

There are horrors patiently waiting for us to stumble upon them,
if we but venture into the dark.

IT'S ALWAYS NIGHT UNDERGROUND

Briar's Reach, Pennsylvania, a three-traffic-light town on the northeastern side of the state, was a pleasant enough place to live. Old buildings lined Main Street, many of them with mom-and-pop shops on ground level and affordable apartments above. The areas surrounding the town boasted no new housing developments or fancy shopping plazas, just scattered homesteads separated by agricultural land and thick forest. If one wanted to go to the mall or catch a movie at the nearest theater, one had to travel almost thirty miles to Millhaven.

A twenty-four-hour diner called Suzie's sat right in the heart of it all. A popular evening hangout for locals, it served as both an eatery and an important hub of social activity. Churchgoers packed its booths and stools each Sunday morning after services ended. And between midnight and four in the morning, in no small part due to the strong coffee and excellent service, it was a regular stopping point for road-weary truckers on their way to more significant locations on the map.

On this particular August afternoon, at a table in the back of Suzie's, three friends sat discussing their plans for the day.

"There's nothing to do in this stupid town," Madison Blake complained, lighting a cigarette. "I mean, it's 1997 and Briar's Reach is still all Norman Rockwell n' shit. The old-school American quaintness of it makes me wanna puke."

"I don't know how you smoke those nasty things," Tommy Marquez commented, waving a stray cloud away from his face. "Besides, you're only seventeen."

"Whatever," Madison said, taking a sip of coffee.

Madison didn't especially enjoy cigarettes, or coffee for that matter, but partaking in such indulgences made her feel grown-up and sophisticated. Maybe a little rebellious too.

"Can we get back to the business at hand?" January Lynn asked, pulling her long blond hair back into a ponytail and snapping an elastic band in place. "That is, if you two are finished bitching."

January was the oldest by almost a year, and her family the wealthiest, making her the leader of their little trio. It didn't hurt that she was also exceedingly clever. Each of their roles had been clear to the group since the three became close in middle school. Madison had always been the fun, wild one. Tommy had always been the sweet, sensible one. And January had always been the undisputed leader.

"Well, I have an idea," Madison offered, unconsciously copying January by pulling her dark brown hair into a ponytail.

Tommy watched Madison's movements as she did this. The sunlight shining through the window gave her green eyes the effect of being even brighter and more beautiful. The light also fell across her olive skin, making visible the tiny peach-fuzz hairs on the back of her slender neck. He'd harbored a secret crush on her since seventh grade, and it had only grown over the years. This, of course, didn't make any sense, because she drove him crazy half the time and he openly disapproved of much of her behavior. Be that as it may, she was usually the last thing he thought about as he drifted off to sleep at night.

It just so happened that January was equally smitten with Madison. This was not something she would have ever confessed to her friend. Hell, neither Madison nor Tommy was in the slightest

bit aware that January even liked girls. January knew that her friends would be supportive and understanding of such an admission. The shame and fear resulting from her orientation came from something else entirely. January's family was very conservative and religious; so much so that they strongly and openly disapproved of any same-sex relationships. While her friends would be accepting of her sexuality, her family certainly would not. If they ever discovered her secret, she would undoubtedly find herself disowned and discarded in a heartbeat. A tragically unfortunate consequence of living her truth, she thought, but the reality of her circumstances, nonetheless.

"Okay," January said, "let's hear your idea."

"I overheard my stepdad talking to his friend the other day. He mentioned a nearby cave with a natural spring in it. He'd been hired by the landowner to seal off the entrance to prevent people from going in. The guy said it was a lawsuit waiting to happen or whatever. But because he's not doing the job for a couple weeks, we could go party and swim down there."

"Do you know exactly where this cave is?" January asked.

"As it happens, I do. It's on the property of an old farm outside of town."

"I don't know," Tommy chimed in, "doesn't sound very safe."

"Don't be such a pussy, Tommy," January said in a tone that was only half-joking. "The only thing you're in danger of is having a good time."

"Didn't say I wouldn't do it," Tommy replied, "just that it might be unsafe."

"Okay," Madison pushed the cherry of her cigarette into the hard plastic of a filthy ashtray until it was properly extinguished. "It's agreed, then. We're going."

"We're going," January and Tommy said at the same time.

"Cool," Madison said. "I'll grab some beers and wine coolers from my house. My parents have a bunch. They won't even notice they're gone."

