

## Stranger in the Dark

by Marei Paintner

Uhhh Mondays! Who doesn't hate waking up knowing you'll have to wait another week until really being able to sleep again? I heave myself out of bed, still feeling like I just came home from college Friday afternoon. For a little moment I think about if I could get away with skipping classes today, I mean it's not like I could really listen anyway with my thoughts always wandering off to some strange place and the guy next to me chewing his tuna sandwich as loud as if his life depended on it, but then I remember that as pathetic as that sounds I really don't have anything more interesting to do. Which is why I throw all my stuff in my, way too old, rancid backpack, quickly pour myself a cup of extra strong coffee and of course how could it be any different burn my tongue once again and head out of my flat rushing to the bus station but of course not before checking three times if my door is really locked, not that you could steal anything valuable from there anyway.

When I arrive I'm a good half hour early as usual, since the weather is quite nice here in the morning, not too cold and not too warm, just right for reading a good book before filling my head with lame facts about our economy, my mom wanted me to study that. As I am reading my book, sitting on a bench at my campus suddenly some random guy approaches me and just sits down without saying a word. I just awkwardly slip a little bit away from him, but I don't think he got the message cause he moves even closer to me grinning and making some weird move with his eyebrows, yeah I think he's trying to make a move on me. I don't like it, I'm not really into this guy or any guy or people in general. "So do you study here as well?" Wow, just wow. No Sherlock I just come here every damn day because I'm waiting until that tuna guy shares some of his sandwich with me, is what I answer or at least what I wish I would have, instead I just force myself to smile awkwardly like an idiot and get up quickly before another single word can come out of his mouth.

In case you haven't already got it, I really suck at social stuff, my mother always tells me she would love me the way I am, but I think secretly she wishes that I wasn't such a weirdo. Personally I don't share the opinion that I'm weird, it's just the people around me who are so strange. It's not like I wouldn't want to have a bunch of friends, just every time I try to socialise, to put myself out there more and believe me I tried a lot after a while I'm just like "nah, better not." Most people are simply like these Kinder Surprise Eggs everybody loved as a child, they may be beautiful and cool from the outside but inside there's just nothing but crap.

My classes go by even more slowly than usual, until the point where I really think my watch wants to play a trick on me. The sun is already setting as I stand in front of my door again after a quick visit in the library and at a fast-food restaurant. Too exhausted to even take off my shoes I let myself fall onto my bed, ready to go right to sleep even if it wasn't that late. I walk to my window to close the curtains as I take a glimpse out of it and see something a bit off, not just that my neighbour from across the street had finally closed his curtains during his evening yoga routine so you didn't automatically have to watch him stretch when you looked out the window but also a strange light blinking on and off in the flat above. It didn't look like there was just one bulb broken, it didn't look normal to me. Maybe on every other day I would have been more worried about it trying to find out what was going on, but today has just been too much for me, for sure it really is just a broken lamp.

24 hours later and that thing still wouldn't stop, I mean come on how difficult is it to change a lightbulb, I'm certainly not some perfectionist, who wants every thing to be in order, but if I have to watch that one single hour more I'm going to freak out. Is it rude to walk over there and tell whoever lives there to fix their lamp? I'm not that sure about that and definitely not in the mood to have

another conversation today, but I have to do something. So I decide to do the probably creepiest thing one could do in that situation, I'm going to slip them a little note under their door in which I of course very politely point out to them that their lamp needs fixing. That isn't creepy, is it? It's just the most practical way to solve the problem, I mean isn't it actually really nice of me? It is nice of me, maybe I should even offer a solution, since the person obviously doesn't know one himself.

I boot up my computer and search on the internet about lights blinking, directly I get passed on to some craftsmen or life hack sites as expected but there's one that catches my attention called "How to learn Morse code". Could it really be that, was it possible that someone tried to communicate over morsing? Probably not, I should just finish the note and hand it over. Who knows how to signal in Morse code anyway, nobody, right? But what if? No, that has to be my mind playing tricks on me and even if, it was probably nothing important. Just as I was about to step out of my door, my gut somehow tells me not to and instead I click on the link, it's probably nothing, but learning Morse will for sure be useful again sometime and besides it doesn't hurt and I have no other plans for the evening yet anyway. It's actually quite hard, a whole hour later and I still can't tell the different signs apart and feel like I haven't made any progress until now. But now that I've already wasted one hour, I'm definitely not giving up. Another hour goes by and I think that I'm really slowly getting it now. I stand at the window my printed Morse alphabet firmly in my hand and determined to find out whatever's going on here to finally stop this flood of thoughts and worries rushing through my head. Three short, three long, three short. I do know what that means, it means "Help!".

