

CHILDREN IN THE FORREST

By N.E Moone

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As a new resident to Essex County Massachusetts, I was well aware of its horrifying history. Between Salem and Ipswich, I was fully prepared to tackle the colonies of witches and sea creatures of Lovecraft. Well, that's what I told my seven-year-old daughter. Being alive at this point in history has its upsides, such as having the highest life expectancy in human history. But there are also downsides, like having a daughter who has access to the internet. Since my divorce, Lyla has needed access to a phone. Despite my attempts at monitoring her online usage, she's smart. Going to be smarter than me one day if I do this whole parenting thing right.

Not even twenty minutes after telling Lyla about the move, she came bursting into the living room demanding that we stay put here in Rhode Island.

It's been perfect in the Ocean State for us. It's quiet, the grocery store, movie theater, gym, everything is just a short drive away, and there's a pretty good school system. However, finding work as an IT employee has been difficult. Even after submitting 50+ applications with nearly seven years of experience in the field, you'd think I would be swept up right away

but that's not the case for me. So when I got offered a position for nearly 80k a year I jumped on the opportunity. Lyla has never had to move out of the state before. My partner and I separated about two years ago now and even then, we both moved no more than 20 minutes away from one another so that Lyla didn't have to move schools or adjust as much.

Telling her that we'd be moving nearly two hours away was difficult, but in the end she didn't seem to mind at the moment. If anything she seemed excited to help me pick out an apartment. No decision gets made without my little girl. But anyway, after our conversation and her eventual barging back into the living room, I had to convince her that no witches or eldritch beings would come to capture us in our sleep. Lyla's always been creative. She's either nose-deep in books or drawing with the special art pencils I got her for the winter months. After some quick thinking, it seemed like only a potion could keep us safe, so I quickly made my way to the kitchen to create a protection spell. Nothing some good ol' showmanship couldn't create. Some pink lemonade, ginger ale, a small splash of Tabasco sauce, and some fancy glasses would do just fine. I don't think the spice was all that necessary, but it seemed to create a nice little extra dash of realism that made Lyla's face pucker up when she downed the potion. Just like that, we were safe in her little world.

We moved right at the end of June, I wanted Lyla to have the time to adjust to the new state and not immediately have to jump right into being

the 'new kid' at school. Our new Townhouse was nice, it had two bedrooms and two bathrooms. Perfect for the two of us. The kitchen was spacious and the living room offered plenty of space for both of our random hobbies and activities. What I really enjoy is the amount of space there is behind the townhouse. There's a lot of natural beauty in the area with plenty of trails and bike paths to choose from. Lyla currently has the goal to become a soccer player, so having plenty of yard space proved to be a nice bonus for us both. I would never let her go out there unsupervised of course, but I'm home often enough that she doesn't complain. On the downside, there was the occasional field mouse that would find its way into the walls and the landlord would have to set out traps to keep them from causing too much damage.

Like I said earlier, I was lucky enough to get an IT job at one of the local colleges. I'm sure you could figure it out if you dig hard enough, but I'll try to maintain some level of privacy. The college has a daycare and youth program that gets taken out of our paycheck if an employee is interested in the facilities. Seeing as we now live a few hours away from Lyla's last babysitter, this was really the only option. Much to my relief, they had plenty of opportunities that she grew to be excited about.

With my daughter taken care of I was able to focus on work. In all honesty, it was easier than my last job, had better benefits, and paid more. For a few weeks, things went great, perfect even. Lyla made some friends at

the youth program and work was everything that I wanted and then some. Plus if I'm here in ten years, Lyla could pretty much become a student with minimal costs.

It was a Thursday, the college semester wouldn't start until August so things were going smoothly in the office. Every so often I'd have to run to do a college-wide update to a few of our systems but other than the occasional issue with an account for a new incoming student I was free to explore other work-related endeavors on the clock.

Because of a power outage, we were able to leave the office early for the day, only by two hours, but getting out at 3 is much better than at 5pm rush hour.

Lyla is more than excited for the change of plans, when I propose we hike one of the trails behind our townhouse her response nearly deafens me with her shriek. On the drive home, I notice her furiously typing away on her phone, no doubt telling her friends back home about our plans. It's around 80 degrees but there's a nice wind that provides a nice breath of fresh air. The trail is almost entirely shaded so luckily for us we won't really have to worry about sunscreen. It's the moments like this that I live for really, everything I do is for my little girl. Each giggle, every smile, makes everything I do worth it.

When we get home, we rush into the house to change into appropriate workout clothes. I cannot wait to take off my polo shirt and pants and switch

them out for a loose shirt and shorts. Lyla waits patiently in the living room for me, nose deep in her phone not even realizing when I stand in front of her.

I laugh and say, "Seems like outside time is just what you need right now."

"Sorry Dad, I'm just texting with my friend right now."

"I'm just glad you have some friends to chat with! You meet them from the youth program?" I don't want to be nosy, but it's my job as a father to be of course.