"Sounds good," January stated. "Let's all meet back here in an hour."

An hour later, having retrieved booze and snacks and a few miscellaneous items that might be potentially useful in their amateur spelunking endeavor, January, Madison, and Tommy rendezvoused in the parking lot of Suzie's Diner as planned. Standing in the hot afternoon sun, the three friends took stock of what they had gathered from their respective homes. They unanimously agreed that it was sufficient for what they intended to do.

Leaning against the rough wood of a utility pole, Madison lit a cigarette and took a long drag. Her gaze was drawn to a poster stapled to the very same pole.

"You guys ever notice this before?" she asked her friends.

"No," Tommy said.

"I wonder how long it's been there," January wondered, taking in the slightly faded image of a smiling teenage girl with short black hair and big expressive eyes. Above her was eerie word of undeniable impact: Missing. And below the image were handwritten words in permanent marker imploring passersby to be on the lookout for her. It said her name was Samantha Knoll.

"Either of you know her?" Madison asked.

Both January and Tommy shook their heads.

The idea that someone went missing from their town was an unsettling thought because such things simply didn't happen in Briar's Reach. Other than the occasional ruckus caused by the town drunks and the expected levels of youthful mischief teens got up to, it was a remarkably uneventful place. Of course, there was the time a profoundly disturbed local had laid down on the

tracks that ran across Main Street and waited for the next train to obliterate him. The mess had been unbelievable. But, again, such things were very rare.

“What do you think happened to her?” Tommy wondered, still looking closely at the face on the poster.

“Probably ran away,” Madison suggested. “Got the hell outta this goddamn town.”

“Doubtful,” January added. “She’s only fourteen. How would someone that young from a town like this make it on her own, especially if she headed to Philly or New York?”

“True,” Tommy agreed.

“Maybe she was kidnapped,” Madison submitted for consideration, though her expression looked as if she was unsure about this scenario.

“Can’t be anything good,” January stated.

“Poor kid,” Tommy uttered quietly, his face wearing an obvious degree of consternation.

“Let’s get outta here,” Madison said, trying to distance her thoughts from the grim topic.

Without another word about the missing girl, they all piled into Madison’s beat-up Volkswagen and headed for the cave. A fifteen-minute drive from the center of town to the farm property saw them on narrow backroads with little but cornfields and forest on either side.

Madison pulled her car onto the gravel shoulder of the road and parked.

“We have to walk from here,” Madison said.

“Where’s the cave?” Tommy asked.

“Just through those trees there,” Madison pointed to a rather dense patch of forest to their right.

“Let’s go,” January said, hooking her arm through Tommy’s and playfully skipping off in the direction indicated by Madison.

January released Tommy’s arm at the tree line, her excitement dying down at the sight of the forest.

“Well, this is going to suck.”

“We’ll manage,” Madison said from somewhere behind them.

Lugging their supplies in backpacks, the three friends trudged through the forest, occasionally stumbling over roots and tangles of underbrush. Eventually they came to a sort of clearing. At its far end was a grassy mound surrounded by a variety of weeds and wildflowers and moss-covered rocks.

“We’re here,” Madison declared.

“I don’t see the entrance to a cave,” January observed.

“It is right over there,” Madison indicated the grassy mound.

There was indeed a hole in the mound, though only slightly larger than the entrance to an animal’s burrow.

“That’s it?” Tommy asked worriedly.

“Yup,” Madison said, smiling mischievously. “We need to squeeze through that hole. From what my stepdad’s buddy said, it really opens up into a big cavern once you get down there.”

“Which of us is going first?” Tommy asked, more worried than he’d been a moment ago.

“I nominate Madison,” January suggested, “since she knows so much about all this.”

“Fine with me,” Madison agreed.

“So,” Tommy proceeded to point out the obvious, “we’re going to cram ourselves into a muddy orifice that leads god knows where. Then, once we arrive at our subterranean destination, we’re going to do some underage drinking and go for a swim. That about sum it up?”

“Yup,” January said, “that sums it up nicely.”

Madison withdrew a flashlight from her backpack and approached the small opening to the cave. Lowering herself onto her belly, she clicked the flashlight to life and inched into the hole, bit by bit, wiggling back and forth when it got too tight. Soon January and Tommy watched the soles of Madison’s sneakers disappear into the dark.

And then she was gone.

“Think she’s okay?” Tommy asked January after a few minutes had passed.

