass kid blocking a dumb-ass door! Right?”

“Yeah, and chance was drawing the long straw and meeting Mike! Hey, by the way George, what do you think he does for

a living?"

"Besides whatever it takes, who knows other than Boomer?"

"So tell me, what's the inner swami of Fireman George saying?"

"Kenny, my survival swami simply says, 'let's boogie the hell outta Dodge and get our asses the hell on home', just like Mike ordered!"

After I started the truck then hung a hard left toward Brooklyn, I slapped George five and yelled, "Roger that, so let's get the hell outta here, bro!"

My first concern was for Anya who'd be waiting for me at eight PM sharp, as we planned. George listened as I wondered aloud, "Shit! Did she take the subway home from her teaching gig in Cobble Hill? No! New York's entire five boro subway system is powered from only one source! If Anya's stranded, then where? Dammit, I have no fuckin' idea what the hell is going on anywhere at all!" Surveying the chaos as the temper of Manhattan's rage intensified, I shouted, "Shit! If the rest of the city is anything like this, there's no telling when we might get home to Brooklyn ... or even if!"

To which, one of New York's Bravest calmly said, "Yo bro, there's a public phone over there. Ain't nothing to lose by giving it a try. Hey, no news is good news ... or so they say."

So much for any news at all! Every other street phone I attempted to call Anya from, as we headed to whatever bridge we could find to get to Brooklyn, all sang the same sad song; *"All of the circuits are busy. Please try your call again."*

Street by overcrowded street, we meandered through masses of humanity pouring from towering buildings, and

then gathering on the pavement below. Swarm after swarm of looters followed the lead of those swarms before them, throwing debris through store windows, creating more debris and of course, even greater shopping options! Like ants heading for a sugar mound, the sudden crowds of looters spilled into the breached storefronts, and then carried their stolen booty from the devastated businesses to their lightless apartments.

‘Lights out? What the hell, is this crazy shit going on everywhere?’ I wondered, ‘How can any of this be? This is New York City! Was our bankrupted Gotham so deprived of revenue that it couldn’t even buy a meager postage stamp to pay for its utilities?’ As the Big Apple devoured itself, was anarchy the only power left in the civilized world’s capital? The magnum opus that played so exquisitely, ever since a wave of old Peter Stuyvesant’s baton, had become reduced to a cacophonous roar of human utterance that was accompanied by a discordant orchestra of rage, car horns and screeching tires. Budget thinned ranks of New York’s Finest tried in vain to control the choking traffic and anarchic human behavior that had become the sad symphony of our New York City. As wondrous as it has always been, a loss of man-made power in The Big Apple is tantamount to what the absence of gravity is to our Earth Mother herself.

“All of the circuits are busy. Please try your call again.” I did try again and then again, only to get the same callous recording! I jumped into my furnace of a moving van. Its radiator gauge showed that the engine was beginning to overheat. Since it was my sole means of an income, I sure as hell didn’t have the luxury of leaving my only truck and means

of survival in that mayhem, and then have to search for its ransacked cadaver the next day.

“Damn! If it wasn’t so goddamn enormous, I’d carry my brand new camera everywhere,” said the ever-laidback George, “Sad as it is, this insanity is a once in a lifetime event, bro! Shit! So, I guess the writer I am will have to keep on finding me those right thousand words...”

“How’s that any different than any other day in the life of George? They say, words are never at a loss for you: A mouth like a fire hose!”

“Hey Kenny! Can you imagine folks like us having TV cameras or even phones right the hell there, right in our friggin pockets?”

“Bro, unlike in Star Trek, as if that shit’ll never happen! Yeah, as if we’ll live to see the day when everyone will have pockets like golf bags just to hold all of that recording shit. So dream on, bro!”

“Get this Kenny, on Star Trek, Spock has this ‘cigarette girl’ like tray hanging from his neck. And guess what, it has one of those computer things built right into it, including a friggin’ phone!”

“Bro, including Spock’s pointy ears, that computer thing you talk about would be gone in a hot second on these streets!”

