

Nobody Steps Forward

by Laura Brown

I can only see their eyes in the dark, reflected in the light from my flashlight. It's so quiet. I only hear the sound of my own breath. I hold the flashlight steady. Maybe they will think I'm not a threat if I'm not moving. It's a small hope.

Yet here we are, at a standstill. Just darkness between us. I can't see a thing through the night. Chances are they can see a lot more. My wedding dress is far too white, too easy to see. Like a big ghostly target.

The dogs begin to move, coming closer. Dragging their bellies over the ground as they crawl closer, carefully approaching, ready to pounce. I see the eyes flickering as they move their heads and blink. I pictured them as I had seen them before it became so dark out. Their sharp, pointed snouts and twitching pointed ears. Long, shaggy fur keeping them sheltered and warm, possibly too warm on a mild night.

Water. I had forgotten how close the ocean was to the edge of the property. If I could creep back far enough I'd soon be at the edge of the water. I could swim, I'd once won an award as a kid. How well can a pack of dogs swim? I could dive, deep under water, far from their snapping jaws.

I pictured myself swimming in the midnight ocean, my dress billowing out. I'd have to do something about the long, wide skirt. I slipped one foot an inch behind me, then another. I dared not run. No chance I could beat them in a run. Another small step, another, then another. My breathing jagged, I tried to keep it steady, giving the impression I wasn't running like a scared rabbit even though I felt just like one.

A twig snapped under my foot. Each of them jerked to attention and pointed every face right at me, sniffing again. A quiet growl. Not from me.

I couldn't look behind to see how far I was from the ocean. To look away from them would give them that inch they needed to take my last mile from me. Death is so permanent. I stopped myself from laughing, my nerves stretched raw almost breaking.

Yet another step back, how many had I taken? Each step a prize toward the unseen goal. I could hear the ocean now, the waves sound so strong, so tempting, so not near enough.

I could smell the dogs. The smell of wet dog, dirty dogs and the smell of whatever they last ate and killed. I'd seen them ripping apart something that had once been alive. They had rolled in it after. A sick joke, dominating the remains of a corpse.

I'd lost count of the steps, the amount of times my foot slid back into space I could not see behind me. Each time I felt the ground again under my foot, good old reliable planet Earth. Another step... but this time my foot got wet. A puddle? Could it possibly be the ocean water itself? Just don't trip and fall now. My foot pushed behind me, hoping any rocks would be moved out of my way before I took the step.

One of the dogs snarled. One of them took a big step forward, coming much closer and snapping its teeth together just a few inches from my face. It had awful breath. I held my own breath to keep from gagging. I didn't have time for that kind of dramatic relief yet.

Both of my feet were wet now. Then a wave broke against the back of my legs. How soon could I turn and dive into the waves? How far into the water could I get before they lunged at me? Two more

steps, a bit quicker now. Freedom so close, so possible. I took a slow, deep breath. Daring to roll my eyes behind me without turning my head.

In the darkness I could only see light reflected on the water. Not my flashlight, this light came from the moon and the old lighthouse. That bastard was no doubt still up there, watching, enjoying the sight of his dogs hunting me.

The water reached my knees. Surely I couldn't get away with more of this. Surely the dogs would jump me and drag me away back to land. But, was it deep enough here, could I spin quickly enough and get deeply enough into the water? Three steps back, the water rising, surging up my thighs and then at my waist as the waves pushed to shore.

It was time to risk it all. I gathered everything I had left in me. I bent my knees, I slowly twisted my back while keeping my eyes on the dogs. Then I jumped back! I water closed over me like a cold, wet blanket. One dog grabbed my ankle in it's teeth but I kicked and was lucky. I swam under, kicking and windmilling my arms to pull me down into the water. The salt stung my eyes. My ankle throbbing and stinging too. The wedding dress clung to my legs but only for a moment, the skirt being wide enough to let me keep kicking my way down into the ocean.

But I was in the water. I could hear the dogs paddling, moving water on the surface. I could hear their barks, their yaps, muted. They did not dive. I kept swimming deeper and farther. My lungs protested the lack of air, my ears began to ache inside but I didn't feel safe enough yet.

My hand scraped the sandy bottom. I stopped. Though I looked up, there was nothing to see, just darkness. No dogs. Now what?

My mind began to plan again. Staying down here wasn't a real option. So I let myself float back up, pushing in the direction that I hoped would keep taking me away from the lighthouse and the dogs on the beach. I would stay in the water until morning. It was safe there. I could do that.

