

## The Bus Stop

“Jenny, the bus will be at the stop soon,” came my mother’s warning from the bathroom upstairs.

I slid my lunchbox into my Hello Kitty backpack before pulling it on over my jacket. “Ok mom,” I answered back. The straps were a little snug with the thickness of my coat but there probably wasn’t time to adjust them, so I headed over to the door.

The latch was an old one. Its many years of service had made opening it hard to do. I wish dad would just buy a new one but my parents loved the charm of antiques so it was just another thing I had to struggle with. Depressing the latch with both small thumbs, I finally heard a loud click and the door creaked open.

It was Halloween, the overcast sky making the morning seem pitch dark. The porch light illuminated our jack o’lanterns, frost covering their exposed top and side. My dad’s was the scariest, with its evil-looking pointed teeth and a sinister grin. The cute one was mom’s while mine looked distorted with its lopsided face and uneven eyes.

I was a little surprised to see that they were lit. Dad must’ve come out early to light the candles so I’d get the full effect of them as I left for school. My father was a Halloween nut. He said it was his favorite holiday. He even went so far as to say, “When I die, I want to be buried out by the garage so I can scare any kid crazy enough to come trick or treating way out here.”

Pressing the door closed I heard the old latch catch. Boards creaking underfoot, I crossed the neglected porch and stepped down the two stairs to the walk. Brittle leaves made crunching sounds as I moved from the sidewalk to the unpaved driveway.

We lived in the country, so I was used to the woods surrounding our home. The bus stop was at the bottom of a slight grade and far from the glow coming from our house. As I walk toward the bus stop, it gradually became darker. I was fairly used to this because with mom and dad being busy in the morning I’ve been getting myself on the bus almost every day this year.

The sounds of the forest came alive as my imagination took over. The wind whipped some stray hairs in front of my face. I brushed them back behind my ear as I tried to keep the sounds of rustling leaves from becoming monsters or some nefarious other creature. Danger lurked

behind every silhouetted tree, their dark arching branches resembled clutching claws on gnarled arms of bark.

I was a big girl, though. Dad had taken me hiking and I wasn't afraid of the animals of the forest. I knew nothing in the surrounding area would want to hurt me. The creatures here were all gentle. There was no cause for alarm.

Just then, a particularly loud rustling came from the dry, fallen leaves to my right. Its pattern was more of a loping gait on the usual even sounds of the animals I'd heard before. A little uneasy, I looked in the direction the sound came from. In the near pitch darkness, I could see nothing.

I reached into my jacket pocket and produced my tiny flashlight. Hands a bit shaky, I depressed the plastic switch and panned it around the area the sound had come from. Breathing out a sigh relief, I directed the light to the road ahead and cautiously continued on my journey. I tried to walk as silently as possible so I could listen for the strange loping noise.

The light gave me a very welcome feeling of assurance as it illuminated the small patch of the driveway directly in front of me. In my mind, I thanked my father for giving me the tiny light. It wasn't very powerful and was really cheaply made, but it provided just enough light for me to feel safe.

Dad ordered it at the beginning of the school year. It came all the way from China. We had to wait a whole month for it to arrive, but it didn't matter because the mornings were bright then. I didn't need the light. The sun was already up and I could see everything around me.

But that was then. Now, in late October, it was still dark when I got picked up by the bus. I know my parents didn't like me being down here alone, but they were busy.

A sound tore through the twigs and leaves to my left. I swung my tiny light in that direction and waved it around trying to catch whatever it was that had created such a racket. This time the flashlight's beam shook as my hands trembled. Whatever it was, it moved with the same loping stride that I'd heard before.

"Whatever it is," I said aloud, "it's gone now." I think I actually voiced my thoughts to calm myself. Hearing my words really did make me feel better so I added, "It's probably just some silly squirrel."