“I’m sure she’s fine.”

As if to confirm January’s words, Madison’s voice sounded from somewhere underground: “You assholes coming down here or what?”

“See, I told you,” January said to Tommy.

January went next, slowly crawling into the dark hole. Foot by foot, she squirmed along, her hands slid along the slick ground, the dampness soaking through her clothes. Tiny roots hung limply from the ceiling, brushing against her hair and back. The tunnel sloped steadily downward as she pulled herself along. She, too, had a flashlight, and its beam illuminated the way.

Tommy reluctantly followed, dragging all three backpacks behind him on a length of rope he’d tied around his waist. Because he had broader shoulders and was somewhat larger than the girls, he struggled more than they had in getting through the tunnel’s mouth and down its claustrophobic throat. Crawling toward what he hoped was Mother Nature’s glorious guts, he pulled himself forward. More than once he internally panicked when the tunnel became so snug that he nearly got stuck. But before long it opened up to become a sizable cavern with stalactites stabbing downward from the rock ceiling. In some places, where there was rock underfoot, the stalactites above met the stalagmites below to form columns of hard minerals and mud. Everything was damp. An earthy smell filled the stagnant air. And other than the gentle sound of dripping water all was quiet.

Not more than fifteen feet into the cavern was the natural spring. Extending as far back as the trio could see, the water looked calm and inviting in the glow of their flashlights. If not for the darkness—against which their flashlights were no match—they knew the water would be crystal clear. And the shadows hanging about the rock walls of the cave crept over the surface as if trying to keep the spring’s contents secret.

“This is fucking awesome!” Madison took in the spectacle of it all.

It was truly a sight.

“Here, hold this,” January handed her flashlight to Tommy.

She bent down and opened her backpack. From inside she retrieved a clear garbage bag and a small box of glow sticks. One by one she bent each of the flexible sticks until it made a cracking sound. After the last one—there were eight in all—they emitted a substantial neon-green light. She picked them up and placed them in the trash bag. Then she reduced the size of the bag’s opening by squeezing it with her hand, placed her mouth over the hole, and blew into it. As her breath filled the bag it expanded until it couldn’t accommodate much more. That’s when she tied the end tightly into a knot, preventing the air from escaping. Finally, she swung the bag and let it

go. It landed with a mild splash several feet into the water. There it floated, casting an eerie glow over as much of the cave as it could reach.

“That was a really good idea,” Madison said, genuinely impressed.

“I came across the glow sticks on a shelf in the hall closet. Figured they’d come in handy down here.”

“You weren’t wrong,” Tommy said, also impressed.

The friends took a seat on the smooth rock floor near the spring.

“What’ll it be,” Madison asked, “beer or wine cooler?”

“Beer, obviously,” January answered.

“Um, I’ll take a wine cooler,” Tommy said.

“Could’ve called that one,” January shook her head.

“Fuck you,” Tommy said irritably. “Beer tastes like shit.”

“Okay. Calm down, man. Here’s your dumb wine cooler,” January tossed him a bottle.

“Thank you.” Tommy twisted off the cap and chugged a quarter of the bottle’s contents. “It’s hella delicious!”

All three burst into laughter.

They sat there for some time drinking, Madison and January the beers, Tommy the wine coolers. Between sips, they discussed their lives at home, town gossip, and their mutual longing to experience more in the world than Briar’s Reach. In all, each of them had downed four bottles. But four beverages to a teenager who doesn’t normally drink will surely have quite an effect. And when January stood up, she swayed drunkenly for a moment before finding her balance. Madison and Tommy were equally buzzed, neither of them noticing just how much until they got to their feet.

“What time do you think it is?” January asked, somewhat slurring her words.

“Probably late evening,” Tommy answered.

“Great!” January said. “Now we’ll have to walk back through those creepy woods at night.”

“It’s always night underground,” Madison stated, stretching out her arms to indicate the entirety of the cave.

“Good point,” Tommy said.

“Let’s go for a dip,” Madison said, changing the subject. She began stripping down to her mismatched bra and underwear.

“I’m good with that,” Tommy removed his T-shirt, less inhibited than usual due to his alcohol-soaked brain.