My head surfaced, I wiped water from my face and blinked my eyes several times to clear the saltiness. Something brushed my foot under the water. A shark? Don't be silly I told myself. A shark feels like sandpaper. It was just some fishy thing. Harmless in the fishy world.

After awhile I tipped my head back, almost snoozing as the peaceful ocean waves rocked me. My body floated up until my toes poked out of the water. I rested on my back, feeling the air drying my face, the water brushing my hair and the sway of my wedding dress swishing around me. I finally caught my breath, held in a sigh and then let it all out. Odd to be relaxing so soon after escaping with my life.

The dogs barked but the sound was far away now. I could hear nothing else but the waves and my soft breathing. I lifted my hand out of the water, I still wore the ring. Such a big diamond I could see it by the moonlight. I looked at my hand, droplets of water falling down my fingers like fake nails. The ring was worth a lot of money. He'd said it was a family heirloom, if I could believe he had told the truth about that at least.

I kept the ring and let my fingers skim the water. There were hours until morning. I'd finally see the sunrise from the ocean. Pretty literally.

Where would I go from here? Was I still married or would he report me dead and try to claim the estate? So much high drama for someone like me. I wondered if the waves would carry me farther out into the ocean or was I drifting to some other shore. I kept

listening to the dogs. As long as the sound was distant I wasn't going to worry too much.

I wanted to live. I'd been so much a nobody all my years. Now I could be someone. I was already someone who had adventures. I giggled. I liked feeling my hair swaying in the water, soothing. I was getting cold, but only the parts of me above the water. So that wasn't too bad.

My whole body jerked under the water as my hand bumped into something solid and I sat up under water. I came up hacking out a lungful of salt water. It tasted awful. I couldn't see anything but a dark shape near me. It wasn't moving. Just bobbing alongside of me in the waves. Nothing happened when I touched it. My fingers felt along the length of it, a log. Timely. My life raft has appeared as if on schedule.

I needed all the strength in my arms to pull myself up and grab the log. Even then I could not rise high enough in the water to get a leg over it. So I just flung an arm over it and began to kick in what seemed like a good direction. I would be someone someone who made her own way in the world from now on. I'd quit my nobody sales clerk job. I had money now, an estate even! Still so hard to believe.

The skirt began to tangle around my legs now that I was heading in another direction. Using one hand I pulled it up, out of the way. I kept moving. At least I was feeling warmer. Between one wave and another there was a flicker of light. I stopped, waited and listened. No sound. So, not likely it was a boat. I knew he would have one but he would have to be very lucky to find me out in the ocean in the dark. I still felt pretty safe.

Kicking my way through the waves again I let my mind drift. I didn't see the light again, maybe it was just a star in the night sky.

Would I get my purse and my suitcase back? I wasn't going to get them myself. I'd never go back there again. Although, if I lived and told the police everything, he would be taken away. Surely. What would happen to his dogs? They would have to be put down. No one should even try to keep such awful, vicious things.

I don't know how long I was in the water, thinking my thoughts, finally having some thought of having a future of my own. The log jammed into my shoulder hard when it hit the shore. It was still deep enough that my feet only just touched bottom when I stretched my toes down. Using the log as support I moved towards what must be another beach. It was rocky. I'd lost my slippers so my feet felt all the sharp rocks. I was getting out, no matter what peril my feet faced.

I listened but heard nothing but the water lapping the shore. The waves were smaller here, must be a bit inland. Dragging, hauling myself up I was out of the water, half mermaid with my skirt wet and twisted around my legs. Getting free of it took some doing but I wasn't going to go without something to wear. Already it was getting cold out of the water. My legs felt like rubber but I made myself stand up.

Sand coated me after my wrestling with the dress. Brushing it off seemed to just spread it to other places. The beach was pebbly and sharp. I gasped in pain a few times walking up towards trees I could see outline in the dark purpling of the sky. Morning was breaking. A new day. A really new life for me if I could manage to figure it all out.

There were picnic tables on the beach, just under the first trees. People had to be here somewhere. The type of people to have a life with picnic tables and cottages and weekend barbecues. Normal people, not crazy bastards or boring nobodies. I sat down at one

table. It was a mistake. As soon as I sat down I felt drained of energy. I wished for a blanket to cover me. I could dry out under a warm blanket then continue on with my self rescue again. I had no blanket. I was still too wound up and frightened to let myself become an easy target to find onshore. So I stood up, nearly sunk down again but caught myself upright with the table.

