

Nyctophobia

By Luansian Llewellyn

Allie is afraid of the dark.

It was no secret. She'd been scared of the dark ever since I met her.

It wasn't a "normal" fear, either. Just straight up paranoia. Hell, she'd just turned 14 and still refused to sleep without a nightlight, like something was out to get her if she didn't.

So I wasn't surprised to see her excited over the flashlight she'd gotten for her birthday, just before we went on our annual camping trip.

It was bright yellow and altogether really boring, but she enthused about it the *entire* drive to the lake. If I'd known that was all it took to impress her, I'd have gotten her way less than 50 dollars and a card.

We arrived close to noon, and Allie's stepdad started setting up the camper where he'd be staying.

Instead of sitting and rotting in the sunlight, Allie and I decided we'd go find somewhere to set up our tent.

I vetoed everywhere near the lake. After the incident when my air mattress "accidentally" floated out onto the water and I woke up to a frog inches away from my face, I didn't like sleeping near that place.

Allie didn't want to sleep anywhere too close to the trailer because of the time her stepdad thought it'd be funny to jumpscare us at midnight (Spoiler: it was not funny).

Eventually, we settled on an area. A clearing just off the trail.

It was out of view of the campsite, making it look like we were surrounded by forest. Like *Survivor*, except in reality the site was a two minute jog away.

"Yo, check it out!" I exclaimed, pointing to the edge of the clearing. "A tire swing!"

Allie turned, arching an eyebrow. "That thing's twenty pounds away from snapping. It could hold our luggage at *most*." She signalled to the frayed rope.

"You're boring." I rolled my eyes, propping a foot on it. The swing nearly gave under my weight, branch creaking. "Agh! Okay, never mind. Maybe you're in the right." I stepped away. "Luggage holder it is."

Allie chuckled. "You brought the mosquito nets, right?" She glanced at me, hammering one of the tent pegs into the ground.

"Yeah, yeah. My mom put them in the bag." I leaned against the tire swing tree, but it didn't really shield me from the sunlight. "Bugs are gonna be bad this year, dude. You might have to deal with a mosquito bite."

She shuddered. "No way. Do you know how many *diseases* those things carry? Malaria, yellow fever, fil—"

"Filariasis, dengue, and a lot more," I deadpanned, quoting the exact speech she recited *constantly*. "We've been over this." I held up my arm, pointing to where I'd been bitten by a mosquito earlier in the summer. "It's not that bad. You're not gonna get Malaria."

She ignored me, checking over the tent she'd just finished setting up. "Looks like this is good to go. Thanks for the help, by the way." She shot me a look.

"My pleasure." I smiled back. She gave me a hand sign that definitely didn't represent gratitude, gaze drifting to the forest.

"You don't think there's anything in there, right?" she asked, an edge to her voice.

"What? You mean like bears or insane cannibals?" I shrugged. "One of those is. I mean, unless bears are out this time of year, too."

She threw a pinecone at me. "Not funny, Lizz." She made a face. "Seriously, you sleep like a log. What if a bear comes near us and I can't wake you up?"

"Leave me and run away in terror."

"Right, I forgot who I was talking to," she sighed, wiping her glasses on her shirt. "I'm gonna go get us soda. Can you set up the sleeping bags?"

"On it, boss." I waved as she left, pulling the sleeping bags into the tent behind me.

My mom had gotten us a new tent last year, since we'd accidentally torn a giant hole into the old one. This one was smaller, meant for two people instead of four, meaning no

more air mattresses. That was probably for the better. We'd have ended up popping them eventually.

I set the lantern up in the middle before flopping down on my sleeping bag.

Footsteps?

Footsteps. Yeah, those were definitely footsteps. Something like that, coming from the woods. Hikers, maybe?

They were drawing closer. I tensed.

I was about to yell at them to go away when they stopped abruptly.

Heavy breathing sounds. Loud and hitched. I couldn't tell if it was from their mouth or nose.

No, that wasn't a person. It couldn't be. Humans didn't breathe that loud, and humans didn't breathe like *that*. But it wasn't a bear, a bear would've been a lot louder.

The tire swing started creaking. It was slow and controlled at first, but it grew louder. Someone was pushing it, that couldn't be the wind.

I gulped, praying they'd go away. The creaking just got louder and more violent. The swing would snap any second. Were they *trying* to break it?

"The cream soda goddess arrives!" a voice called.

The swing stopped abruptly.

I heard footsteps racing back into the woods, faster than I could even comprehend. By the time they were completely out of earshot, the swing was still creaking.

The tent door unzipped, and Allie tossed me a can of soda.

"What's the deal?" she laughed. "You look like you just saw a ghost."

I didn't answer. Allie opened her can, raising an eyebrow at me.

"I think someone came up to the tent," I murmured after a few seconds, opening my own can. "Probably a hiker. I don't think they knew I was inside."

“Eugh.” Allie shuddered. “What’d they do? Just snoop around?”

“Pushed at the swing.” I took a sip of my pop. “Breathed really loudly, though. It was creepy.”

Allie tensed. “Breathed really..? Should we set up somewhere else?”