Madison’s eyes fell on Tommy’s muscular form in the sickly green illumination of the floating glow sticks. His body was considerably more masculine than his mind, but Madison liked that about him. It was an ideal contrast, in her opinion. She shifted her view to his handsome face. Despite the semi-darkness of the cave, she knew his skin was tanned, his eyes the color of cinnamon, and his black hair just unruly enough to be effortlessly fashionable. In truth, she had always been attracted to Tommy, both his physique and personality.

Best friends harbored plenty of secrets, even from one another.

January shed her shirt and shorts to reveal a one-piece bathing suit underneath. Despite the level of confidence she invariably displayed, this proved she was more insecure than her friends ever would have thought.

The water was cool yet satisfying. They floated around lazily, occasionally splashing one another as they delightedly screamed and laughed. This disturbed several bats that had been snoozing silently at the back of the cave. With a series of sharp clicks and flapping wings, they

took off in a fearful frenzy toward the cave's exit. So unexpected were the flying mammals, and so loud was their clamor to escape, the three friends went still and quiet as their hearts jumped high in their chests.

Once the bats were gone, Tommy looked at Madison and January.

"That scared the shit outta me."

"Me too," Madison admitted.

"Totally," January said.

After the brief ordeal with the bats, the friends took turns diving down in attempts to touch the bottom. But they couldn't manage to do it.

"This cave must go way down or something," Tommy observed after breaking the surface and wiping the water from his eyes. "I can't find the bottom."

"Super weird, right?" Madison said.

"It *is* weird," January agreed.

"Yup," Tommy added.

That's when Madison noticed floating in front of her an empty plastic Sprite bottle. She reached out and grabbed it.

"Looks like someone was down here," she said.

On closer inspection she saw that the bottle was not empty but contained a rolled-up piece of paper. "What the hell?"

"What is it?" Tommy asked.

"I don't know," she said. "There's something inside."

"Let's check it out," January began swimming toward solid ground.

The others followed.

Swimming to the rock wall of the cave and climbing onto a ledge that could accommodate the three of them, January, Madison, and Tommy sat around the mysterious Sprite bottle. Madison picked it up, unscrewed the cap, and fished the piece of paper out using her right index finger. Carefully, she unrolled the sheet. It was the sort of lined paper commonly found in composition notebooks.

"Looks like someone wrote a note on this," she informed her friends.

"Well, what does it say?" January asked impatiently.

"Yeah," Tommy said, "what does it say?"

Obliging her friends, Madison began reading the words that had been sloppily scrawled on both sides of the paper.

To whoever finds this...if anyone ever finds this...my name is Samantha Knoll. I'm fifteen and have lived in Briar's Reach my whole life. Been in this cave for what I think is a couple days now. Hard to tell time down here. All I have is a bottle of soda, a pack of cookies, a tiny keychain flashlight, and my school stuff. I hid here when two of the worst girls from school, Becky and Trish, were chasing me. They've been bullying me for months but never threatened to physically hurt me before. Not until the other day. That's when I found the opening to this cave and decided to hide in here till they passed. But when I went to leave, something was blocking the way out. A living thing. Not human, but some kind of creature. A scary creature, like a monster. It's still here, watching me. Been waiting for it to go away, but I think it's waiting for me to try to leave, or maybe

fall asleep. I'm pretty sure it wants to hurt me. The battery in my light is starting to die! If I don't make it home and you find this, please tell my family what happened to me. But I imagine if you're in this cave, you're probably in the same situation. I don't think I'm going to make out of here. But I really hope you do.

By the time Madison had finished reading the note, all three had sobered significantly. She folded the sheet of paper and carefully put it under the shoulder strap of her bra. The three friends sat in stunned silence for what seemed like a long time but had probably only been a minute or two. Finally, Tommy spoke up.

"That's the same missing girl from the poster outside Suzie's."

"It is," January's voice was barely louder than a whisper.

"That note can't be legit." Madison shook her head. "It can't be. Right?"

No one answered Madison's question. Instead, even though none of them wanted to, they all turned their heads in the direction of the cave's exit.

Crouched there was a dark, naked thing. In the murky neon light thrown about the cave from the bag of glow sticks, they could see its mouth open to reveal sharp teeth so white they were almost clear. Strings of drool dangled from its snarling lips and its bulging milky eyes were trained on the teenagers. Long fingers with too many joints ended in black talons. The color of its nubby skin was a marriage of clay-brown and moss-green. In other places, however, its skin seemed to be in a constant state of movement, shifting and resting, shifting and resting.

"What the *fuck* is that?" January's voice trembled in escalating terror.

