

Nights Like These

By Michelle Pugh

I always thought “go towards the light” was just a saying, something Christians invented to push their agenda of heaven. I found it hard to believe that, in your dying moments, you would see some sort of path, guiding your way to death. But here I was, and there was the light. I sat there for at least five minutes, just staring at it and contemplating. The edges of my vision were dark and the forest swayed around me. I felt the rough tree bark against my back, digging into my already aching spine. My body hurt everywhere. But I wasn’t quite ready to go.

I wondered how I had ended up here in the first place. My memory had never been great but now it seemed like it was failing me at the most crucial moment. I didn’t remember entering the forest. Not how, not why, not even when. I had a vague idea of what had hurt me so badly. A beast, a monster I had never seen or heard of before. Like a bear, but somehow... not.

The light had grown closer and brighter. If I didn’t go to it, I wondered, would it come to me?

I woke to a nudge. Brennan was already fully dressed, adjusting his cuffs by my side.

“Going to work,” he said. “I got up early and made pancakes. Help yourself. Are you feeling better?”

I rolled over to glance at the clock and winced. Pain rippled up my back. My reaction was enough of an answer for him. His face fell. “I’m sorry, baby,” he murmured, leaning in to kiss me goodbye. I stared at the ceiling, unmoving, as he left.

Where was the light from my dream?

Some of my most peaceful hours were while Brennan was at work. It wasn't that I didn't love spending time with him— he was one of the sweetest people I knew, and my closest friend— but it was nice to get time to myself, to sit by the window, watch the cars go by, and just write. Sometimes I worked on my novel. Most of the time, though, I just put a pen to paper and let my mind take me away. Prose flowed from my hand as easily as water from a tap, spilling across the pages, creating an ocean of another world.

Around noon, I found myself leaning against the bathroom sink, examining the state of my face. A large welt spread across my left cheek where I had been hit the night before. My lip was split down the middle, dried blood painting it a dark brick color. Less recent bruises stretched down my jaw. I blinked at the woman in the mirror. There was a reason she never left the house. There was a reason she sat at her desk writing all day instead of going out to lunch with her friends. I let my fingers run across my injuries. Makeup couldn't hide this.

Tiredly, I stripped naked, turning away from the mirror to examine my back. The heavy bruising scared me. It had been bad before. Not this bad. Last night's events flashed in my mind, the familiar scent of whiskey, the coaxing and pleading. My refusal had been met with the usual: whimpering, begging, eventual anger. Something had happened at work that day, though, because suddenly, he wasn't just upset with me; he was entitled to me. The roughness of his hands still lingered atop my skin, propelling me back against the wall. My bruises burned with the memory of that impact, my ears with the closeness of his breath. But the worst of the night was still to come.

It hurt to think about. I reclined myself and returned to my desk, shoving headphones deep into my ears and cranking the volume up to max. For the rest of the afternoon, I couldn't hear myself think. As a result, I didn't write a single word.

I thought it was probably better this way, though.

He came home that night, kissed me, and cooked me dinner. We ate together, laughed. After dinner, we watched *Friday the 13th*. I hated horror movies, but it was Brennan's night to choose. So I didn't get scared, Brennan pointed out any screw-ups the moviemakers had made. He cracked jokes. When he saw me shrinking in fear, he took my hand and pulled me close to him. When the credits rolled, he took care of me, gently massaging my back and tending to my injuries. I fell asleep curled up in his arms.

This was what made it the hardest. Nights like these.