

An October Story
October 26, 2020
by Ruth Wood

It is 1 a.m., All Hallows Eve. Eliza lies in her bed and blinks awakened by the setting blue moon bathing her face in all its brightness. Her eyes adjust, she gives a fleeting thought to the old legends of the full moon on your face making you crazy, she turns over, faces away from the light, thinking sleep will surround her and draw her into dreams again. It does not.

As the days shortened, she had parted the curtains of the bedside window. Her alarm no longer the boisterous nasal nuthatch family storming the feeder at 4 a.m. but the dawning light gently growing to frame bare birch branches or snow-dusted boughs, soon flocked branches.

Eliza groans wishing she had remembered tonight's full moon would set so brightly in these early hours and thought to draw the curtains, but she had not. Within half an hour Eliza accepts that she will not sleep and careful not to bump Sam or let the bed creak, she slips from under warm covers and out of bed. Softly she walks over to the window and looks out— something she did every day, the natural thing to do or her first mistake?

The lake open yesterday had iced over as the temperatures dropped in the night. The full orb painted an enticing path across the lake. This combined light of the moon and the shimmering path speaks in a voice simultaneously soft, eerie, and beautiful. Her heart gripped in the vice of such beauty, Eliza could neither stay at the window nor crawl back into bed. Without even dressing, she creeps down the stairs counting the steps to avoid a stumble that might wake Sam. Bundling up, she steps outside. Half way down to the lake, she wonders whether she should have left a note or grabbed her phone, but she does not go back.

The leaves crackle beneath her feet, and she pauses to listen as she hears sounds in the woods— echoes of her steps, a branch cracking in the cold, or a small animal scurrying away? The small coating of frost on the boardwalk, slows her and seems to magnify the sounds of the forest. The dense dark black spruce swallows the moonlight, and Eliza welcomes the relief she feels as she steps out onto the dock and into the light.

Immediately an ‘Oh my Gosh!’ beauty surrounds her. Slowly she turns in a circle taking in everything before easing into the Adirondack chair to drink of the night. Her breathing slows; she inhales and exhales, clearing her mind so she can just be. After a few minutes, she no longer feels the cold, she no longer inventories the individual features of her surroundings. She has no conscious thought and is truly one with the night.

And, then a splash, not a single splash, but a splashing. Eliza has heard those sounds every time she watched one of her trail cam videos this month. Something is either swimming or walking in the water near the shore—traveling or hunting, the sounds are the same. The ice is brittle and thin. It would easily break under the weight of bear or moose, perhaps even crack under a fox or above a large salmon. But, the salmon run was over. There has been no sign of bear for over two weeks. Most likely a moose that will turn around as soon as it notices that she is there ... she tells herself.

The moonlight illuminates the whole lake to the east, but not the outlet in the southwest, and that’s where the splashing comes from. Eliza leans forward, squinting as she peers toward the outlet but sees nothing.

The splashing continues, getting closer and louder.

The splashing seems deliberate. Ridiculous! What wild creature, whether hunting or traveling, would want to announce their presence to other animals?

Still, Eliza sees nothing.

Splash! Crack! Swirl! Flicker! ... Splash! Crack! Swirl! Flicker! The sounds grow louder, closer ... Splash! Crack! Swirl! Flicker!

A paw or hoof rising and falling or a swishing tail?

Splash! Crack! Swirl! Flicker!

Wait! is that a large, dark shape discernible in the distance or her imagination creating something?

Splash! Crack! Swirl! Flicker!

Yes, the animal slowly emerges not fully illuminated in the dimmer light near the shore, but definitely not a moose.

Splash! Crack! Swirl! Flicker!

The animal was still too far away to know she was there, but if this was a bear it could be on her in a flash. Should she move enough to make a startling noise or quickly and silently rise and retreat up the dark, scary trail through the woods?

Paralyzed by indecision and mesmerized by the night and the sight, Eliza doesn't move.

Splash! Crack! Swirl! Flicker!

Closer and closer. This is a bear and it is huge. Eliza should have left. Her heart races. She holds her breath and tries slowly releasing it in an effort to calm herself. But, "Oh!Oh!" she should have left.

Splash! Crack! Swirl! Flicker!

Maybe it won't see her if she stays still.

Splash! Crack! Swirl! Flicker!

The bear is now at the spring that runs in from a small wetland. It's not 50 yards away and Eliza is a sitting duck trapped by her earlier hesitation and thin ice.

Instead of stepping through the spring's pool, this huge bear steps out onto the ice, and it doesn't crash through.

Chaotic thoughts explode through Eliza's mind interrupting and running over each other. Is she safe? Is the bear going to cross the lake on this thin ice? Can she retreat across the ice— No! of course not! the lake was liquid yesterday! What is happening?

***The bear approaches the dock. It is larger than any bear Eliza has ever seen, and its fur is white. Not polar bear white, but frost white. Has the bear been swimming and the water frozen into this silver coat of reflection? Its eyes are golden, not brown. Eliza takes these observations in but cannot process them.

Her only sense is the taste of fear. She does not breathe because she cannot breathe.

The bear reaches the dock and stands up. It is so massive that Eliza must look up to meet the golden eyes. She immediately averts her gaze remembering a bit of bear encounter advice— not that that will help her now.

The bear pulls itself up onto the dock, knocks the red canoe aside, and without a sound walks toward Eliza.

Eliza is terrified and calm at the same time. Again, Eliza does not process these thoughts. The whole world is this massive silver bear with golden eyes close enough to reach out and touch her or raise a paw and swat her dead. Again, Eliza looks up. She

cannot help herself. Just as their eyes meet, the bear turns away and walks to the edge of the dock brushing her bent knee as it passes.

Somehow, somewhere in the recesses of her mind she knows she shouldn't, she can't, but she does. She reaches out and touches the bear's coat and knows she will remember the ice melting on her finger tips and the feel of the coarse bristly fur for the rest of her life, be it years or seconds. It feels like magic.

The bear turns, looks at Eliza, waits a moment, and says, "Yes, it is magic, and now it belongs to you too." The bear turns back and dives off the dock. There is no splash, no whoosh into the sky. Simply a poof of light and the bear is gone.