"Mhmm, his name is Jay. We met outside when Miss. Sara took us out for tag." She stands from the couch and leaves her phone on the small table beside her. "I'm ready when you are Dad. You always take so long to get ready."

I jokingly roll my eyes and this gets a giggle out of her and I'm soon chasing her to the front door. It's true, when we get home I take off my tie and just sit at the edge of my bed for a moment to close my eyes and take a few deep breaths. It's tough being an adult, sometimes a moment alone can be a lifesaver.

Lyla runs ahead of me and I jog after her. I'm not really worried that she'll run out of sight. There's not really anywhere she could go off to, but even so, she always stays in my line of sight. We make our way onto the well-worn path and I take a nice deep breath of fresh air. Pollen coats the air

and I can tell that flowers are sprouting up nearby, it just smells fresh and healthy out here. We go at our own pace and take in the surroundings. Every so often Lyla will ask me about a random flower that she sees or questions me about what type of bird might be calling. More often than not I don't have the real answer to her questions. But a good response of "what do you think it is," more often than not satisfies whatever answer she is looking for.

We must have been walking for close to an hour before we start circling back towards home. We didn't make it all that far in all honesty, but that just means we have less of a distance to walk back. The both of us have been quiet for a little bit, enjoying the peace when a sudden feeling of concern goes through me. I look towards Lyla and she seems to be doing just fine, balancing on a fallen log beside the trail as we walk back. I look around our surroundings and don't notice anything out of the ordinary. It's been a year or so since I've last had an anxiety or panic attack and by how fast my heart begins to beat I can tell that the exercise must have triggered something.

I make sure to tell myself that I know exactly what's going on. My elevated heart rate probably just triggered an attack, there's no need to be concerned. It's a beautiful day and if I need to sit down I can sit down. I've told Lyla about this type of situation and what to do. Just take it easy, don't panic, be calm, and get an authority figure if needed. When I pull myself out

of my inner thoughts, I'm caught off guard when Lyla isn't in front of me. I stop and immediately turn around, spotting her standing just off the trail and staring into the woods.

"You okay? What's going on?" I try not to let my panic show in my tone. When she doesn't respond I walk over to her and kneel down. "You good, sweetie?" Her face looks pale like all the blood has drained from it. I fix my gaze to where she is looking but don't spot anything. "What is it, you're starting to worry me."

After opening and closing her mouth a few times she says, "There were kids out there. But they—" She couldn't finish what she wanted to say and finally turned to look at me. "Daddy, I want to go home."

That's when I knew something was really wrong, she hasn't called me that for a few years now. An immeasurable sense of dread washes over me. It feels like something is watching us. Occasionally, there are mountain lions and sometimes brown bears in the area, but this feeling is...something entirely different. I snatch up Lyla and she wraps her arms and legs around me, burying her face in my shoulder. I take off down the trail back towards home. "Lyla, I need you to tell me if something is following us." I snap, eyes darting to each side of the trail.

I feel her head move up and she immediately shrieks, "Dad!"

I plant my feet in the ground and quickly turn around, ready for whatever it may be. My gaze tilts down and no more than five feet away

from me are two small figures. Both of them young children, one boy and one girl, standing in front of me. Both of them looking no more than fourteen. It's like I can feel their presence as they stand unflinching. Right away I can tell that the dreadful feeling is emanating off of them in waves. They are both wearing long sleeves and pants with no definitive branding or anything on them, even so, with the skin that is exposed they look sickly pale in the shade of the trees. They are just children, they can't do anything to me. But then why am I so terrified? It's like I'm caught in the view of a deadly predator.

"W-what do you want? Are you lost?" I ask. It's clear that they are the ones controlling the situation.

At the same time both of them speak with a dull buzz coating their words. "We lost our friend, have you seen her." Their voices don't have the tone of a question, more like they already possess the answer.

"We haven't seen anyone, it's just been me and my daughter." I force the words out of my throat.

"She can be our friend." They speak at the same time again, taking a step towards us.

My eyes widen when I finally meet their gaze. Their eyes are an endless void of black taking in whatever sunlight dribbles across their orbs and reflecting nothing back. All I can bring myself to say is, "No, she can't." My body is trembling and I can feel Lyla's nails digging into my neck.

I hesitantly take a step back, keeping my eyes locked on the pair. When they don't do the same I take another. I keep walking backward, afraid to even blink and have them leave my vision. Eventually, I'm forced to and when I open my eyes they are gone from sight.

When we make it back to the apartment I immediately lock the door and call the police. Each step away from where we saw the kids the feeling of dread lessens. I'm not sure what to tell the cops other than two lost kids were roaming the woods looking for their friend. I give them the best description I can but I can't bring myself to tell them about their eyes.

The rest of the day goes without incident but that doesn't stop me from being on full alert. I wait for a knock on the door or for that horrible feeling to come back but it doesn't. The TV stays on the rest of the evening, I'm afraid of sitting in silence and I think Lyla appreciates it too. Even she stays in the living room with me the rest of the day rather than disappearing into her room. I don't even say anything when she gets lost on her phone.