“Nah. We won’t have to worry about it tonight,” I assured her. “We’ve got the light. They won’t come by if they know we’re in here.” *I hope.*

To be fair, we were close to camp, and if the person – animal, *thing?* – was dangerous, they’d have attacked me already... right?

“If you say so.” Allie shrugged, taking another sip of pop. “We’re going swimming soon. Ready?”

I nodded. “Let’s not get covered in leeches this time.”

Allie beat me in a pool noodle dual, I flipped her inflatable donut over. Then we got covered in leeches and spent the evening peeling them off.

I bit into my burger. Allie was still preparing hers, leaving me alone to watch kids splash around in the shallows.

“I have arrived with *The Burger of*— Ew, are you sitting on the *grass?*” Allie came up behind me, then dropped a towel. “Move over.”

Sighing, I scooted over to let her set the towel up. She laid it out horizontally before sitting.

“C’mon, you’re gonna get bug bites!” She patted the spot beside her.

I rolled my eyes, sitting next to her.

“Did Mike manage to cook it right?” I asked. Her stepdad was terrible at using his portable grill. Two years ago he’d burned his hand on it, not to mention set three burgers on fire.

“Nope.” She removed the top bun to reveal a singed patty, coated in a layer of ketchup and mustard. I wrinkled my nose.

“Blegh. How do you eat that stuff?” Plain cheese was the only way to go. Allie grinned, shoving her burger closer to my face. I recoiled. “Ick – *ick!* Get it away!”

I swatted at her.

“You call *me* squeamish?” She laughed. I glared at her.

“There’s a mosquito on your arm.”

“Agh! Kill it! Get it off!” She shook her arm before realizing I was kidding. “Not funny. You know how many diseases those things carry?”

“Oh my god, I *know* the diseases.”

She snorted.

“Should we head back to the tent soon?” I asked.

“Sure. You checked the batteries in the lantern, right?”

“Yep,” I lied. They’d never been low before. Plus, I had more batteries in my bag, so I could just replace them before Allie woke up.

I should’ve checked the batteries.

I woke up to complete darkness. It took me a second to register that the lantern had turned off.

I waited for my eyes to adjust before I looked around. That’s when I noticed something... odd.

The tent was a mess. Allie’s sleeping bag was bunched up against the half-open door and torn mosquito net.

She was nowhere to be seen, neither was her flashlight.

Went back to the trailer, I concluded. It was my fault for not checking the batteries. But in my defense, they'd never been low before. Who knew this would be the *one* year they were?

"Ugh." I rubbed my eyes, standing up. I'd go back, too. This forest gave me the creeps, anyway. "Note to self; next year, don't set up here."

As I switched out the batteries in the lantern, I noticed Allie's glasses were still lying beside it.

Weird. I walked outside. That's when I saw the tire swing.

The bottom half was torn off and the branch had snapped, hanging at an awkward angle.

It took me a second to locate the tire itself. It was way deeper in the woods, lying on its side.

I squinted, making out what I could in the darkness. There were white lines along the side. Scratchmarks? Had a bear come by? Maybe the noise had woken Allie up.

I glanced around warily. Was it still around?

Something odd caught the moonlight. I rubbed my eyes, looking closer. There was something bright and yellow on the ground by the tire.

Allie's flashlight. It had to be. Broken and lying in the dirt.

"Allie?" I called into the night, worried now. "Allie?"

I racked through possibilities in my head, trying not to freak out. She could be back in the trailer, she could be perfectly safe. I was probably being paranoid.

"Allie?" I called again, louder this time. Silence. My gut twisted. "Allie, if this is a prank it's not funny!"

Still, there was nothing. I sighed. *I should probably just head to the trailer.*

That's when I heard a branch crack.

"Allie?" My voice shook. "Allie, is that you?"

Silence.

That's when the breathing started. Loud, hitched. Coming from the darkness. My heartbeat quickened. The breathing from earlier.

Back to the tent, back to the –

Footsteps.

Something grabbed my arm. I screamed.

"Lizzie – Lizzie, calm down." A familiar voice said. "It's just me."

"Allie! *There* you are!" I hugged her. "Where'd you go?"

"I just had to use the restroom – why are you freaking out?" she chuckled.

I raised an eyebrow, grinning. "You? Going in the woods at night? For some reason that's hard to believe."

"Oh. Well..."

"Doesn't matter. I'm just glad you're okay." I signalled to the broken yellow flashlight on the ground. "What happened there?"

She paled. "I, er, dropped it."

"Damn. Want to see if Mike can fix it?" I asked, reaching for the pieces. She hit my arm. Hard. A lot harder than I would've expected from her. "Ouch! Alright – okay!"

"Let's just go to bed," she insisted.

"You sure? The mosquito net's torn." I snorted.

"That's alright. It's just bug bites." She shrugged.

I glanced at her, and when she didn't say anything I laughed. She smiled, looking a little confused.

I climbed into the tent and flicked on the lantern. She cringed, then came in behind me, adjusting her sleeping bag.

"Just wake me up next time, dude. I thought you'd been abducted." I laid down on my sleeping bag.

"Okay," she responded quietly.

I pulled my blanket up, turning my back to her.

That's when the breathing started again. My heart stopped.

"Allie, wait. I hear it," I said, frozen. "The hiker —"

The lantern turned off.

Allie is afraid of the dark.