Tommy couldn't speak. He was rendered mute and paralyzed by fear.

It took everything she had but Madison fought to remain calm and rational. "I don't know what that thing is," she said very quietly, "but I don't think it's interested in being friends with us."

"What're we gonna do?" January asked.

"As far as I know," Madison contemplated, "that tunnel is the only way in or out. We have to get around that creature to get to it. Maybe we can distract it or overpower it. It's three against one, after all. We know we can't wait it out; that tactic didn't go so well for that Samantha girl."

Emboldened by what Madison had said, January stepped forward and spoke directly to the creature: "We're going to get by you, you ugly bastard!"

Provoked by January's gesticulations and aggressive words, the creature leaned forward and released a chilling shriek. Flecks of spittle sprayed the air in front of its mouth. Its skin twitched and squirmed, twitched and squirmed, until little pieces began falling away and landing on the cave floor. Upon contact, the little pieces scurried toward January, Madison, and Tommy. These were living things, independent of the creature but controlled by it. It was a symbiotic relationship in which the host was evidently the master.

Taking a step back, the three friends couldn't deny that their situation had just become considerably worse. The trio was afforded a better view of the little, many-legged abominations as they neared. They looked as though a spider had been bred with a crab and then that unfortunate offspring had been bred with something decidedly reptilian.

The friends stepped back again, finding themselves at the rock's edge. There was no place to go now but back into the water.

When the first of the creature's minions reached them, Madison stomped on it. A loud crunch was followed by a green ooze which squelched out from around her bare foot. Soon their numbers would be too great to fight off. But the trio had to try.

"Step on as many as you can! Smoosh 'em!" Madison yelled to her friends.

They crushed one after another. And with each of its minions killed, the creature responded by issuing yet another pained, angry shriek.

Suddenly, the bulk of the swarm turned its attention to January, attacking her. In an instant she was covered from head to toe. Madison and Tommy tried swatting them away, but there were far too many. It was over quickly. January's horrendous screams ceased as she collapsed onto the blood-slickened rock. The swarm then detached itself from her limp body to focus its collective attention on the two survivors. Seeing no other option, Madison and Tommy leaped from the rock, landing back in the water.

From the water, Madison and Tommy saw the swarm at the edge, awaiting instruction. They turned their eyes to the creature as it left its place at the exit. It grunted and took off at a full run, using both arms and legs to propel itself forward much like an ape, until it mounted the rock and stood over January's lifeless body. Its nostrils flared, taking in the scent of the fresh kill. With that, the thing effortlessly plunged its powerful hands into January's chest, her ribs snapping like dry branches in autumn as it sought her meat. They heard wet, squishing sounds as it grabbed handfuls of organs and ripped them from the cavity, to devour the stuff from which January was made.

Tommy let out an anguished cry.

Madison said nothing. Her expression, however, conveyed much: she wasn't nearly as scared as she was sad and pissed off at that moment.

"You piece of shit!" she yelled at the monster as it chewed on the pieces of her friend. "You sick fuck!"

The creature swiveled in their direction, regarding their presence as if it had momentarily forgotten them during its feeding frenzy. A shriek escaped its throat commanding the swarming symbiotes at the rock's edge to enter the water. And they did, falling in with a series of tiny plops.

"Uh oh," Madison said.

"Oh no," was all Tommy managed to say.

"Swim," Madison shouted. "Swim for the exit."

So they swam. Fast. But the swarm was faster. And before the two friends knew it, they were overcome by them. Tommy was just behind Madison, and the vicious little bugs got to him first. They attached themselves to his legs. He frantically kicked and thrashed about in the water as they crawled to his abdomen, then his upper torso. Madison stopped, turned, and reached out to take hold of Tommy's arm. His face wrinkled up in a picture of absolute panic and terror and agony.

Madison held onto him.

"Come on, Tommy!" she yelled. "Keep swimming! We're almost there!"

But Tommy was no longer swimming; he was sinking, a heartbreaking look of resignation replacing the panic and terror.

There wasn't much of him still above water when Madison knew she had to let go. But she had difficulty releasing her grip, as if by doing so she was accepting he was lost to her forever.

"No," Madison groaned, tears streaming down her face. "Don't leave me."