Every public phone that I tried was dead. The truck’s temperature gauge was creeping upward. After a few blocks, darkened signs for the Manhattan Bridge began to appear.

“Kenny my man! You sure as hell gotta hire that dude out there! He runs like a high-steppin’ halfback and at the same time, carries a sofa all by his lonesome!” shouted George as

we watched a couch with legs turn the corner, “Man, that dude could empty your entire truck while we hang out and just bullshit all about him!”

Though riots and looting reigned in upper Manhattan, the streets of Greenwich Village were much like an enormous festival as they filled with candle toting throngs of people singing and dancing in the streets. As we crawled through the partying crowd, George reflected; “Bro, ain’t Fate great? At the flick of a switch, an obstacle can become a path. If that kid didn’t need tape, right now your truck might be a godsend for those bad guys who are looting every store in the Upper West Side, while we’d still be stuck between floors in Marvin’s private elevator! Yeah, ain’t life just a roll of the dice or a flip of a coin!”

“George, I sure as hell had the best guy to be stuck in an elevator with, a New York City firefighter! If you didn’t get us outta there one way, you’d sure come up with something else! What about you?”

“Kenny, I had me a partner who actually got used to people peeing on his leg!” George laughed as I rammed my middle finger at his face.

The banging from within my truck’s engine’s walls was drowned out by an ever-growing discordant commotion of voices, sirens and rapidly falling property values echoing from the canyon-like walls of Manhattan. Slowly, we crept along through street after street and the madness of a city that had suddenly become unplugged.

With the East River behind us, I drove along Brooklyn’s Flatbush Avenue while the sight of The Big Apple’s skyscrapers, framed by the Manhattan Bridge’s steely

skeleton, slipped into the distance in my sideview mirror. As my truck's wheels finally rolled along the streets of Brooklyn, George and I bellowed, "Home, at fucking last!" Soon afterward, First Street's gentle slope challenged my steaming truck's ability to make the grade; its engine noises becoming even more ominous. But who's got time for bitching and moaning? First Street is where I chose to drop anchor, and my life in Brooklyn began as the live-in host of my tiny after hours coffee house, September's Child.

The traffic came to a sudden stop as George shouted, "I'll take this break to get you some engine coolant from my crib," as he jumped from the truck then ran to his place two doors down from what once was where I called home: That is until its contents washed away in a thunderstorm as they and I were unceremoniously tossed to the curb two years before, simply because I failed to pay the minor detail of, uh ... around six months' worth of rent! The thunderous downpour was Mother Nature's way of welcoming me and all of my possessions to our long overdue rebirth, as her water broke all over me and the wreckage of all that remained of what I had once stupidly thought of as mine. But that's a whole other story!

Rather than sit and stew in my truck, I tried to call Anya only to hear from the street phone, "*All of the circuits are busy. Please try your call again.*" George split for home after pouring the precious coolant into a thirsty radiator. I hoped to make a try for Anya's apartment, but First Street's traffic became entangled with that of Seventh Avenue's. Resolved to being unable to get off of the block, I shut the engine and walked to what once was September's Child and parked myself next to

its doorway. Lighting up a joint, I looked to the sky and recalled the first time I sat there. What once drew me to that refuge from the dog eat dog corporate world that I had abruptly walked away from, had become void of its enigmatic aura. Turning my attention to better things, I tuned in to the ambiance of my beloved Park Slope streets. The summer moon rose and pierced the clouds above the buildings adjacent to Anya's building, so close yet so far. Humankind's muted growl throughout Brooklyn was peaceful in contrast to its deafening roar of Manhattan's darkest day, becoming the madness of its night.

The Slope's laid back disorder was abruptly highlighted by the chirping of a shopping cart's loose wheel, as a sudden wind gust blew it away from PS 321, across the street from where I was sitting. With the music of Jethro Tull's flute playing in my head, I wondered, 'Could it be The Slope's resident vagrant, 'Aqua-Lung's', home on wheels?' No sooner than I had that thought, I saw a heap of blankets and rags ten feet from the cart. Atop the heap were the aged 'Lung's trademark urine soaked plaid pants. Nearly indistinguishable from his bunched up blankets and rags was his gray, bearded face. His vacant eyes held a ghostlike, glaring stare at September's Child's basement hatch. I waited for 'Lung to blink, but his glassy gaze never broke.

