

Night Terrors  
by  
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I drive home late at night, squinting at the darkness before me. It is an absent night: absent of moon, absent of stars, a road absent of comfort. A dank, weighty blanket covers the ground and all who travel on it. My gaze shifts back and forth, like my windshield wipers, hunting for darker than dark shapes – a great shaggy moose with thunderous umbrella antlers, perhaps - that might challenge the path of my car. I long for the confidence of my youth, when nights like this thrilled me. But, my confidence is gone. I no longer see as well as I should.

A car comes, the driver switching his lights from bright to dim. I curse. I know I have to lower mine, too. I wait until after one warning flash from the oncoming driver and just a split second before I know he'll retaliate with his brights. I try to gauge how far I am from him, but my depth perception is a trickster on nights like this. This is not my daytime driving life where I see everything, exactly in its place, with both eyes.

I curse again, flinging epithets at the beast whose hardened foot found my eye thirteen years ago. I was lucky, they said. Lucky I could still see. The doctors nodded while they warned me about recurring cataracts. Nineteen times the needle went in and out of my drugged lid. The swelling didn't leave for over a year. Sometimes still, with a bad headache or a teary night, the eye becomes a tangerine in its socket.

I curse again and click my world darker.

I can't see the road. It's gone now, as on a hundred other nights just like this, when I try to stay home. I focus on the oncoming car's starred lights, trying to remember every nuance of the familiar road. My foot leaves the accelerator and hovers over the brake. Leaning forward, as if it really makes any difference at all, I begin to edge my car toward the near shoulder of the road.

I hold my breath.

The stars that are lights reach violently toward me and I swerve a little bit more, just to be sure. When I close my bad eye, the stars disappear, but I still can't see the road. I edge farther away.

The gravel from the road edge crunches under my tires, then then the oncoming car gallops past, gone, like a wild bronco.

I sit up, leaning back into the seat, and coax my car back onto the road. My foot finds the accelerator, and I flex my knuckles from their clench on the wheel.

Sucking air deep into my lungs, I reflect on that which led me to this dark space I never seem to leave. The doctors never told me about the panic that lives just under the surface of my skin on nights like this.

The End