‘DON’T LOOK NOW’

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He wasn’t going to look around - there was nothing to look at. There was only darkness between the trees, but then there would be, it was well after sunset. And the little creaks and tiny rustles… mice and squirrels, maybe a stoat… there was nothing else out there.

“Things are only scary if you want them to be scary.”

William half-smiled at the thought. His old grandad used to say that when he tucked Will tightly into to bed after another of his childhood bad dreams.

‘Can’t even remember what they were about now’, thought Will, ‘least ways, it was usually something under the bed or inside the wardrobe…’

He focussed his attention on the meagre fire he’d made after scrapping aside the leaf-litter so it bedded on dry earth, surrounding it with a few rocks and stones for safety’s sake… not that he’d be going to sleep, not much anyway…

He shivered, not only from the chilly air. It was fair weather when he left the house, but knowing the moors like he did, he’d done the sensible thing and taken a small rucksack with water, socks, sandwiches, all the bits they told you you’d need, but never think you will… well he did now!

First the mist had come down suddenly, a wet mist that made the rocks slippery; then he’d turned his ankle, and as he fell, his compass shot out of his hand and landed lord knows where. Among the rocks and scrubby bushes, tussocky grass and layers of heather – he’d searched in vain… ‘you’d never believe something palm-sized could utterly vanish… like the bogles had stolen it!’ he grumbled to himself, feeding small twigs into the flames. He kept all his attention on the little camp-fire. After he hobbled off the tops, he’d found a small water course and followed it carefully – water always took the shortest way down, you could just as easily find yourself stepping off a cliff as following a convenient way-mark. The afternoon sun was vanishing by the time he grudgingly admitted to himself that he was lost – so much for a solar panel on your rucksack to power a ‘phone… that only worked if there was some bloody sun!

The stream had gently descended into a wooded combe, with only foot-high little falls dropping over the granite rocks. The trees here had thickened, which made it even darker, but the undergrowth had thinned under the canopy, which made walking a bit easier, especially now his ankle had started to swell. He had to have walked south, or it could be south-west… or did the water-table run south-east? He couldn’t remember and he’d left his map behind on the kitchen-table – after all… he wasn’t going that far, and it was a route he knew well… and ‘he was a bloody idiot!’ William could hear his grandfather saying it. He knew the old man wouldn’t have much sympathy ‘watch where you’re going, and where you’ve come from’, he’d say, but even if he’d not lived up to his Grandad’s advice, at least he’d remembered the old boy’s instructions as to how to make a camp-fire.

Night had dropped suddenly, and from hobbling in twilight, Will had rapidly gone to stumbling in darkness; at which point he’d finally admitted it was little use going on when he couldn’t see a thing. Even the stream had vanished; he missed the comforting burble that had kept him in the right direction – for all he knew he could be walking in circles… ‘no I couldn’t, it hadn’t felt uphill’ he thought. Nevertheless, and he really didn’t want to admit it… it was spooky out here… ‘No! It wasn’t!’ he told himself, it was just the moors, and woods, at night – that was all… but he wished the clouds weren’t so thick, there might be a bit of moonlight out there.

A twig cracked some distance behind him. He didn’t look – there was nothing to look at – and in the woods the sound could be from anywhere. Will wondered if he should get up and try to find some more dead wood for the fire. He’d pulled a big fallen branch over to sit on, and to break up and feed the fire, but… it was more comfortable to sit here among the tree roots and have the broad, sturdy trunk behind him. Crouching on the branch had felt vulnerable, and of course, he might have to burn it – better to settle with his back to the big old oak tree from the outset…

From the other side of the fire he heard a rustle.

‘I’m not going to look, it’s only a fox, or maybe an owl,’ he thought. He reached out to push more twigs into the flames… ‘better be careful, this has to last all night’.

He stretched out his hands to the warmth; leaning forward meant taking his back away from the security of the comforting tree-trunk behind him, which felt… weird. He leaned back. To his right, a bush moved briefly, as if something landed on a branch – ‘it’s only a wood-pidgeon roosting’.

To his left, a crackle of leaves and a tiny squeak – ‘it’s just a mouse’.

Beyond the edge of the firelight, another twig snapped – ‘I’m not looking, it’s only that fox, come to see what’s going on.’ Will focussed very hard on the little flames, the blackened twigs, the grey ashes, the hard ground beneath him, the rough, solid bark at his back…

“Funny, Grandad always used to say the goblins would get you if you spent the night out alone in the woods…’

And they did.