The street darkened as passing clouds danced across the moon. Before my eyes could adjust to it, the pitch blackness was pierced by a patrol car's single rotating red light. Slowly, two officers exited their vehicle and walked over to 'Lung. Immediately one of them poked at him with a baton. The cop's voice resounded from the school wall as he said into his two-

way radio, *"Nothing here, just another dead street critter..."* 'Critter!' I thought. In whose pompous eyes does a living, fellow human become seen as nothing but a critter? But hey, perhaps this particular officer hasn't met a friend worth knowing yet, or at least an unblemished mirror.

The red glow from the patrol car's flashing lights pulsed on the cop's fingers as they lowered 'Lung's eyelids. Turning to his partner he said, "It sure seems like tonight's 'lights out' was for more than just Brooklyn. So it's sayonara, gramps!" An ambulance drove along the sidewalk to his remains. Two paramedics wheeled out a stretcher and a black cadaver pouch, then lifted 'Lung from his resting place of rags to prepare him for an interim situation. Both the cops and the para-medics seemed to be unaware of 'Lung's right arm dropping away from his chest. While red lights flashed across his ghostly white hand, his dead finger aimed at the dead issue that was once my September's Child fantasy gone bad. As the officers stuffed 'Lung's arm into the bag, I gazed at my botched endeavor and wondered, 'Before that store became the something I would run from, might it have been the home that another human in search of something he could never explain, became totally lost in? Could a question, forever-elusive of an answer, hold his spirit within a time and a place where it was doomed to never leave?" As the ambulance drove away, I said to myself, 'Hell no, that ain't gonna happen to this fool! If I don't like the answer, then I'll ask a different question like: 'Am I next?' No! Next is never gonna be the four-letter word that'll define my sorry tush!' Looking in the direction of my cough-drop mansion of a home to be, I asked myself, 'Have I finally run out of asinine excuses? Has the time come to grow

the hell up and move the hell on?’

Staring at the basement’s trap door, that ‘Lung pointed to for the last time, I ground my joint out on the street that we shared. Whatever held his spirit to that place, even in death, had lost its hold on my life. A gripping energy, from what I once thought of as a living force that I tagged as ‘*Brooklynite*,’ had led me to a place where I found questions which would evoke answers, leading to a singular conclusion: Anya!

“Dammit! Why did it take a total blackout for this damn fool to see the light?” As the ambulance prepared to take ‘Lung away, I saw my reflection in its side mirror and yelled to the commotion around me, “This is it! Hurry the hell up and get over to her place, you jackass!”

As soon as the traffic jam began to clear, I jumped into my truck and drove to Anya’s building. The flickering flame of a lone candle in her window shined like a guiding light as if to let me know that she was safe at home. I ran from the truck, charged through her building’s entryway and soared up the stairs to her apartment. Her face glowed from a moonbeam that shined through a crack in her window. The dancing reflection of the candle that was her study light shined in her baby blues. Finally, I realized that all that I had ever been drawn to or accomplished since I abandoned my previous life as a corporate slave was meant to take me there, to Anya. I grabbed her by the hand while shouting, ‘Babe, let’s stop killing time and say what has to be said!’

“Calm down, Kenny! Say what?”

“Let’s move in together! I latched on to a great studio apartment!”

“What?”

“It’s perfect Anya! Open the rear door, and there’s a garden where we can set up a table and chairs, and finally use that grill of yours. Hey babe, time’s a-wasting! We ain’t getting any younger!”

“But you’re only thirty! And I threw that greasy old grill away.”

“Anya, first thing we can do is shop for a new grill, my treat... Hold on! I’m already thirty? Holy shit! What the hell are we waiting for?”

We answered one another's hours of hopes and fears as we held each other. I felt as if I had run the gauntlet or lived the Journey of Ulysses; my reward being to hold her and to be held. We looked into one another's eyes as I said, “Home is a moment like this ...”

