

## Who's Afraid of the Dark?

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NEW YORK, NEW YORK - It was a nightmare for commuters, the sick, and for anyone with perishable food to sell. In an age of terrorism, the darkened buildings, stalled, stifling elevators, and idled subway cars were a haunting and, in those first minutes of power failure, terrifying reminder of the vulnerability of a complex technological society to a single well-targeted blow. But, as it turned out, for many in midtown Manhattan the blackout was, let's admit it, really rather fun.

As everyone now knows, the power went down shortly after 4 pm and, as the sultry summer afternoon drifted into an unusually authentic twilight, it didn't take long before Second Avenue was transformed into a sweaty, raffish playground, Bourbon Street on the East River, bars still open, their interiors only slightly darker than usual, drinkers lit by candlelight, forbidden cigarettes (don't tell Nurse Bloomberg) and one, two, three, four tepid beers, no one was counting.

And on the sidewalks entrepreneurs were quick to set out their wares, bags of ice (for a while), snacks, water, flashlights, and bottles of beer of a vaguely exotic brand, Sapporo, not Bud. Larger stores quickly gave up the struggle, but the bodegas never paused. The usual merchandise — the flowers, the packets of powdered vitamins, the groceries that you always forget to buy, the batteries (yes!), the cigarettes, the fruit, and, decaying even more rapidly than normal, that peculiar unidentifiable meat, was still for sale, all prices rounded up now to the nearest dollar, for cash registers were ancient history, useless relics of a vanished civilization, as dead as an air conditioner, a traffic light, or a refrigerator. Fortunately, the bodegas were made of sterner stuff than their hardware. The next morning,

there was still no power but my local — it's run by the sort of Koreans who give Kim Jong Il nightmares — was still open and serving hot coffee, hamburgers, and other unimaginable luxuries. How? A gas stove. No problem. These guys would not shut up shop for the Apocalypse.

But back to Thursday night: As the hours passed, darkening, electric in a very different way, strangers swapped stories on stoops, sidewalks, and street corners, a touch of the old neighborhood in a part of town that never really was one. The men at the parking garage sat around their radio and, CNN for a day, passed on the news to those who wandered by. A fire on the West Side? A disaster in Canada? Lightning? Who knew? When's the power coming back? No idea.

At home we listened to the radio, and tried to make out the picture on, yes (don't ask), our battery-operated TV. No *Friends*, no *Buffy* rerun, no *E! News Live*, just Chuck Scarborough over on a blurry Channel 4. He was doing his best, calm through all the confusion (I read later that he was on for nearly nine hours straight). He was magnificent, our Ed Murrow, the voice of civilization, continuity, and reassurance — or at least he would have been except for the awkward fact that almost no one in the city could actually watch him (the battery-operated TV crowd is a very elite group). Oh well, never mind. On the radio, meanwhile, there was talk, news, gossip, the occasional press conference, speculation, and at one station a DJ with, he said, nothing but 'a handheld mike and a CD player'. It was enough.

Later, a group of cops patrolled the avenue, Giulianis on Bourbon Street, checking on those who had partied too hard and too long. Here and there, flashlights guided the way and, for the truly desperate, there was always the dim illumination of a cell-phone dial pad. On the side streets it was quieter. There were fewer people, and it was, somehow, darker, but the noisier of the two French

bistros on 51st Street was, as always, busy; there was not much food, but plenty of wine; tables full, each with a candle, each with a couple. The candlelight was romantic, but feeble against the darkness - not that anyone seemed to mind.

That August night was a night for candles, their light flickered in the windows of high rises, a hint of the medieval amid Manhattan's concrete and glass, their smoke perfumed the air and added to the haze in the street. The mayor recommended flashlights. Safer, he said, prosaic, I thought. It turned out that Bloomberg was right: Candles were responsible for a number of fires that night, blazes that contributed to the death of one person and, yet again, the serious injury of a fireman doing what firemen do - protecting a city that still remembers the sacrifices of that bright blue September morning.

Up the street from the French were the Japanese. Empowered by a power cut, the usually reserved little sushi place had annexed a spot of sidewalk. Tables were set up with linen, neatly packaged snacks, and a small group of diners. Elegant paper lanterns glowed where streetlights once glared. We walked a little further. One block to the west is where the office buildings really begin to soar. They loomed, still blocking the sky, only more so. In the foreground Third Avenue cut through the gloom, still a mess of traffic: jammed, unmoving, cars, vans, trucks, headlights, noise, and anxiety. Will I get home? Is there enough gas? As for the buildings behind, no longer their usual glittering spectacle, they made for a slightly forbidding backdrop, massive, almost gothic hulks, dark now except for those prudently or neurotically (take your pick) managed few where emergency generators were producing light and, dare to dream, air conditioning.

There would, we knew, have to be enquiries, commissions, and allocations of blame. Fingers would be pointed, lessons would be learned, and precautions

would be taken — just like last time. But that was for tomorrow. The night of the great blackout was not a night for recrimination, it was a night for strolling the streets, enjoying our city, and, just like visitors to New York are always said to do, gazing stupidly into the heavens. But we were no hicks. It was not skyscrapers we were staring at, but another, stranger wonder.

The stars.