I straightened my shoulders and turned once again toward the bus stop, but before I'd taken another step, a twig snapped behind me and to my right. I whirled about as quickly as I could only to catch the shadowy form

of something small. The light's beam almost managed to shine on it before it escaped into the tree line.

I was about to flee home in panic when I heard the sound of an approaching vehicle. It sounded like my bus so I ran for the stop.

As I sprinted I could hear other noises, but in my haste, I couldn't tell if they had the same broken gait that I'd heard before. My small backpack bounced wildly as I careened down the dirt drive. The occasional loose piece of gravel caused me to stumble. My arms were cartwheeling as I stop at the edge of the paved road.

Headlights knifed through the woods as the vehicle negotiated the turn, but to my disappointment, it wasn't the bus. As the dump truck's headlights played across me standing beside our mailbox the driver honked his horn. It was Jim, our nearest neighbor. He worked for the municipality maintaining our roads. In a few months, he'd be attaching a big plow blade to the front of that truck in anticipation of snow.

Seeing Jim and thinking of a much-needed snow day settled my nerves. As I watched his red running lights recede around the next bend I noticed our mailbox. Directing my small light onto it I could see the decorations I'd placed there for our mailman.

*Halloween, that's it*, I thought. Remembering the jack o'lanterns, I understood why I was so scared. I made a mental note to scold my father for making his so terrifying. I smiled as I saw the corny ghosts I'd put on the sides of the box. Reaching up I pulled the door open. It groaned as the rusty hinges gave protest to their unwanted movement. Shining the light inside I chuckled at seeing my little prank on the mailman. A small pile of black forms covered the bottom of the box. They were all plastic spiders meant to scare our postal carrier.

As I sighed in relief, my flashlight began to flicker. I smacked the strobing light against the palm of my hand. The reassuring sound of an approaching vehicle kept me from becoming frustrated. Finally, the bus was arriving.

My moment of calm was shattered by an explosion of sound from across the road. I whirled about, banging my hand on the open mailbox door in the process. The pain brought tears to my eyes as I swirled the light desperately trying to see what was making all the racket. Branches broke and dead leaves crunched, the sound seemed to come from everywhere.

I took a step backward, then froze as a group of small forms advanced onto the edge of the road. My tiny light was really starting to cut out and I

couldn't clearly see what they were as they scattered before the headlights of the oncoming van nearly caught them in its beams.

"No!" I cried in fear when I realized it was just a big white panel van. As it passed, I gave into fear and ran for my home. A quick look over my shoulder and I could see in the red glow of the van's taillights that many small things were chasing after me.

The cool autumn air burned in my lungs as I ran for my life. Sounds of pursuit came from all around me as I furiously dashed along our driveway. My arms pumped furiously as I raced ahead. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see brief glimpses of the wildly flashing light gripped tightly in my hand. I didn't dare to look beyond it or even behind for what I might see.

As I neared the outer radius of the porch light's glow, it disappeared. Someone must've turned the light off. In the near pitch-dark I slipped on a loose piece of gravel. Plunging forward at a break-neck speed I slid on my hands and knees across the driveway. My malfunctioning flashlight spinning off into the distance, I felt cinders grind into my skin.

I wanted to sit and cry but with a horde of small dark forms gaining ground I didn't have time. With my breath coming in ragged gasps I couldn't even scream. I could only run toward the now dark front porch.

As I made it to the walk, I felt a ray of hope. If I could get there fast enough I might make it inside to safety. My parents would surely protect me.

My shoes pounded across the creaky, wooden boards as I slammed bodily into the closed door. Lungs pumping like bellows, I struggled to work the ancient latch. I tried to scream as the first set of clawed feet scrambled across the porch. My last view was of the cheery glow of the jack o'lanterns, the tops, where we'd cut them open in order to hollow them out, were lying on the porch to one side.

The news reported that a child was missing. That she'd been possibly abducted from her bus stop. A white panel van had been spotted in the area about the same time as the possible abduction. The local police had issued an alert.