

What is it about the dark that draws men in? Not all men, of course, at least not right away, but across our species, there's an incontrovertible tug about our hearts that compels us into the unseen.

I, for one, think it is not really the pull of darkness, but light. We go into the unknown to know it, into the darkness to light it up either with electricity or understanding. Yes, that's what we truly crave, the light of understanding, the comprehension of all things, and so we creep into the deepest caves, farthest shores, and most distant planets in order to penetrate that tantalizing blackness.

But sometimes, just a little understanding is enough.

It was this soul-deep pull that drew me into the forest just outside of town with nothing but a flashlight long after dark. I only intended on investigating a little ways, maybe an hour or two. I did not anticipate the flashlight dying on me, drowning me in the void.

Such nothingness! Such absolute lack! You can close your eyes, but you'll never come close to the experience because those eyes can be opened again. You must go where no light is possible to understand what it means to be in freefall while standing up.

Naturally, I tried to retrace my steps, but it was a vain effort. My groping hands could tell me the width and texture of a tree, my shoes the crunch of leaves and twigs, but none of this made for a compass. I admit fear came over me. Every leafy rattle of the wind was a bear come to feast on me. The goosebumps on my neck were spiders with poison teeth.

After many minutes of groping and imagining sight in the nothingness, I finally decided to sit by the next tree I could touch and stay there until dawn. It was a balmy night, I was tired, and wandering wouldn't make me any safer from wildlife than staying put.

Then just as I touched the scratchy bark of the sycamore that would mark my bed for the night, at last I saw a light. Just bright enough to illuminate the silhouettes of trees in the distance. It was a moving light, and my mind said it was a car moving too quickly, but at least that meant a road, which would mean more cars in the future. Yet as I made up my mind to feel my way to the road, the light turned and doubled back. Thinking myself fortunate, I stumbled faster, eager to grab the driver before he vanished.

I moved too slowly, but the forward-facing light turned once more. I thought the driver must be seriously lost, and it had to be a car because of the twin beams protruding from the blackness. Yet it was strangely fluid, turning this way and that on a dime without so much as the screech of a weary tire.

The light source was farther than I realized. Even as the ink of night began to melt into a chalky slate color, I could see the beams were still a ways ahead, their rays cutting long swaths as they turned to and fro on its redundant path. What was more, the light grew stronger with each step, far beyond the power of any car headlights. It was more like a twin lighthouse pushing away the night with each revolution, blinding me as it passed.

That was when I saw the light for what it truly was. Eyes. The radiance burned so brightly, so sharply, that the area around it burned a hazy gray, leaving the black outline of a koi fish swimming in the air. And it was not alone. Beyond the great creature, twice the size of any truck, more lights twinkled in the distance, too low and mobile to be stars. Some collection of beings, maybe, some great, ethereal aquarium of floating things, I will never know, for just as I came near, the great fish's eyes stopped on me.

I shielded my eyes against the blinding beam. The air around me crackled with energy, though without heat. Only a part of me shivered. The rest, well, that was the tug that demanded my feet keep walking, to see, to understand.

But the fish blocked my way. When I came near, he did not move. I tried to edge around him, but he flicked his tail to impede me again. Every which way I turned, he moved with me, the dizzying brightness forbidding me to gaze beyond him. When I tried for the fifth time to sidestep the gargantuan swimmer, his great head shook left and right, deliberate in his message. I knew then that this creature was no mere beast of instinct, but something intelligent, something warning.

So I turned back and followed the fish's long-reaching eyes as far as they would take me. When the light was spent, I slept next to a tree. In the morning, I found my way and drove home.

Why did I turn? After all my fascination for exploring the unseen, why did I not return in the morning, explore with a friend, or even wonder how such a thing or place could exist so near an established human residence? It is true that men desire to pierce the darkness, but a desire does not grant a right. My desire for a woman may be natural, but that alone does not make her mine for the taking.

I know quite little of what I saw that night, just a mysterious, floating fish with celestial eyes and an unknown, glimmering beyond. But when curiosity strokes my cheek, I recall the way the great koi shook his mustached head and I remember why I left. I do not know what lies beyond that luminous sentinel, but he let me know one thing: it isn't for me.