

To Be Fearful of the Night

by Lauren Uttermohlen

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My soul went out back for a smoke one busy night at work and didn't come back. I don't blame her. She changed my cell phone's background to quote a poem, then left to wander the suburban wasteland in search of some greater meaning, guided by the dim glow of the green traffic light. "Though my soul may set in darkness, it will rise in perfect light; I have loved the stars too fondly to be fearful of the night."

A few days later when work and school allotted a two day break, my best friend and I seized the chance to go find her, drawn to the Michigan dark park from our only clue. Six hours down and six hours back, minus stops for bathrooms and police officers (that both thankfully gave warnings), and we had enough talk about the meaning of life to fill the script for a bad indie movie.

Innocent and young, victorious for a fleeting moment - nothing could have prepared us for what would be the scariest night of our short lives.

9:38 p.m.

Clunk, clunk.

Our car doors shut one after the other as our gazes fell on the forest where we'd find stars. 'Dark' was an operative word; eerie was a more fitting one. With the light of the Mackinaw Island theme park on our backs, the forest seemed haunted by the spirit of a beast much older than us. The trees were gray without light, half barren with the turn of fall, dead leaves scattered at their trunks. A man-made cabin stood by the end of the trail, orange-tinged wood bright compared to the kin behind it.

"This place is kinda creepy."

The silence broken, I held the telescope over the roof of my mother's car. "Hey, Kayla. Can you hold this really quick?"

She shook her head, mouthing no. She knew that old trick. By the faint glow of an ineffective lamp post a dozen feet away, I could see her freckles shift as she smiled. The lamppost was open at the top. It caused more light pollution, *and* made the light on the ground dimmer.

“Fine, but I’m going to complain the whole way.”

Park one mile from the shore line. Please do not use flashlights. Red lights are allowed. A flashlight can be turned into a red light by covering it with a sock. We followed the website like a recipe for fun. Please be respectful of others who are trying to see the stars.

We resolved to make the one mile journey without flashlights. Our eyes would adjust, we figured.

9:45 p.m.

We entered the maw of the forest, following a forked concrete tongue. We were swallowed immediately, the Mackinaw lights gone as the lips closed behind us. Just like that, Kayla and I were alone. The wind was drawn through the trees as the forest took a mighty breath, the silence otherwise broken only by our tiny voices.

9:49 p.m.

I caught something out of the corner of my eye. White. White cloth. A white *dress*. A white dress *flowing in the wind*.

I turned my dimmed flashlight on the culprit responsible for my apprehension.

A girl, no more than twelve, smiled back at me.

“Kayla, there’s a person.”

She started to laugh. “You better not-- *holy shit*.”

Oh great. She can see demonic little ghost girls, too.

We ran.

9:51 p.m.

“Let’s join another group.”

“Safety in numbers,” Kayla agreed.

“And more people to trip when that Goddamn ghost child starts chasing us.”

9:57 p.m.

“Who the fuck puts a life-size sign of a little girl *in a dress* in the middle of a dark forest, and doesn’t *warn people* about it?” I asked our new companions.

"I have no idea," the man laughed. "There's, like, ten more on the path." He was tall and skinny. A black shirt clung to his frame, matching cropped black hair. He had the greatest hair I'd ever seen on a faceless stranger.

On his far side was a girl. Blonde hair, short, a little fat. She seemed nice. His girlfriend, I figured.

"Are they always there?" Kayla asked, half-laughing still. Something about having the piss scared out of us always seems to make that girl laugh.

"Yeah," he confirmed. "Last time I came down here in the daylight. Much less scary."

His accent was familiar. Not British or Scottish or something easy like that, but familiar. *Almost* Russian, but not quite.

"I wish we'd done that."

10:12 p.m.

A woman passed by, a border collie trotting happily at her heels. He didn't pay attention to us. The woman smiled in greeting. A small reflective badge hung on a lanyard around her shoulders.

"Man, how do those people walk like that?" I asked when she was out of earshot.

"Without a flashlight?" the almost-Russian-but-not-quite answered.

"No, with such gargantuan balls between their legs."

He laughed. It almost made me sad that I'd never see him again. I dig a guy with an accent, *especially* if they laugh at my jokes. When they don't have girlfriends, at least.

"Should I turn off our flashlight?"

"No." The response was collective, lead by Kayla and the handsome stranger.

"Why, you scared?"

"Fuck yeah," he laughed.

10:15 p.m.

"There's been a lot of cougar sightings around here," the blonde girl said.

She had no accent. The Midwest flat gave her away. She was native.

"That doesn't sound right," Kayla responded. "Cougars don't live up here. It might have been coyotes. Or bears."

"Oh, yeah. I think it was bears."

"What kinda bears live out here?" I interjected.

"Probably black bears. They're small. Only like 250 pounds," Kayla answered.

"What should we if we see one?"

