

The Visitor

Matt's eyelids parted slowly and heavily, the subconscious activity in his mind drifted quickly away and left him confused and groggy. He blinked erratically and waited for the fog of sleep to clear, and for his eyes to adjust to the darkness. He took a deep breath and felt that his throat was scratchy and he grunted quietly out of reflex, still not in full control of his actions. He squinted and stared out at his surroundings, they felt familiar to him, but yet unfamiliar at the same time, and in those initial waking moments he wasn't exactly sure where he was.

Matt laid on his back, on a thin foam mattress, looking up at the raised ceiling of his small pop up camper. The ceiling and walls of the camper were made up of a thick canvas, but as the light reflected by the moon made its way down to the surface, it caused the brownish material to look thin and faded. Matt turned his head to the side, and shapes began to materialize inside the space where he had been sleeping just a moment before. The outline of a battery-powered lantern sat on a counter, a plastic pail and shovel sat by the door, and a heap of blankets in a pile on the opposite bunk, were silhouetted in the dim light, and all at once he remembered where he was.

Matt sighed heavily and pushed his head into his pillow.

It was his family's annual camping trip with his in-laws, and as always they were staying at a campground near Duck Lake, the place where his wife's family camped every year since her father was a small boy. It was a trip Matt usually enjoyed, a trip that brought his kids together with their grandparents, a trip that brought his wife together with her sister, and a trip where

many good times had been had in the past. But at this moment it was not where Matt wanted to be.

He thought about how he wished he could have spent the weekend in his air conditioned house, relaxing in his favorite chair, and sleeping in his own bed, a bed that he could almost hear calling his name at this moment. A heaviness filled his chest. He was so tired. The kind of tired that made you feel on edge and anxious, and all he wanted to do was to get some uninterrupted sleep to recharge mentally and physically.

“Why does this keep happening?” Matt thought to himself.

His frustration overflowed momentarily and his brain held a silent scream.

He wasn't enjoying the trip this year. In fact he was annoyed with it, annoyed with everything about it, from his father-in-law's good natured ribbing that he usually took in stride, to the camper's cramped sleeping space and foam mattress that was one step above sleeping on the ground. He was even annoyed with his own family, and he hated that he felt that way. It wasn't their fault that he couldn't get a good night's rest. There was something bigger, some power in the universe that must have a vendetta against him this vacation, and whatever that power was it had struck again on this night.

The days leading up to the trip had been filled with late nights after a storm ravaged southeast Michigan, and Matt, a journeyman lineman for the last five years, had been called out to help restore power to the almost two hundred thousand homes that had lost electricity. He worked sixteen hour days in ninety degree heat, with a humidity that pushed the heat index

up into the hundreds. It was pretty typical weather for Michigan in late July, but it was brutal for Matt and his crew, who were forced to work in the conditions for four days. It wasn't until another storm hit that the heat wave broke, but even in that there was bad news as the second storm interrupted service to another thirty thousand customers.

Matt spent more than a week pulling wire and setting new poles to restore power. It was good work that he enjoyed, and the storm time paid well, but that didn't make up for the toll the work took on his body. At night he and the other men in his crew would grab dinner and head to whatever the closest motel was to grab a quick shower and five hours of sleep before they had to get back out there to do it again the next day. Until finally, after an almost inhumane nine day stretch, the storm work ended on a Thursday, just in time to hitch up the camper and get the family on the road Friday morning for a long extended weekend camping trip.

Had the storms hit a day or two later it would have surely been a non-issue, there would have been no way that he would have made it back for the trip. But as each home was restored, and the residents rejoiced, it became clear to Matt that he may actually be done in time.

On the phone that Wednesday night he almost told his wife Meg to tell her family they weren't going to make it this year. He said to her, "I don't know dear, we may have a couple more days of work left here, I'm not sure we'll be done in time." Although he knew full well it was looking like the work was going to wrap up soon, most likely the next day.

When Thursday came and he called her again to tell her that they had finished early, he wanted to bring up the possibility of still not going, but Meg either didn't hear the exhaustion in his voice, or choose to ignore it, because she was instantly elated that it had worked out perfectly and that they could still make the trip. "Yeah, perfect," Matt had repeated over the phone, his voice lifeless and flat. She told Matt about how the boys had been making plans all week to go fishing and climb the giant hill of sand and go swimming and play on the beach. She said Jackson, their oldest son, had even been praying that his dad would get done working in time for them to go. Matt realized his wife and kids were so excited for the trip, how could he say no?

Matt closed his eyes. He was aggravated by his body's unwarranted decision. He rolled onto his side trying to figure out what had caused him to wake this time.