After finding out about the rest of the words, I tried to communicate with whoever was over there, no answer just the same words over and over again: "Help! I am not alone, you are not alone. There is a stranger in the dark." At first I told myself that I must have made a mistake, but I didn't, the following day as soon as the sun had set the light would blink the exact same words. Even though it frightened me almost as much as the message itself I gathered up all my courage and went to the police.

As soon as I was standing in front of the building I nearly just turned around and walked the other way, but I had to remember it wasn't just about me, there was someone in this flat needing help, needing my help. For everyone else going to the police would have been just the logical thing to do, but for me that was actually hard. But I did and I told two officers what I had seen, they took some notes and promised that I wouldn't have to worry cause they'd handle it and I went home with the feeling everything would be alright. Little did I know how everything would turn out.

The following week I didn't waste a thought on the person in the window, the situation was in good hands, the police would find out what's happening there and help the person and the moment I got a call from the police station I was absolutely sure they just wanted to inform me that everything had been solved, but instead the following words felt like a punch in my face. I should come to the station again to answer more questions, so I went there just for being kept asking questions, but not the ones I expected.

"Are you sure that you didn't just dream, it could be possible, right?" "Did you drink anything alcoholic that night?", "Do you know that a false testimony is a crime as well?" I couldn't believe it, they didn't trust my words, they didn't believe me. "You see, we checked the flat, nobody has been living there for ages and it really looked like we were the first there in a long time, we saw no indications at all that there are people in this flat." My head was spinning, my ears were ringing and I felt like throwing up, I didn't know what to do, so I just told them what they wanted to hear, that I had seen a horror movie before and just had a bad dream, everything just to get out of there.

On my way home for the first time in the last years I felt the urge to speak to my mom or to friends, but I don't really have friends, you know. I felt scared and even though I always have been alone a lot of the time, for the first time in forever I felt alone. And that leaves me here.

I'm sitting in the bus just staring at my hands, so I don't accidentally lock eyes with somebody. At the moment I want to go home more than ever, I have overcome myself with going to the police fearing they wouldn't believe me and guess what they don't, they think I'm just some stupid little girl who doesn't know anything about the world. I know something isn't right at all. Someone is watching me, I don't know why but suddenly I get goose bumps all over my body, I don't exactly see anyone watching me I just feel it.

The next stop comes and the doors open, I don't care if I have to walk that extra mile, there's no way I'm staying on that bus. He's still here, the stranger is still following me, my mind racing, my hands shaking I keep quickening my steps until I begin to run. Do you know it when it feels like your life is running backwards? I run faster and faster, forcing myself through crowds of people and pushing one or the other pedestrian out of the way but still everything around me goes in slow motion, every time I try to increase my speed I get slower and slower as if my pursuer is pulling me straight towards him. My heart is pounding in my chest and I don't think I can breathe properly anymore, well I guess that's what I get for not joining the athletics team in high school.

I turn quickly into an empty side street, hoping that nobody has seen me, my head goes crazy, fear fills every pore of my body and I'm actually just waiting for the moment where I either faint or get found. Surprisingly enough neither of them come true, I could have sworn I wouldn't be coming home today but after a good hour, more half than fully conscious, I try to put my thoughts in order and somehow manage to calm the flood of them with a nursery rhyme which I still know as well as I did in first grade.

The next days I rarely leave my home, up until the point where I feel disgusted by only the thought of frozen pizza and normally that's just impossible, cause let's be honest if you can't eat pizza anymore, it's bad. And it is bad, I skipped all of my classes, not that that's the most shocking or important thing, but still, I didn't exactly see anyone except my favourite characters on my laptop screen and slowly I think I have a problem. Okay, it's obviously not healthy and the longer I stay in the more I convince myself that I'm just 100% overreacting, the police didn't find anything and that means that there is nothing to worry about, right? Right, I just have to be logical and logically it's probably more dangerous to not leave the house for so long than the risk that someone may be after me.