Daylight was finding it's way, so could I. Just keep moving. I must have looked like a very old woman trudging along in a wrecked wedding gown, hair all stringy, encrusted with salt.

I found a road on the other side of the trees. A paved road even. I felt lucky. I kept walking, forward now, watching my feet find their way in front of me.

The sky became pinkish, my feet were a massive pain at the end of my legs but I walked on. It was so hard to keep going, I wanted to lie down on the side of the road and just slip into a coma for a week. But, the fear of being found by the wrong person kept me going.

My heart died for a split second when a car pulled up behind me. But it was a police car. I don't know what they said and I don't know if they understood my jumbled words. I was scooped up, a grey blanket thrown around me and then I was in the back of the car. The conversation was over my head. I felt like an alien just fallen to the planet. I fell asleep.

I woke up suddenly. The police car had come to a stop and the back door was opened. The officer was pulling me out but I blocked his arm, the fear of being grabbed took me over again. It had been a pretty hard night. I worked my way out of the car and he held out his arm for me to take. I smiled the bit that I could and took his help, gratefully. They led me into the police station. I told them my story. It took a long time. I can't remember much of it. I made sure they knew I did not want my husband called. I didn't want him to come

for me, to touch me or even see me ever again. It seemed a long time later that I woke up from a catnap and was being led to another police car. They had gotten my stuff back, even my purse and all my ID.

The woman officer took me to a hotel, she checked me in, told them I needed a room for at least a day and wanted no visitors. She helped me upstairs, pulling my luggage along for me. She was so kind, even asked if I had shampoo or anything else I might need. Before she left she put the TV on low and left the remote by the bedside with the sheets pulled down.

I really wanted a shower, to be clean before getting into the bed. But I was just dragging myself over the floor, keeping upright by not falling down. I'd apologize later but all I could do was tip myself over the bed like a timbering tree and fall asleep at last.

It was dark again when I woke up. My wedding gown had dried to my skin and I felt itching and icky all over. My skin felt tight and seemed to crackle as I pulled myself to sit up at the edge of the bed.

The bastard was there. I wasn't surprised. He wasn't the type to let go of prey so easily.

His eyes glowed red. He stood, leaning against the wall by the door.

I didn't have enough energy. Just seeing him here after all I had done to get away left me hopeless, feeling lifeless.

He smiled and my stomach turned. He reached a hand out to pull me to him, so sure that everything was his to command, he had all the answers and I was just that nobody I had always been.

But, I wasn't. I had gone through the desperate struggle to escape. I had braved the vile dogs, the comforting ocean and the pain of the

road on my naked feet. Digging inside myself I found the courage, the reserves of energy in my mind and body and I ran for the chair where the police woman had left my purse. He strolled over, so sure of his victory. I held the tiny jar in my hand and opened the cap. It stuck! How could it stick when I needed it open so immediately.

His hand was closing on my elbow, his grip tightening, punishing me, hurting me. The cap popped off so suddenly I just managed to keep hold of the jar. He could smell it right away. His hiss of breath grazed my ear but he still thought I was such a nobody he did not even back a step away. I put the jar into my other hand, the one he did not have hold of my elbow. I threw the jar's contents up into his face. I blew them through the air, just to make sure he got the full blast.

His scream was high pitched, enough to make your ears seem to bleed. His fingers mauled my neck, choking me. The pain he felt gave him more energy. I thought I was dead, his venomous glare shocking me as I felt the life squeezing out of me. I closed my eyes. I didn't want him to be the last thing I saw. My legs dropped out from under me. I was held up only from his hands strangled around my neck. Then I fell to the floor. I heard a thud follow me.

I wasn't dead. I could still breathe but not easily. Nothing happened for awhile, nothing moved. Not a sound except my harsh breath. Was it over? Did I live?

Shadows moved over the wall facing the windows. I watched them, listening to the sound of my breathing. Very aware of every other sound, movement in the room. He must be dead. I must have done it. The old spell had worked and I had done it.

I was dreadfully afraid to turn my head. But I did. His face was turned toward me. His eyes were open but frozen in an expression of pure hatred. Nothing about him moved. I dared to move, slowly to

sit up. I pushed myself up from the carpeted floor. He still didn't move. I still didn't fully believe it could be possible. But it was. I was alive. I was the only one in the room other than the bastard's cold, dead corpse. So I left. Just left him there, stepped out of that room one foot in front of the other with everything I had left to find what other adventures I had in store.

