

Afraid of the Dark  
by Lesley L. Smith

One of the Harry Potters was getting too close to the flames. "Michael?" I asked.

My son Tyler, aka The Hulk, giggled and said, "No, Mom, that's Chris."

"Chris, back up. Fire is not a toy. Where are your parents?"

Chris shrugged and pointed over at the picnic shelter, which was filled with orange and black crepe paper, balloons, and parents drinking beer and enjoying a few kid-free moments.

Personally, I was relieved to sit down, although the tree stump I was sitting on could sure use some padding. Smoke from the bonfire picked that moment to blow right into my face, causing my eyes to water profusely.

Once I could see again, I said, "Tyler please, go over to the shelter and get another adult to help with the ghost stories."

"Aw. Mom," he whined. "I want to stay here with my friends."

"If you don't do as I say, I'm going to give you a big hug and a sloppy kiss in front of your friends."

"Don't you dare!" He was up and moving in a flash.

The wind picked up, tree branches rustled nearby, and brown leaves swirled around us; it smelled like fall. The moon started to rise through the trees.

"Hey, Mom," Tyler said. "Look who I found." Tyler pointed at my grad student Jason, who was dressed like a ...grad student in jeans, a black t-shirt, leather jacket and glasses.

"Hey, Mom," Jason said grinning.

"Ha, ha, Jason. I'm nowhere near old enough to be your mom."

He handed me a small candy bar. "I brought you a bribe."

"Fun size? Is this the best you could do?" Nonetheless, I ripped open the wrapper and popped it in my mouth. "I'm guessing you want something...?"

He shrugged out of his backpack and scooped some papers out of it. "Yeah, I finished another chapter of my dissertation. I was hoping you could look at it this weekend."

I shook my head. "No, sorry. Weekends are family time. My husband, Mark, and our daughter Hannah, I mean The Little Mermaid, are on the hayride. Here, we're about to tell spooky ghost stories."

Jason frowned.

"Do you know any scary stories, Jason?" Tyler asked and flexed his green arms dramatically. "But you can't scare me, I'm The Hulk."

"Yeah. Tell us a story," Matt, I think, said. He was wearing a ragged black robe with a hood.

"What are you supposed to be?" Zach asked through a black rubber mask.

Jason set down his backpack. "I guess I'm a mad scientist. What are you?" This unleashed a flood of exclamations.

Zach fluffed his black cape and said, "I'm Batman."

"I'm a dementor," Matt said.

"I'm Frodo," Brandon said, "can't you tell?"

"I'm Spiderman," Daniel said.

Jason nodded seriously. "I can tell. And I see Harry Potter and Harry Potter and another Harry Potter. Very nice costumes, everyone. I guess I'll be going then."

"Hand over the chapter. I'll look at it first thing Monday if you stay and tell a story," I said.

"Yes!"

"Tell us a scary story."

Tyler said, "Jason, I bet you could go get a beer if you wanted. Right, Mom?"

I nodded. "If he tells us a really spooky story."

Jason rubbed his hands together. "In that case, just a sec." He came right back carrying a big plastic cup of beer and a bunch of mini-candy bars which he passed around. Once he settled down on a big rock next to the fire, he said, "I do know a scary story--a very scary story."

The boys leaned toward him.

Jason took a sip of beer. "It's about dark matter and dark energy."

I suppressed a chuckle. That was what Jason's dissertation was about.

"Well, don't keep us in suspense. Tell us," I said.

Jason set down his beer. "Did you know we are surrounded by dark matter and dark energy? It's everywhere in the universe. It's even here with us tonight."

"It's around us, right now?" Tyler asked.

Jason leaned toward him. "Yes, it's all around. In fact, dark matter is smashing into your body right now," he said in a low voice.

Tyler flinched. "Really?" He glanced at me.

I nodded.

Jason continued. "Dark matter is smashing into all of us right now! And dark matter and dark energy are very powerful. Someday they're going to make the universe squeeze together until everything and everyone is crushed to smithereens."

"Everything?" Tyler asked. "People and animals? Even like stars and planets and stuff?"

"Yes." Jason nodded and paused dramatically. "And that's not all. Dark matter is here at this party, tonight."

The boys gasped.

Jason glanced over at the jack-o-lanterns by the shelter. "Earlier this very night, I saw some in-the-dark matter."

I suppressed a smile.

Chris swallowed and stumbled up. "I'm gonna go look for my mom."

The other boys rocked in their seats, glancing quickly right and left, possibly trying to spot some dark matter.

Suddenly, we were interrupted by a clip-clopping noise. It was the hayride, a horse-drawn wagon festooned with hay bales and twinkly orange lights. They pulled to a stop near the fire. A few people got off.

Among them were Mark, with Hannah cradled in his arms.

I stood up as he sauntered over to us.

"Someone fell asleep on the hayride," he whispered, pointing down with his chin. "Are you guys ready to go?"

"Stupid baby," muttered Tyler.

Chris and his mom, Lisa, approached us.

"What's this I hear about knives?" she asked.

I pointed at Jason. "He's telling us a spooky story. Jason, maybe your story is a little too spooky. Tell them some good stuff about dark matter." He grinned.

"Lisa, can you stay here? I think we're going to go," I said. "Ariel, here, seems to have pooped out."

Lisa smiled. "I guess that would be all right." She plopped down on my tree stump. "Continue with the story."

"Come on, Tyler," I said.

"Aw. Ma, do we have to? I don't want to go," whined Tyler.

I said one devastating word, "Kiss?"

"Aw." He shuffled after us as we began walking home.

"Did Jason's story scare you, Tyler?" I asked.

"No. I'm not a baby," he said, his eyes downcast.

"It might surprise you to know that this piece of in-the-dark matter also gives kisses and hugs," I said.

"Ew," Tyler said.

Mark met my eyes and grinned. "And makes babies."

Grinning back, I knew what we were going to be doing later. "And makes Hulk and Ariel costumes, hands out Halloween candy, and even carves jack-o-lanterns," I added.

"Jack-o-lanterns." Tyler's head bobbed up. "Wait a minute! We made jack-o-lanterns! Are we in-the-dark matter?"

"Yes." I smiled. "We are definitely matter and we're in the dark, aren't we?"

"Cool." Tyler nodded. "I'm in-the-dark matter."

We walked the rest of the way down the block in silence, enjoying the moonlight and the cool breeze.

As Mark fished in his pockets for the keys, Hannah stirred.

"Where are we?" she asked.

Mark set her down on the front stoop. "We're home, little one," he said, opening the door.

Hannah stood on the threshold of the dark house.

"Go inside, Hannah," Mark said.

"I'm Ariel!" she said, not moving. "I don't want to! It's dark in there."

Tyler stepped up and took her hand. "You don't have to be afraid of the dark, Ariel. Come on in and I'll explain it to you."

They stepped inside together.

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