So today I get up on time for my classes, make myself some coffee but without milk as I have none left and prepare myself mentally to answer 100 questions of the tuna guy about where I have been. I step out of my front door as I see a little package on the doorstep in front of me. I don't remember ordering anything, but since I don't want to be late the first day back, I just take it and put it on the table in my apartment. Strangely enough I notice that the package is not sealed properly at all, maybe the postman has looked in briefly, but since it is almost open anyway I can take a look at it as well. There is a book inside the package.

Normally I would have been incredibly happy about it, but I hadn't ordered it and I didn't know anybody else who would give me such a present, let alone just put it in front of my door, carefully I take out the beautiful old edition of "Alice in Wonderland". I had always wished for one like this but the way it looked it had cost a fortune, when I open it all words get stuck in my throat, all pages have been ripped out. All but the last and on the backside there is a message, the ink seemed almost still fresh. "You are not alone." That's it, that's enough.

If the police won't do something, I will and so I decide to get to the bottom of these things and if I had to do it myself. And no, I am definitely not one of those heroes in every Hollywood blockbuster who is incredibly brave and doesn't need help from anyone, no honestly this is probably the most stupid thing I could do and I do need help, there is only one problem, I have no one. But if I don't solve this now I think I will lose my mind. I'm most definitely going to regret doing this.

I quickly throw on my jacket and panic looking for the pepper spray that should be somewhere in my apartment, emphasis is on should be because I can't find this damn thing, my mother had been pushing me for ages to buy one and now I have one and can't find it. I discover it for whatever reason in my kitchen, leave my apartment and quickly run out of my house to the other side of the street and just as quickly jump into the elevator to the 3rd floor, the reason I hurry so much is to have no chance to change my mind and back out. The elevator makes a small ringing sound as a sign that it has arrived and I am just one step away from turning around and running in the opposite direction, but I pull myself together and step by step I walk towards the apartment door, which has been cordoned off by the police with a yellow barrier and I step carefully under the barrier.

Now I am standing directly in front of the door, I take another deep breath, try to pull myself together as good as possible and slowly open the unlocked door, more or less ready to face whatever I would see in a moment. Nothing. That was just not possible, there had to be something here but when I enter the apartment, I see nothing but a single dusty armchair that had its best days long ago. With the spray in my hand I take a closer look at the other rooms, I find a completely dusty water tank covered with cobwebs and an empty bookshelf that has been broken for a long time. Could it really be that nobody had been in here before the police arrived, it sure looked like it, nobody could have entered the apartment and left so few traces.

I was left with no air to breathe, I don't know if I should be relieved because I found nothing bad or be disappointed because I took another step away from an explanation, I know I was not just dreaming I had the book in my hand a few minutes ago. I need to get out of here and collect my thoughts. What's wrong with me? I let myself drop on the steps in front of the house and bury my head in my hands. A single raindrop runs down my face, the sky has begun to close in and dark clouds have pushed themselves in front of the sun.

As I sit there I suddenly discover a small piece of paper under one of the stones next to the stairs, I think about it for a second, then I pull it out from under the stone and unfold it. A few more minutes in the rain and you wouldn't have been able to read it, but this way the ink was a little blurred but still very legible, if I didn't know better, I'd say that this note was written in my handwriting and then I read it. "I am not alone. You are not alone. We have each other, everything else doesn't matter."

I don't understand, what should that even mean? My hands tremble and grasp the note in my hand as firmly as if they wanted to check that it is really there, it is. A sound escapes my mouth and I don't know myself whether I am laughing or crying. All this time it has been me, I was my own stranger in the dark. All my life I was so proud that I had done everything on my own, turns out I never was on my own. Nothing else matters but us. I get up and without even looking back, I walk towards Garry's car, Garry is some guy who comes around here from time to time to do business, don't ask me what kind.

The good thing about Garry is that he never locks his old truck and usually even leaves the keys in it, probably because this piece of junk isn't worth a penny anymore. I haven't seen him in many days so I'm assuming he's either dead or finally had enough of his crappy car, either way lucky for me. Starting the engine, I drive off without wasting a single thought about my previous life so far with the radio playing "Help!" from the Beatles as if it was laughing at me. "*Help me if you can, I'm feeling*

*down and I do appreciate you being 'round. Help me get my feet back on the ground. Won't you please, please help me?"*

How strange the world is.