

***Let There Be Light*** is set during a 25-hour blackout in New York City in 1977. The plot revolves around Chester Young, who works his dream job in New York but struggles with the monotony of his life, and his chance meeting with friendly stranger Leo Maltempi. They become trapped in a powerless elevator together, and gradually, revelations about the mysterious stranger emerge, culminating in the realisation of Leo's unexpected dark past as an Italian Mafia hitman.

To be perfectly frank, I set my story and these characters during this particular event because I was looking for historical fiction writing prompts on Google, and I really liked the idea of an extended blackout in a major city because of the breadth of narrative possibilities the situation allowed. On top of that, this was a topic that had absolutely no ties to me personally, which left much room for creative scope. Quite often, you see a lot of people writing stories that have great personal meaning for them, and there's something beautiful about putting a piece of yourself in a story. However, sometimes all you need is one initial idea to get the creative ball rolling, and for me, this was it. Ultimately, I decided on writing a more human story about Chester and Leo, taking inspiration from the real-life accounts of that fateful evening.

### ***Let There Be Light***

***July 13<sup>th</sup>, 1977***

I've made it, Ma.

This is it. I'm living *my* dream.

The solidity of the weightless silver card case in my pocket—and its existence—is very much palpable. In bold black letters pressed onto a subtle off-white, the little piece of card lies flat in the palm of my hand and reads: “**CHESTER YOUNG: STORY EDITOR**” and under it: “**175 Fifth Avenue New York, NY 10010**”.

The words on the card seem to find their way into my mouth and sit there for a while, unspoken. These words leave a bittersweet aftertaste, peppered with flavourful hints of pride, accomplishment — and disappointment. Disappointment because I've worked so hard to be here, in *the* Flatiron Building, but when I leave my desk in all of its coffee-ring-stained glory, it means leaving the colourful world of fiction I've grown to love behind and going back to the shitty apartment I've grown to hate.

My fingers drum while I study the page of messy scrawls and doodles when a fleeting quote comes to mind - “When the lights went out, so did people’s inhibitions”. Perfect for the character I’m working with.

In here, I am Chester Young, Story Editor. But, in the rest of this wonderful city, I’m Chester Young, the man whose world is painted in shades of grey. Chester Young, Story Editor, is a publishing connoisseur. He’s respected, useful, and damned good at his job. Yet, in this big, big world outside of crippling deadlines and calendars fit to bursting, I’m reduced to nothing. This building and the job that comes with it inject colour into the monochromatic life I live. This is why I burn the midnight oil—not because I can’t stand my shitty apartment, but because I can’t stand myself in it.

The sultry, humid night permeating my little office window coats my world in a slight sheen of perspiration that bleeds through the collar of my shirt. My forearm adheres to the uncomfortable faux leather armrests of my office chair and in the quick struggle to free it, I steal a glance at my wristwatch—it’s well past nine. It’s one of those unbearable summer nights when cracking a window open does nothing but tighten the hellish grasp of suffocatingly sticky air.

The aimless wanderings of my fleeting thoughts provide no comfort to me as I step into the elevator. Chester Young, Story Editor, regresses into the lesser Chester Young—left alone to chase happiness in his lightless drabby world. These distracting thoughts send my mind spiralling sluggishly; briefly captivated, my unfocused vision centres on the shiny black surface of my shoes.

The grating sounds of ancient cables and pulleys creaking swiftly draw me away from my musings. Coming to a jerky halt, the car’s ornate gold and silver doors open, revealing a pair of brown loafers. Intrigued, my line of sight continues upwards, discovering neatly pressed slacks with creases as sharp as cut glass. His weary eyes and time-ravaged visage contribute to the calcified air about him—clearly from a different era

than today's discos and bell bottoms. Perched on the gentleman's nose is a pair of simple black shades which is distinctly odd as it is night-time, and we were indoors.

As we wait for the elevator to begin its descent, he offers a tentative smile with kind eyes that seem to say, 'I guess I'm not the only one here at this godforsaken hour'. I smile back.

He seems determined to break the silence and he speaks, gesturing at himself with a laugh.

"Leo, Leo Maltempi," he has an infectious grin. "You know, this kinda weather reminds me of home—Sicily. I left that island for a reason—the weather, one of them."

"Chester Young, a pleasure to meet you." He exudes friendliness and I am hesitant not to return it. "It can't be so bad – better than sliding on ice all day here in the city," I respond wryly, looking him over once again. His oddity continues – he seems far too meticulous to be a man who likely grew up running wild on the sands of the Italian coast. He laughs, the sound ricocheting off the walls of the elevator.