No sooner had she uttered these words than a member of the swarm jumped from Tommy's wrist to her hand. Grasping her with its spindly legs and painful pincers, it sank its teeth deep into her flesh. Before it could inflict any further harm, she let go of Tommy and flung her arm at the rock wall, smashing the thing against the hard surface. A crunch preceded a burst of green ooze which covered her hand. Breathing hard, tears falling over her cheeks, she turned back toward the tunnel only to discover the creature was once again guarding the way out.

Without a reasonable course of action presenting itself in her mind, she chose a rather unreasonable one. First, she grabbed hold of the floating bag of glow sticks. Ripping the plastic, she reached inside and grabbed one. She then took a breath, as deep a breath as she was able, and dove down into the water. As she swam, she placed the glow stick between her teeth and bit down, holding it there to light her way. With both hands now free she swam into a vein of the cave, hoping it led to a more agreeable end than what awaited her in the cave above.

She swam and swam until her burning lungs felt as if they might explode. Desperate for air, she stopped. She took the glow stick from between her teeth and pointed it around the underwater tunnel. Looking up, she saw an air pocket at its ceiling. As quickly as she could, she swam to it. There was only enough room in the pocket for a portion of her face and she hungrily inhaled its precious oxygen. For a moment she lingered, but she knew the oxygen there was limited. She started swimming again, searching for another.

And she found one. Just in time, because her burning lungs had had enough.

This pocket was considerably larger than the first.

As she greedily breathed in the air, she noticed little roots protruding from the top of the tunnel. She raised her hand to them. What she felt there was not hard rock but earth and forest debris. She pushed her hand into it. It was soft and yielding. Taking a deep breath, she inserted her other arm into the tunnel's ceiling. That's when some of it fell loose in soggy chunks of earth, leaves and twigs. Grabbing hold of whatever she could, Madison clawed and climbed, dragging herself through the suffocating muck until she emerged into a roughly cylindrical chamber.

Filling her deprived lungs with air, she wiped the mud from her face and opened her eyes.

Shining the glow stick around revealed the scaly stone wall of an old well.

This meant there was a way out.

This meant there was hope.

Using the spaces between the stones in the wall as handholds, she climbed. Her muscles strained so much with the effort that they contracted and quaked with a series of tiny spasms. At the top of the well she encountered another obstacle: it had been sealed off with boards. Holding onto the slippery wall with one hand, she placed her other hand on the board directly above her head and pushed. Unexpectedly, it was wet and soft, bending upward as she applied more muscle to the task. Bits of the badly rotted wood rained down on her, yet she maintained her hold on the wall, her feet remaining loosely wedged between the stones below. She pushed and punched, pulled and tore, removing just enough so that she could clamber through.

Making it over the lip of the well, Madison fell to the forest floor. Because her eyes had adjusted to the darkness of the cave, it seemed impossibly bright outside even though the sun was going down. Half-naked, chest heaving with grief and exertion, Madison curled into a ball in the dirt and began to weep in deep, body-shuddering sobs.

Eventually she rolled over and wiped the tears from her eyes. Dealing with her trauma and losses would have to wait. She needed to get as far away from this piece of land as possible. What if the creature could track her through the cave system and then pursue her through the forest? She needed to get back to the car. She needed to tell someone what had happened.

Struggling to her bleeding feet, Madison ran as fast as she could in the direction of her car. She brushed her matted hair away from her eyes with the back of her mud-caked hands and staggered on, exhausted, but not daring to stop.

When she made it to the vehicle, she grabbed an old sweatshirt from the trunk and pulled it on. It was long and baggy on her because it had once belonged to Tommy. She'd kept it after he

had loaned it to her on a chilly night some months back. It still smelled like him, adding to the welcome warmth the extra layer provided over her grimy bra and underwear.

When she slumped into the driving seat and grasped the wheel, Madison's thoughts went to Samantha Knoll. She had to tell her family what awful fate had befallen her, even if they refused to believe it. Remembering the note, Madison felt for the folded sheet of paper she'd secured under her bra strap. Surprisingly, it was still there. She unfolded it with care. It was tattered and very dirty, and only parts of it were still readable. But she could surely fill in the gaps.

Madison retrieved her spare key from beneath the floor mat, put it in the ignition and turned. As the car rumbled to life, she looked at herself in the rearview mirror. She was quite a mess. There was no time to clean up, though. She threw the car's gear shifter into drive and aimed it in the direction of the Knoll residence.

As she sped away, a persistent thought kept repeating in her mind:

It's always night underground.

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