



THE RINGLEADER

by
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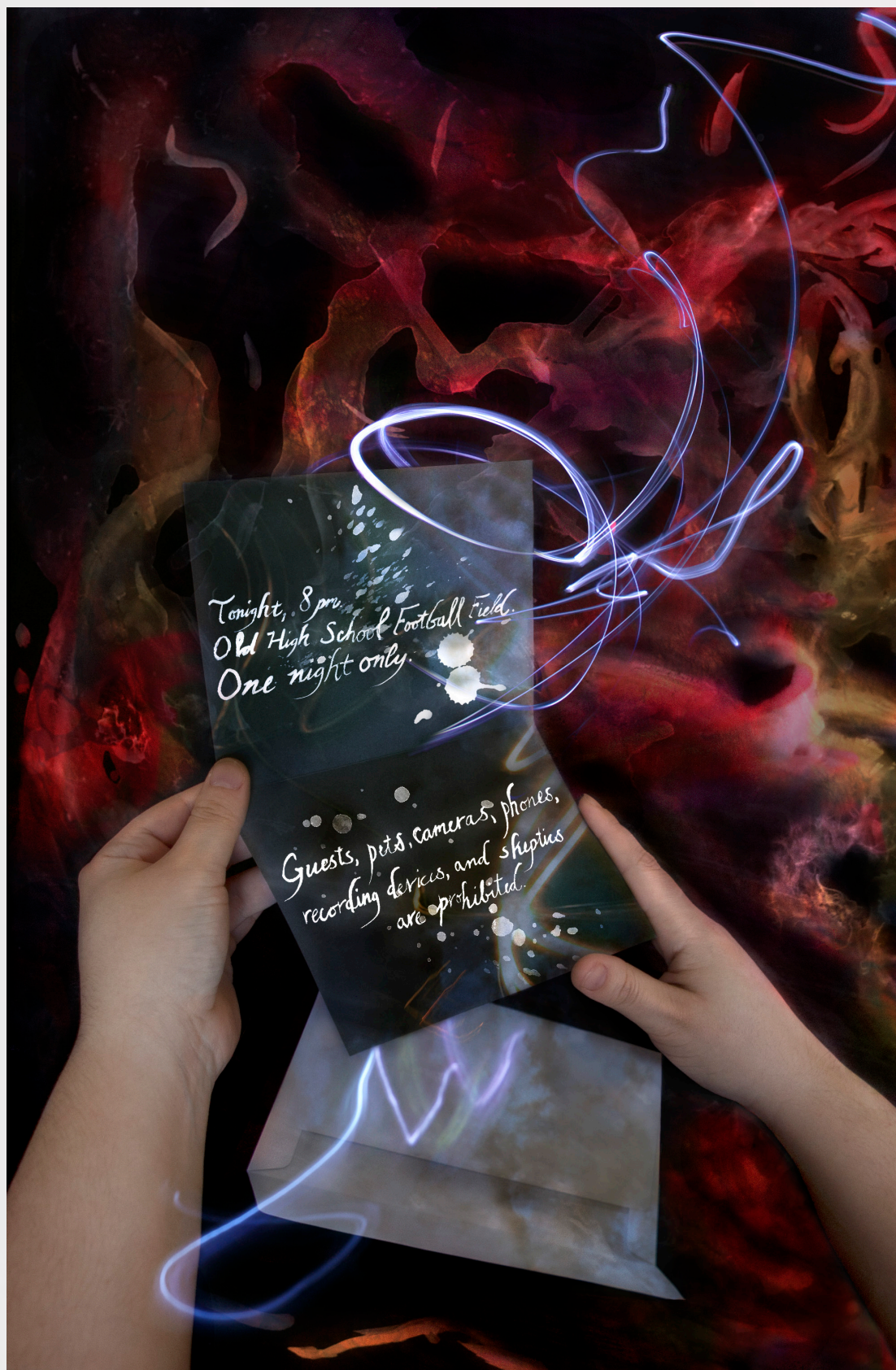
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Tonight, 8pm
Old High School Football Field.
One night only.

Guests, pets, cameras, phones,
recording devices, and stupids
are prohibited.

THE INVITATION

The day it happens is really no different than any other. You wake to your blaring alarm. You shower, dress, make and drink your two cups of coffee, and head to work. The dread that fills you as you enter the building is no different than any other day. After all, you despise your job. There is nothing more dreadful than facing something you hate day after day.

The routine only becomes unusual when you receive the message. It is a simple white envelope sitting atop your inbox. The label's scrawling script very clearly spells out your name. No address, no stamp, no return address. You slit it open with a pen, and out falls the invitation:

You are invited.

You flip open the card. In a flash, a spark of light and a splash of color spill from the invitation, like a firecracker exploding or a paint can overflowing. Startled, you gasp and drop the card. Before the folded paper hits your desk, the vision is gone. You blink several times. You peer over the top of the walls that surround your desk, eager to see if anyone else saw what you had, but no one even glances your way. For several moments, you just stare at the card, afraid to even touch it. Finally, driven by wild curiosity, you gingerly pick it up again. You hold your breath as you push it open once more.

This time there are no fireworks. Just a handwritten message. It is in the same script as your name on the front, in a light colored ink that almost shimmers in the light. You notice ink splatters across the page, as if it was hastily penned by a quill rather than with the Bic pens of your coworkers. Bewildered, you frown and read:

*Tonight, 8pm. Old High School Football Field. One night only.
Guests, pets, cameras, phones, recording devices, and skeptics are prohibited.*

You turn it over, hoping for more information. But the backside has only one lone sentence scribbled across it:

Prepare to be amazed.

The rest of the day drags. You are completely distracted by the invitation. Every few minutes you pull out the card and examine it, hoping to catch a glimpse of the display that accompanied its first opening. Much to your disappointment, the lights do not reappear, no matter how many times you flip open the card. You run your fingers across it absentmindedly, staring at the grey walls of your cubicle instead of completing the tasks that generate your paycheck.

You tell no one of the envelope or its contents. You punch out, earlier than you really should, and head home. The drive is a blur as your mind turns over the possibilities of what this event could be. Excitement makes your stomach flutter.

You pick at the take-out from last Wednesday, barely eating anything. Your stomach is in knots and you know it is not from the week-old lo mein. You push the container away from you, suddenly feeling ridiculous.

"It has to be a joke. I shouldn't even bother," you mutter. Yet, even as you say the words aloud, you feel your heart plummet with disappointment as the thought of not going sinks in. You throw out the remnants of your dinner and turn on the television. You try in vain to stay focused on a cheesy reality show. Still, your mind returns to the invitation with interest.

At 7:45, you pick up your keys and head for the door. You mentally trace the drive to the football field, even though you are not convinced you will actually show up. Maybe you'll just go pick up desperately needed groceries instead.

But now here you are, standing at the edge of the usually deserted field, staring up at a cloth tent. On the ground, rows and rows of white paper-bag lanterns lit by candles create a path to the pavilion's opening. You hesitate, listening for anything that might tell you what you are about to walk into, but strangely it is very quiet. You take a deep breath, shake your head and walk down the path.