The previous night it had been raccoons, storming the campsite like navy seals. They began to rummage through food and garbage that Matt and his family had mistakenly left out. Matt had to get himself out of bed and chase off the masked bandits and clean up the mess they had left behind, but his sleep that night was ruined, and it began to catch up to him the next day as his eyes slid closed any chance they got. Once while sitting on the beach watching his two boys play in the water, once while lying on a blanket after lunch, and a third time when he was sitting in his camping chair next to the fire. But each time it looked like he might be granted a short nap, his wife, or his boys, or his father-in-law griping about the fire being too low, and telling Matt to put on another log, would snap him back to life.

This night however, Matt directed everyone to be more careful, making sure any and all food was stored in Rubbermaid bins and that garbage was taken to the camp's dumpster.

Matt parted his lips and inhaled deeply then exhaled through his nose. His other senses began to explore the surroundings. Outside the late evening dew had set in and caused the pillow where his head lay to feel cool and damp, as well as the air around him to feel moist, the way it does on so many of those cool summer nights. The interior of the camper smelled musty, like the basement of his grandmother's home in the country, and it was as still and quiet as that subterranean room as well.

Matt hadn't thought of his grandmother in years, and even though the thought took him by surprise, it was what happened next that got his heart pumping.

In the next instant, before the warmth of his grandmother's memory could take hold, the silence inside the camper was broken, and a strange sound invaded the space. Unlike before when he first awoke, Matt's eyes opened quickly this time, and froze in their sockets. He could feel his muscles become tense and he could feel the vein in his neck begin to throb, something that happened to him when his blood pressure was on the rise.

The noise had caught Matt off guard and all at once appeared to fill the old camper. He couldn't tell what was causing the sound or where it was coming from. He could see nothing, no reason for the intrusion.

“What is that?” Matt thought and he tried to concentrate on the noise, straining his ears in an attempt to pinpoint the location of the source, but it felt as if it were coming from everywhere all at once.

It was not an overbearing sound, and did not seem to disturb the other residents who were still sound asleep, but at the same time it quickly began to feel as if it were closing in on him, like the way the suffocating air in an elevator feels to someone who is claustrophobic. Matt became restless. His thoughts wavered between his well-being and his curiosity. He felt safe in his bed, under his protective layer of homemade quilts and afghans. But was this sense of security merely a product of the warmth he felt underneath them? A spark of concern for his family flickered in his mind and then began to grow as his imagination amplified his torment. His alarm caused the noise in the darkness to take on an unnerving tone.

“Is it getting louder?” Matt thought.

Putting his apprehension aside, Matt realized he could lie still no longer and cautiously he reached over the side of the bed. After a slight hesitation, he rapped his knuckles against the wood paneling near the floor of the camper.

The noise stopped.

For a moment the camper fell silent again and Matt lay still with his arm dangling over the edge of the bed, and he thought briefly, that maybe that was going to be the end of it. But in his next breath the sound again arose. Matt struck the paneling once more, this time

however, the noise merely paused for a short time, and then defiantly continued almost as soon as the sound of his knuckles against the wood had diminished to silence.

Sinking back down into his pillow, Matt looked up at the glowing canvas and sighed. He was so tired. The night before the attack by the raccoons, one of his sons, Alex, the younger of the two, had crept over across the camper to his parents bunk. Matt instinctively woke up and twitched with surprise at the silent pair of eyes staring at him in the dark.

“What’s the matter?” Matt whispered. His heart rate quickly accelerating from it’s at rest pace.

“I had a bad dream,” Alex’s replied timidly.

Matt got up, and with his hands on Alex’s shoulders, urged his five year old back into his bed. Matt sat next to him for what seemed like an hour, although it was probably more like ten minutes. It was unfamiliar territory for Matt. His wife usually took care of things like bad dreams. There are certain things that just require a mother’s touch, a mother’s caring, and Matt wasn’t sure what he should do. But his presence alone seemed to be enough for Alex and he soon fell back to sleep. Matt however, climbed back into his bed and laid there awake for most of the rest of the night.

And now here he was again, awake in this camper, as if the space itself held a grudge against him to keep him from sleep.

Matt sighed and reached down, pulling the covers off his legs and feet, and began to shift his weight to step down out of the warm bed. The camper groaned and creaked against

his shifting weight as he maneuvered himself to the edge of the slide out bunk. He stood and stabilized himself against the camper's slight pitch, taking care to make as little noise as possible to not wake the others, especially his sons in the bed on the opposite side under the heap of blankets.

Matt reached down and grasped a long black metal flashlight. He had set it on the bench next to himself before he retired for the evening, and now it felt cool in his hand as he made his way for the door. His migration caused the camper to creak even more, even though he tiptoed lightly, as if he were walking on eggshells.

He pointed the flashlight down and turned it on in short bursts, again not wanting to wake anyone, but needing to find his sandals that lay on the floor by the entrance. The orange light illuminated the dull black soles of his flip-flops against the glossy beige linoleum floor and Matt slipped them on one at a time.

