Motes

It was so long ago; most of us have either forgotten or moved on. Forty years ago, on this day. It was such a short time as well, a few mere minutes of chaos, in the middle of one of the most celebrated and often peaceful days of the year. It was a cold morning; snow over a foot thick coated the ground. The sky was a light gray, which was an improvement over the inclement weather we’d been having. The day perpetuated in my mind.

I remember we were in the main room: Various guests making their way about, my 6 year old son harassing the cat, and my wife ran about in a flurry seeing to it that everyone was enjoying themselves. She kept an urbane appearance though, for which I admired her. I was sitting in my favorite chair, a simple wooden thing with a curved back and red velvet seat. It faced the fireplace. The crackling logs and open flame were always soothing. Along with me were a few other men who had been coerced into attending by their wives. They made the best of things and enjoyed themselves over the wine, musing about the dreary weather, and speculating on my wife’s culinary expertise.

The grandfather clock in the corner struck noon, signaling the guests that festivities were soon to begin. A few people began filing into the dining room, but most were just taking their time, enjoying the relaxation. I rose from my seat and walked out onto the porch. Lighting a cigar I leaned on the railing, watching the exhilarated children play in the snow.

That was when I saw it. It was a most peculiar thing, a negligible little black speck, like a bit of ash floating up from the chimney. There was a dark light radiating softly from it. At first I thought nothing of the speck; It just floated down as gently as would a snowflake, and disappeared when it came into contact with the ground.
But when I looked up to search for its source, I saw more. Hundreds of them: tiny, black, glowing lights were softly proliferating through the air. I briefly pondered what sort of divine artifice it was before my vision centered on a man across the street. He was staring up in wonder, and held out his hand. He watched as one of the lights slowly fell into his palm. He brought it close to him, examining the little wonder. A moment later he was gone.

In but a fraction of a second, he was disintegrated into a fine black powder and blew away on an invisible wind before disappearing entirely. His demise was as spectacular as clapping together a pair of chalk board erasers; he was just, gone. In a complete stupor, I gazed at the place where a fully grown man had stood just a moment ago.

It was a scream from my yard that snapped me out of the trance. Turning my head, I caught the last glimpse of a black cloud of dust swirling away from the children. It didn't take me long to realize what had happened, and to my horror it happened again. Another child, a boy around the age of eight, exploded in a plume of dust. Two more disappeared just as quickly. By then the children had all begun screaming in terror, the black particles being the only explanation for the abrupt end of their playmates.

Chaos erupted and they ran in any direction they could, most toward the house. My own son, the youngest in the group, stood in the middle of it all and looked around in confusion. That was when I broke into a sprint to the yard, my cigar still lit, but unused and forgotten on the porch. I called his name. He turned to me, outstretching his arms as if to welcome a hug.

I saw his face; crystal blue, uncomprehending eyes pleading for help, a single tear rolling down his cheek. No sooner had I touched his gloved hand when he dissolved. I fell through the cloud that was now in his place and tripped in the snow. There was a wail; it was probably my own. I lay there on the ground for a time, sobbing into the white powder. Eventually, I pulled myself up and stumbled my way to the door. Blinded by tears in a craven run, I burst into the house to see a woman disappear right in front of me.

I looked around the deserted house, and watched as the specks of black passed through the walls as if they weren't even there. I could hear faint wailing across the street through the still open door. The clock in the corner clicked to 12:05 and there was, save the
ticking of the clock and the crackling of the fire, silence.

As I look back on that day, I remember the deep-seeded depression I held onto for many years to come. I wondered what punitive measures led to my being still alive, and to this day I still remember the fear in those eyes before there dissipated into the putrid black mist.

The man set down his pen and leaned back. The grandfather clock struck noon, the fire near him crackled with warmth. Lighting a cigar, he drew a breath and puffed smoke. He watched calmly as a little black speck appeared through the ceiling and came to settle in his lap. A moment later the cigar fell to the floor, and a cloud of black dust merged with the floating ashes of the fire.