When nighttime comes around, I walk Lyla to her room and tuck her in, which I haven't done for the last few years now at her request. But for tonight, I can't say I blame her for wanting the extra security. I kiss her on the forehead and when we say our goodnights I leave her door open a crack so that when I sit on the couch for the rest of the night I can see the foot of her bed. 10 pm rolls around and instead of crawling into my bed, I make

myself comfortable on the couch. I can't shake the feeling that something more is supposed to happen.

Lyla saw the black-eyed children too so I know it's not my imagination. With the blinds closed and all the windows and doors in the house locked we are as safe as we could possibly be. Because we share a wall with the neighbors a good shout would be able to alert them if anything did happen at all. They were just kids, it's not like they could do anything.

11 pm rolls around and I'm tossing and turning on the couch with the possibility of sleep seeming like a fantasy. Every so often I check on Lyla and she's fast asleep. I have to get up around 6 so I'm not looking forward to the lack of sleep I'll have for tomorrow, but I've done worse before. 1 AM rolls around and I am staring daggers into the ceiling. It feels like I'm next up to bat at the World Series and it all comes down to me. I know it's all from earlier, but I just can't shake this nagging feeling of...I don't even know what to call it. At moments I even get the feeling that the police are going to come banging at my door under the pretense that I either kidnapped those kids or made up the whole story. It doesn't help that another field mouse must have burrowed itself into the wall because there's a slight scratching noise every so often. I'd rather deal with the mice than whatever this night was.

Another episode of my show ends and I've given up sleeping at this point. I know I'll have to call out tomorrow but at the very least if Lyla was

still interested in going to the youth program I could— *Tap*. In the silence of the credits, a minuscule noise barely whispers into my ears. *Tap*. I wipe whatever fuzz could be in my ears and mute the TV daring for the noise to happen again. My heartbeat lightly drums in my ears but much to my annoyance and relief the noise doesn't happen again. I sigh, standing up from the couch. At the very least I could try and grab a book maybe and do some reading, anything that will help me with—*tap tap tap*. I freeze in place. It's not in my head I know I just heard that come from somewhere. I rush to the front windows and push them aside. Outside all I can see is the well-lit walkway outside the house and my pale reflection staring back at me. I let the curtain fall, trying to swallow the concern that's making me want to empty my stomach.

There is the faintest sound of hushed breath and in the quiet of the night, it may as well be alarm bells. So, this is it, I think. This is how I finally go mad in this world. A sharp creak immediately brings me back. It was the sound of a window opening. I sprint to Lyla's room, cold sweat coming down my forehead as I push the door open. She's kneeling on her bed facing the window, curtains swept aside and frozen in place. She's opening up her bedroom window and for a few seconds, I see someone standing outside. The three of us freeze in place. For just a few seconds, we all pause looking at one another like deer in headlights. One immediate thing became clear, that was not a child outside her window, but an adult man. Before I can

consciously make a move, my instincts take over and I rush over to the window. The man dashes away before I slam the window closed and lock it. Lyla immediately starts crying and I take her into my arms.

Over the next few days, I quickly came to realize just how close I became to losing my daughter. The second week after we moved here, Lyla made herself a new friend at the youth program. His name was Jay and he was the groundskeeper for the college, at least that was his cover. Most days of the week Jay would come visit the college and make his rounds around campus, always making sure to say hi to his little friends whenever they were out. He'd wait and sit on a bench just outside of view from where they went out to play tag and get their outside time. He'd offer them little gifts or snacks, he always had a uniform on so he was a trusted adult. When I took Lyla's phone, they've been exchanging messages for weeks now. He'd send her photos of animals, message her goodnight...say things to her that make my skin crawl just talking about it. The night he came to the house, he told her that he'd be taking her to a special star-gazing event. She wouldn't be allowed in if she told me, no adults allowed it was something just for the kids...and him.

The police were able to find the identity of who Jay truly was. His real name was Thomas and he wasn't a groundskeeper at the college. He was a failed farmer who lived on the outskirts of the state never holding down a job for too long. They raided his home but it was empty by the time they got

there. He had a barn where police found evidence of other kidnappings, but they were never able to find what he did with the other children he took or how many children he ended up keeping there.

He knew everything about our schedule, when we left, when we went home, what days of the week I had off, he knew about the divorce. Everything needed to steal my baby girl away from me. He would have succeeded. I would have lost Lyla. I would have never seen her again.... if it weren't for what we saw on the trail.

Safe to say, Lyla's phone got taken away. She got a long lesson from both me and the police to never do what she did again. The scary thing is I don't know if that'll be enough. Her school issues out laptops for its students to complete homework and take care of school work. She eventually will need to have her own phone again and social media is its own horror story.

After that night, I didn't trust Lyla's safety again in this house so I asked for my Ex partner to take her until I could move away and find another job. I just can't shake this nagging feeling that things will never be the same again. If it weren't for those kids we encountered on the trail Lyla may not be alive today. I just have this feeling that something even worse is waiting for me with each passing day.