"True, true. There's not a day that goes by where I don't think of home." His wistfulness is endearing. "I bet there ain't a day go by where Sicily don't think of me."

As I lean in closer, drawn in by the hinted promise of an interesting interlude to assuage the monotony of the night to come, the pungent scent of citrus permeates my nose. The sharp zesty notes of Leo's cologne are a welcome stranger in the dusty elevator, transporting me right into the lazy afternoons of his nostalgic reminiscing. Now, this—this delicious satiating of both the Chester Youngs' appetite for stories is a *fâilte* addition to what was going to be a monotonous night.

Leo opens his mouth to speak but the words die on his tongue as the fluorescent lights dim to a warm yellow. They flicker and blink, as though struggling to stay awake before suddenly slumbering, much like the rest of this city at this hour. Leo remains

unphased. What does phase us both, is the violent halting of the elevator car, not too dissimilarly to the conversation we are having.

“The lights have gone out,” I muse, squashing a bubble of momentary panic. My simple observation seems to amuse Leo who chuckles.

“Welcome to my world, boy.” That explains the shades. I’m inclined to relate with Leo, being no stranger myself to lightless, confined spaces. The life I lead outside the office bears some similarities to the situation we are ourselves in—one likely caused by a power outage in the building.

“Ah,” I flounder a bit, unsure how to respond to that – after all, what does one say to someone who’s blind? I don’t want to offend this intriguing stranger. Leo finds my lack of response amusing, his now-familiar chuckle reverberating in the dark, blanketing us both with the sound.

“Yeah, shit happens. Y’know I could —well, actually, I am— write a book about all the shit I’ve been through. Matter of fact, I was just finishing up signing a book deal at your offices. Apparently, they like my stories of hot, lazy afternoons spent among groves of citrus fruit, sipping almond milk and munching on Indian figs.” The chuckle reverberates once again.

I huff a laugh. “It sounds like paradise.”

“It was. I spent many an afternoon in the shadows, desperate to escape that unforgiving glare, lounging in ancient Greek ruins. I still see those weathered, dilapidated façades, like bleached skeletons against the backdrop of the pale blue sky.”

I can hear his teeth grinding softly and imagine him carefully mincing the words he will say next.

“But I didn’t spend so much time in the shadows just for fun, you know. Those old ruins are great for lurking and staying out of sight. Wish I could say I’m

writing this book about perfect Italian summers, or picnics with my loved ones...”

Again he sighs wistfully and my curiosity piques higher. “My story’s about men’s last wishes. Their words, their tears – and fears – just before they die...the way the light in their eyes just *poof* – extinguishes.”

The silence following his revelation rings in my ears. Once again, this stranger has rendered me speechless. I can feel my brain scrambling for a logical explanation.

“Were you a doctor during the war effort? It must’ve been difficult seeing these tragedies so often.”

“Oh no, nothing so honourable,” he continues, “a trained professional with expert hands, yes, but no, not in the same way.”

Hanging on to every word, I wonder—whatever could this gentleman be talking about? An amusing thought comes to mind, and I crack a joke. “What? Like a hitman for the mafia or something?”

Leo considers this for a moment and replies, “Well, I did have to leave Sicily for a reason...don’t it feel good to just run away?” His tone shifts from flippant to serious.

I roll my eyes. “Ha. Very funny. You should greet tourists with a sign that says, ‘Welcome to Fear City’, especially with the Son of Sam on the loose.”

Before Leo can reply, the elevator’s doors are pried open without notice, bathing us in swaths of bright, morning light—its exposure quickly becomes painful. I look at Leo again, this time in the sun, and realise this calcified air surrounding him isn’t due to his age, or grounded wisdom. It is the crushing weight of the guilt that he carries with him—*his* guilt.

As I part ways with Leo, it is immediately apparent that I have met someone who is definitely...interesting, if not dangerous. Still, Leo briefly coloured my night, if not my life. But outside, outside of our chance encounter, the city has suffered an unforeseen apocalyptic event. Well beyond my line of sight, hundreds, if not thousands of stores of

all sizes have been looted. Stretching dozens of city blocks, debris litters the floors of our streets, from signage to rubble, to shards of cut glass from smashed windows. From where I am standing, acrid fumes envelop the city in billows of charcoal, waiting to be extinguished.

I learnt later that while Leo and I were stuck in the elevator that night, the city had lost all power for twenty-five hours. I'm not sure if I was fortunate—I was oblivious to what was happening—but I might have been a little too close to a killer for comfort.

Now, when life gives me lemons, I think of Leo.