The noise had stopped, but Matt was convinced it was not far removed. He set down the flashlight and leaned over, pushing the latch of the camper door with his right hand and then adding force against the door with his left. While still holding the latch he pushed and pulled simultaneously to open the reluctant camper door as quietly as possible. The door made a "thunk" sound, like a single beat on an out of tune drum, as it swung out of its metal frame and into the moonlight.

Matt picked up the flashlight, clicked it on, and a beam of light shot out, invading the darkness. He moved the beam back and forth scanning the campsite from the door of the

camper with an uneasy feeling. The light rolled over grass and dirt, sticks and rocks, and came to rest a few feet away on a tree stump directly in front of the door. The tree stump looked eerily black in the light, and Matt studied it. He looked it over, from the velvety moss around the bottom to the convex mushrooms growing out of the top, before he emerged from the camper.

The pop-up seemed relieved of its burden as Matt stepped out and into the cool night air. He turned and lightly closed the door behind him. Then, panned the beam of the flashlight to his left and right, surveying the area in all directions looking for anything out of the ordinary. The noise was again audible, and had a crackling quality to it, like someone running their hand over aluminum foil. Only now outside the camper, the sound was muffled, and it was not all encompassing any longer as it had been on the inside.

Matt turned around and took a step back from the door. He bent down to one knee, placed a hand on the ground, craned his neck to the side, and focused the beam of light into the shadows. The light illuminated every obscurity as he scanned the camper's undercarriage from one end to the other, but the light showed nothing but thin grass poking up through sandy gray earth at all points.

"What is making that noise?" Matt thought and pressed his lips together. Taking in what the light showed him Matt was conflicted between concern and relief. As much as he wanted to know what was causing the noise, he was also anxious about what he might find.

Matt stood and his mind began to wander, the way a child's imagination will wander and get the better of him in a dark bedroom while he tries to sleep. His thoughts became exaggerated and Matt had to force himself to start walking.

He made his way around the camper, taking care as to where each step landed. At the corner of the opposite side he stopped. White moonlight clung to everything he saw as he peered out into the open space of the campsite, his heart still in his throat. He noticed that the shadowy leaves on trees that surrounded him did not move a whisper, and the stillness caused a chill to go down his spine. He took a breath and washed the terrain behind the camper with his light. Then, grudgingly, he commanded his sandals to move into the space where the light had preceded him. He again bent to a knee, hunched down, and flashed the light underneath.

Once more the noise stopped.

In the silence Matt craned his neck further in an attempt to gain the best vantage point possible, but he could not bring himself to place his head directly under the camper to look up into the metal frame for fear of what might come out. He frowned and wondered for a moment, and then again the noise started.

Matt screwed up his face and mumbled some obscenities under his breath as he stood in frustration. All at once his apprehension changed to annoyance, and he began heatedly painting the side of the camper with the light from the flashlight. He shined it across the big green letters that spelled out 'VIKING', down to the fresh water hose protruding out along the

bottom, and then over to the electrical hookup where he stopped, and something caught his eye.

The electrical hookup was a long black extension cord that snaked out of the camper through a hole in the side. The hole was encompassed with a pattern of six plastic fins that surrounded the cord as it exited the camper. Matt approached the hole and carefully inspected the fins. One of them seemed smaller than the others and its edge was jagged. Matt leaned in closer and noticed small white pieces of plastic lying inside the hole, like crumbs of bread, and just like that he had a revelation.

Matt stood, walked around to the front of the camper, and pulled on the handle of the door. The door made little sound when it opened this time, but the trailer groaned with objection when his first step inside was taken. With the flashlight still on, Matt hunched down beside the bench on the opposite wall from the door where he had just entered. He was ready to put his new insight to the test, but just at that moment a dark figure rose from the bed to his left.

The movement caused Matt to shudder, and he had to place a hand on the floor to stop from falling back. But he immediately recognized his folly and held out a reassuring hand to his wife.

Meg never spoke. Her shadow merely slouched back down to one elbow and gave Matt a perplexed look that he couldn't see in the darkness.

With his heart pumping like a steam engine now, Matt put his head down, grinned, and thought to himself, “Well there went two years I’ll never get back.”

After catching his breath, Matt gathered his wits, and then quickly got back on task. He raised the cushion on the bench to reveal a wooden panel underneath. The wood looked surprisingly new and out of place in the old camper, the one thing that probably still looked as good as when the original owner had bought it. At the corner of the panel was a hole that Matt then stuck his finger in and used as a handle. He pulled until the wooden panel rotated along its hinge, and exposed a storage space. Once open Matt deliberately pulled his hand back and wiped the sweat from his palm on the sleeve of his shirt, before he aimed the beam of the flashlight into the opening letting the light flood in to fill the space.

