

When we turn from light

By Valerie Yeung

Darkness always gave me the hair-raising creeps. In darkness, there hides many unknowns. Humans get scared by things beyond our control, unbeknownst and incomprehensible to our minds. We would then start inserting our imagination into these gaps. That's probably where the ideas of monsters and ghosts came from.

I was very afraid of the dark when I was young. I would always be extremely cautious whenever I entered dark spaces at night. The voids of the unknown always seemed to spew menace and hunger. In my young mind, monsters thrive best in the dark. In any second, I dare not to look at the crevices of cabinets, or the looming gap of obscurity behind bathroom doors left ajar. I made sure all the lights were turned on before, so that I could feel safer without the worry of monsters in the dark lurking into my room while I drift to sleep. I stayed away from the dark, made sure that there was a distance between us so I could keep the fear at bay.

That time when my primary school made all the P.5 students go to an EQ training camp, there was one particular event that I had been dreading since I entered the campsite ---- the night-walk. The activity was going to be held on the third night, during which we had to walk solo through a short section of a trail along the hill next to our campsite. Right before the activity, we had a briefing session with one of the instructors in the program. I tried fitting every single word the trainer said into my memory as he told us the list of precautions. Afterwards, we followed him outside and headed towards the mountain together.

We stop before a crossroad. "From here onwards, you are going to proceed on your own," the instructor says. "Follow the paths that are lined with glowing sticks. Do not stray away from the designated trails."

I feel my muscles tighten. I look down at my fingers, and realize that they are shaking more than I expected them to. Next to me stands the class clown Charles, who is usually cheerful and bold. *Should be easy for him.* My gaze drifts upon his face, and to my surprise, his face is plaster-pale. It is as if blood has been drained out from his cheeks. He pushes his palms along his legs like I do when I wipe off sweat, and when he brings them back, his fingers shake. I open my mouth to ask him something, but the words don't come.

Someone taps my shoulder. It's the instructor. "Valerie. You're next," he says. He hands me a glowstick that is barely glowing. My stomach churns with anxiety. *This is it. The moment that I have been dreading the most.* I stare at the straw of life for a few seconds, then shut my eyes close while trying to swallow the fear down my throat.

"Hey, add oil," Charles pats my shoulder. He looks at me and gives me a reassuring smile, which makes me feel less anxious. "Yeah, you too," I say, breaking a smile as I set off into the shadowed trail. "See you on the other side!" I hear my classmates shout behind me.

The road ahead is pitch-black. The only sources of light around me are from the glowing sticks lining our designated route. I keep on walking, my hands tightly gripping onto the thin piece of glowing stick. With the limited illumination from the glowstick, I could barely see 5 inches before myself. As I proceed into the forest of trees, my classmates' chatters become more and more distant. Up till one point, I realize that I can no longer hear their voices.

I am alone.

A haunting chill electrifies my spine as the realization of solidarity occurred to me. *But I can't turn back now. I can only go forward.* I start pacing. There is no wind in the mountain, and the silence is deafening.

My mind frantically tries to search for ideas of comfort. *I can sing hymns.* I recall a few hymns from Sunday school and hum their cheery notes to myself as I brisk through the darkness. *God is here with me. God is here.* I repeat over and over to myself, soothing the crippling anxiety inside me as I make my way through the tall black trees.

“Hushshshshshshsh!”

Suddenly, a gust of wind rushes through the trees from nowhere, making the branches shake and roar violently. It is as if the whole forest has come alive. I can feel every piece of my hair standing up on my back as I hear the mountain roar in awakening. I shut my eyes close. I think of the smile Charles gave me. I think of the fact that my teachers and classmates are waiting for me at the end of the trail. *I will face it,* I take a deep breath, my sweaty palms gripping tighter on the piece of glowstick from my teacher, and focus my two eyes on the sparse glimmers of guiding lights on the ground as I forge ahead towards my destination.

Finally, I can hear distant streams of laughter and chatter. *At last.*

With a boost of hope, I sprint as fast as I can ahead towards the sound that I have been longing to hear for the entire time. My four classmates and my teacher are waving at me under a lamppost. With great relief, I run towards them and join their company.

“Congratulations! You finished the walk on your own,” says my teacher, hugging my shoulder with pride.

Shortly after, I see Charles also emerging from the shadows, marching towards us in triumph like a soldier coming back home from war. We cheer for him as he high-fives everyone. “Ayy we did it! It’s really not that scary,” said Charles. We all giggle together. My chest swells with glee and pride. *I did it.* A huge grin makes its way on my face. *I finally*

conquered my fear.

I returned home the next day, still feeling triumphant. When bed time arrived, my mom came in my room as usual and kissed me goodnight. Right before she left, I halted her at the door edge.

“What’s wrong dear?” she asked. I hesitated for a moment. “I...think I can sleep with the lights off this time,” I eventually said with determination. Mom looked surprised. She probably did not expect such a big transformation in her daughter after four days. “Seems like the trip really changed you for the better,” she smiled as she switched off the lights before closing the door.

I lied in my bed in the pitch-black darkness, staring at the ceilings. The room was quiet with a low, consistent buzz from the air-conditioner. I closed my eyes, my mind drifting back to the night before when I ventured into the wild alone at night, made my way through the dark mountains, carrying nothing but a piece of glowing stick. Now, I had returned to the darkness again. Except that for the first time, I realized that the fear that had haunted me for as long as I could remember is no longer there.

If I could survive through the wild mountains at night, what is there to be afraid of in this enclosed space? I chuckled to myself. After all, darkness is only jarring when left untouched. There is nothing else I can do to conquer my fear, except to face it. As I do, I shall hold tight of the light of empowerment from those I love and those who love me, and permit the fear to pass through and over me. And when it has gone past, I will observe the fear in my mind and study it with my experience. In the end, I will remain, stronger and wiser.

I nestled soundly my head into the pillow, drifting off to the rhythmic gallop of my

heartbeat. *Freedom at last.*