"Walk away. Don't run, or they'll chase."

"What if they're really hungry?"

She laughed. "Then I'm tripping you!"

10:20 p.m.

Conversations were light. We kept to ourselves. Rarely did our conversations cross with our guides'. Occasionally we'd ask them a question anyway, like we were pretending to be friendly, sociable people.

"Where are you guys from?"

"Michigan," was the girl's answer. "What about you guys?"

"Indiana." I looked at the guy. "What about you?"

"Bulgaria."

"Oh."

"You have no idea where that is, do you?"

"It sounds *vaguely* familiar," I tried, feeling my pride slip and fall on its face.

He laughed. *Oh, I'm a dumb, ignorant American.* He didn't tell me where it really was and I didn't want him to catch me with the Google page open.

10:23 p.m.

The "road closed" sign hung on rusted nails. The wind hadn't blown it on its back. Something had made it fall halfway, the other side still bolted into the stand.

"That wasn't there before," the Bulgarian said.

"Oh, my God. It's like every horror movie ever."

We knew we were reaching the end of the trail. Cars scattered the edge of the thin road, half on dirt, locked and empty. It was like the rapture had come and we weren't invited.

The detour wasn't far. It took us down a dirt path that cut closer to the coast. Our feet sunk into sand. Waves beat at our feet with the consistency of blood pumping through a heart. The wind blew off the water, threatening to return us to the forest.

The sky hovered, a black disk speckled with paint. It wasn't like I'd been told at the planetarium, but it was more stars than I'd ever seen.

Gruff men - Mexican I guessed, littered the beach with folding chairs. Those would have been a good idea. We snuck by their field of vision quickly, but our apologies went untranslated. We picked a spot farther down the thin strip of beach, and offered a blanket to our companions.

While I set up the telescope Kayla watched the view, and it was silently decided that our little coalition was over. Sure, they used our blanket as a token of our gratitude for their guidance, but they talked by themselves, bringing up names of people Kayla and I will never meet.

I didn't care. I was happy. The stars and the moon were beautiful overhead, and I sat next to my best friend. There were no signs of the impending storm the weatherman promised.

"This reminds me of a poem," I remarked. No one wanted to hear it, but I quoted it anyway.

10:46 p.m.

I tried to find the planets with the help of my cell phone. If we were lucky, we'd see Neptune, according to my star chart app. We weren't.

"We're gonna leave," the man said, standing. "Thanks for walking with us."

"You, too!"

We watched them disappear down the trail. There was no way Kayla and I would leave yet -- we were having too much fun.

As soon as they were gone, I Googled Bulgaria.

11:27 p.m.

“Did you see that shooting star?”

I quickly made my wish. Love. Love for something or someone. Anything that makes my soul come back.

“No,” Kayla replied.

12:10 a.m.

We were alone. No voices on the horizon, just the wind, rushing into the trees behind us. I saw another shooting star -- we both did this time -- and wished that Kayla and I would stay best friends until our deaths.

12:42 a.m.

It was getting cold. We huddled under the blanket, trying to point out constellations. Occasionally a bolt of lightening in an otherwise cloudless sky would make a new one for us.

12:59 a.m.

“When should we go back?”

I checked the forest. The trees swayed as the wind picked up. What if a bear was hiding in there, *right now*, ready to jump out and eat us?

“I don’t know. When do you want to go back?”

“Not yet,” I decided. “We should make the most of this.”

1:46 a.m.

The sky was being swallowed by dark, shapeless clouds. Not even lightening made it out alive. We packed up the telescope carefully and tried our best to get the sand out of the blankets, then headed for the trail.

We passed by the Mexican men again. *Do they live here?* I wondered, and chided myself for being racist. No one lives in the park. Either way, we weren’t going to be walking back to the car with any of them. They weren’t speaking a lick of English, nor did they seem ready to leave.

2:00 a.m.

We took the socks off the ends of our flashlights. Mine sent shadows fleeing behind the ominous trees; Kayla’s only served to remind us that the shadows were

there.

Our pace was brisk, lest we get eaten by the sky too.

2:10 a.m.

“Stop doing that!”

I turned my flashlight back on the trail ahead of us. “Doing what?”

“Looking behind us! There’s nothing there.”

“I’m just checking!”

“Don’t! We have to *avoid* being every white girl in every horror movie ever!”

2:12 a.m.

I watched the treetops. Nothing. Not a sound. Not even squirrels -- or bears or coyotes or cougars. *They all knew to escape the forest when they had the chance.*

We checked every roadside human-sign to make sure they were still there.

2:16 a.m.

“Kayla, why are you walking so damn fast?”

“Because I want to get the fuck out of here!”

“You’re just going to be tired when the monster comes out to eat us.”

She didn’t slow down. She kept her eyes glued to the trail, like that would help her get out even faster.

I checked behind us again. Nothing.

2:20 a.m.

The signs were familiar.