The storage area contained the inside of one wheel well, the camper’s water tank, tubing running from the water tank to the sink next to the bench, and a black electrical cord coiled in loops next to the water tank. Matt’s gazed panned from the front of the storage area to the back and stopped when it came to the hole where the electrical cord was fed through and going outside. Standing at that hole, with its rear legs standing on the floor and its front legs stretched into the hole, was a small, gray, mouse.

The mouse turned its head to look up at his discoverer, its black eyes innocent and wondering, its pink ears at attention, and its long tail curled slightly and pointing in Matt’s direction. Matt was taken aback. He furrowed his brow and focused on the mouse’s probing black eyes. There was something about the way they glistened in the light that drew Matt in. They were warm and honest and Matt found himself frozen and unable to look away.

For a moment time stood still. The scene felt surreal, as the shadows around Matt faded and the sound of the outside world left his ears. All that remained were Matt and this creature suspended in the orange haze of the flashlight. The mouse never moved. It never blinked. It just stared back at him, as if it knew something that Matt didn't.

Maybe it was his lack of sleep, or his mind playing tricks on him, but Matt began to sense a connection, like an intertwining of souls. He could feel the mouse, could sense what it was thinking, and he understood. As much as Matt needed sleep, this late night intruder was just looking for food, and Matt felt sympathy for the animal, and it seemed as if the mouse felt sympathy for him as well, and they shared a sort of camaraderie, each being interrupted from what they desired. It was a moment that lasted no more than twenty seconds, an uneventful, unremarkable moment to the outside world, but in that time Matt embodied the meaning of empathy.

And then the moment passed. It was just a mouse after all, and it was loose in his camper.

Matt's wry smile turned to a frown and he reached into the storage space with the flashlight, and wielding it like a club, brought the head end down on the floor lightly near the mouse's rear legs. The surprised rodent darted through the hole, but stopped short, and its tail still remained visible through the hole, and the movement seemed to indicate confusion.

Matt could almost hear the mouse thinking, "Why would you do that after the moment we just shared?"

But he didn't linger on the thought, Matt swung the flashlight again, this time closer to the hole nearly hitting the mouse's tail, and the mouse scurried down the black electrical cord and dropped into the grass under the camper. In the next instant the mouse vanished into the brush near the campsite, headed on his way to look for his next encounter.

Matt stared at the hole in disbelief, that brief moment that had just taken place when the two had locked eyes hung in his mind like a cloud, almost as if it were a dream and not reality. He took a moment to compose himself and then opened the cabinet door below the sink that stood adjacent to the storage space. Using the flashlight to investigate, he saw what had been causing the noise all along. Inside the cabinet, a wrinkled yellow potato chip bag, with a hole in it, sat next to a mess of chip crumbs mixed with shrapnel from the bag itself. A crack between the storage space and this cabinet had provided the nocturnal intruder a path to his dinner. And the cabinet provided the perfect speaker to echo the sound, magnifying its loudness and intensity. Matt frowned initially, but then grinned with his next heartbeat. He knew the mess would need to be cleaned up.

"But not tonight," he thought.

He exited the camper, found the hole where the mouse had entered, and stuffed an old towel in it, to deter a repeat visit. Then, as discreetly as possible, Matt got back into the camper and closed the door, similarly to the way he had opened it. He looked around and saw that his wife was again lying down and that his children still had not moved, oblivious to the evening's activities.

“Thank goodness,” Matt thought. He slipped off his sandals and got back into bed, sliding between the covers next to his wife.

“What was that all about?” Matt heard Meg whisper as she placed an arm around his body.

“Nothing,” Matt whispered back. “Go back to sleep. I’ll tell you about it in the morning.” Meg pulled him close and murmured an unworried sigh of contentment and then was quiet.

Matt lay on his side with his eyes open and stared out at the motionless shadows as he had done when he first awoke. He listened intently, his ears on high alert for any other sound he felt was out of the ordinary. But the only sound he heard now was the one coming from the crickets outside, which he had not noticed earlier.

The insects chirped in unison under the moonlight and their combined instruments became like an orchestra that echoed into the night. The symphony that rang out was surprisingly soothing and immersed Matt’s senses. He felt himself letting his guard down and his apprehension easing.

He pulled up the blankets, tight to his neck, and listened, letting the outside melody infect him, like a cup of hot coffee warming him from the inside. And soon Matt found that the effects were causing his eyes to get heavy and his breathing to become steady.

Matt thought about his encounter with the mouse one last time, thought about him in an almost animated way, imagining the mouse in the aisle of a grocery store surrounded by

cheese. The thought brought a smile to Matt's face, it was a peaceful thought, and it was his last thought, before he aptly drifted off, back to sleep.

The End