“Oh, great. There’s the creepy little girl. Never thought I’d be happy to see you.”

We hadn’t run into anyone on the path. No families, no women with their dogs, no Bulgarians, no Mexicans.

It took all of Kayla’s willpower, and by extention my own, not to start running for the exit.

The forest spat us out, and the lamp post welcomed us back to reality. I

made certain the right key was in my hand *before* we reached the car, because white girls like me always fumble and drop them soon as they reach the door.

2:21 a.m.

“If I hit anything, I’m not stopping,” I told Kayla, who was the only other occupant in the car. I knew. I checked the backseat.

“No, we should stop. And reverse. So we hit it again.”

2:26 a.m.

Safe. Or so we thought.

We could see Mackinaw in the distance. The city was so damn bright. The bridge was illuminated with decorations for some festival. Apparently today was a big holiday for those who lived here, and those who didn’t came from all around the state.

The motel across the street from the dark park’s path had a dirty pink neon sign, the ‘NO’ by the ‘VACANCY’ left dark. It looked the place where all the clowns attending the festival would stay at. I’ll be damned if we made it out of that forest just to have the two little girls from *The Shining* show up at our door.

Besides, the trip to Kayla’s grandma’s was only two hours, mostly on highways, and she’d promised us ice cream.

2:28 a.m.

I quickly claimed the cleaner of the gas station bathroom stalls and let out the piss of a century, only to find no toilet paper in the dispenser beside me.

Great. Try as I might to be the intellectual, deep, poetic one, I can’t wipe my own ass without my best friend.

2:40 a.m.

Mackinaw was gone. The dark park stretched on as little beads of rain hit our windshield. Trees lined our path, only smooth headlights to disperse their shadows.

“Shit, was I supposed to turn there?” I asked.

Kayla fumbled with the GPS as it rerouted.

2:46 a.m.

I prayed we'd find the highway again. Or a street lamp. Some sign of civilization.

Google didn't seem interested in our old path. No, now we were unwilling pioneers, lost in the woods, mere specks in the everlasting expanse. The forest and the road were less than a foot apart, and deer that littered the roadside looked up at us like they'd never seen a human before.

The speed limit said 40, but I didn't dare go above 25.

"You know what would be really scary in a video game?" Kayla asked, because video-game fear was the kind we were used to. "A forest, like that one. And it's just you and your dog. And then, you see this giant zombie bear come running out of the woods."

"You can't just reveal the monster like that. You keep it hidden. That makes it scarier. That's what Stephen King said. You can have a ten foot monster behind a door, but if you reveal it, then people think, 'Oh, at least it wasn't a twenty foot monster.' No, if you *really* wanna scare people, have your dog start barking at the woods. Then you hear something, and you both start to run. And, as you're running, you see *something* reach out and grab your dog -- who was totally running faster than you. You turn around. All that's there is a blood stain. You hear your dog yelp, then a *crack*. Then there's silence, and you just keep fucking running."

We didn't talk about horror games after that.

2:51 a.m.

"Why did Pandora stop?"

"I don't know." Kayla woke up my cell phone, which had less than 40% battery. "I think we don't have internet out here."

A deer looked up at us as we passed, its rounded eye glinting in the headlights.

"Can you switch it to Google music? Or the radio? Or *something*?"

"I'm trying!"

The silence dragged on. Any minute now I figured a metal claw would burst through the roof of the car, and we'd go driving off the road. And, when the monster chewed on our corpses, the *Supernatural* theme song would start playing.

"Try songs that are downloaded. I don't care what."

Sound crackled through the radio. A high pitched ring coupled with thunderous static.

Then -- music. Oh, thank God for music.

3:31 a.m.

"All booked," the woman on the phone said.

We'll just have to make it to her grandma's house, no matter how slow I need to drive.

3:40 a.m.

We passed the time by talking about things we liked. Like computers. And home.

"We haven't seen a single car yet," I observed.

3:56 a.m.

A red Jeep, occupied by a bunch of young, idiot boys, sped past us in a 'no passing' zone. The city was coming into view. Only a half hour remained. No one in civilization seemed to know the terror we'd just been through.

4:40 a.m.

I killed the engine in front of Kayla's grandmother's house. We scampered inside, where the cat playfully nicknamed 'Zombie Cat' for its skin-painted bones and hiccup to its breathing that reminded me of a hospital stay watched me sink into the bed with glazed, sightless eyes. The very sight of Zombie Cat made me shrink from its benevolent purring.

Kayla shooed Zombie Cat away when she returned, and shut the door behind her.

"I think that was the scariest night of my fucking life."

She agreed.

When I lay safe in bed, my cell phone plugged into the nearest wall, I thought about the stars. No revelation came to mind -- no secret truth about the universe, or special poem was inspired. I was too exhausted to consider the search for my soul a success or a failure.

I changed my cell phone background before falling asleep.