



SPRING

1. Joel Discovers the Dark

“Joel, will you please run this plate of cookies over to Grandpas?” asked Mother. She sealed the bag filled with oatmeal whoopie pies, handed them to Joel, and proceeded to pack the rest of the cookies into her plastic container.

Joel stared at the bag of cookies he held. He was not admiring their perfect texture. He was not sniffing their tempting aroma. He was not thinking how they would delight his dear Grandma and Grandpa.

Joel was thinking though.

How can I, a nine-year-old, refuse to do an errand in the dark that I'd love to do in the daylight? he wondered. *I don't want to say I'm scared. Janelle would laugh. But neither do I want to go clear across the vacant lot by myself.*

Suddenly, an idea surfaced.

"Mother, think Janelle would like to go along over? She always likes to go too."

"No. Not this time," Mother answered. "It was nice you asked, but she has homework to do. Now run along."

Joel set the cookies on the table, then slowly went to the coat closet and pulled out his heavy winter coat. The warm April breeze did not call for such warmth. But goose bumps were already dancing up and down Joel's arms. He knew how very cold he'd be outside, alone in the dark.

Dreading to go out, Joel sauntered over to the kitchen sink for a drink. He dawdled, thinking about the shadows and darkness in the lot between their house and Grandpas.

Daddy looked up from his work at his desk. "Joel, didn't you go yet?"

"Not yet," Joel answered. "Wanna go along?" he added hopefully.

"I'd be glad to, but I still have some estimates to make. You must obey promptly. Go now."

There was no way to refuse. Joel picked up the cookies, headed for the door, and stepped into the night.

If only I'd have a dog to go with me, he wished. He ventured carefully across the lawn.

This night is as black as Midnight, my cat, he thought, *except Midnight has one light patch on her front paw*. "And there's another difference," he muttered aloud. "Midnight makes me feel comfy and warm. The night makes me afraid."

Joel's steps dragged as he neared the shrubbery bed. He glanced to the left. To the right. Behind him. Was anything following?

At that very moment there was a rustling in the shrubs only three feet ahead of him. Something black darted across his path.

Joel wanted to scream, but he couldn't. His feet were frozen to the spot.

The critter, black as coal, shot ahead, apparently as frightened as Joel. Then it turned and came directly toward him.

"Meow!"

"Midnight!" Joel exclaimed. "You scared me! For scaring me like that you'd better come with me the rest of the way. Did I scare you too?"

He bent to stroke Midnight with his free hand, keeping the cookie bag out of reach in his other hand. Suddenly, he stiffened again. "What was that?"

There it was again!

But then Joel relaxed, for he recognized the low, warbling whistle coming from across the vacant lot. "That's Grandpa!" he said.

"Hello, Grandpa," he called.

"Joel, is that you?" came Grandpa's voice from the darkness.

"Yeah! You scared me. I didn't know what I was hearing."

Grandpa's laughter rippled through the darkness. He headed across the vacant lot and met Joel midway.

"What are you doing, Grandpa?" questioned Joel.

"Taking my evening walk," replied Grandpa. "I enjoy breathing in the fresh air before I go to bed. It gives me time to be alone with God. And I enjoy the beauty of the night."

His last sentence stunned Joel. "Beauty of the night? What do you mean?" asked Joel.

"Where shall I begin? Each evening has its own beauty. Like tonight. Let's just hush for a minute."

Joel listened. He heard a sighing, rustling sound.

"That's the breeze sweeping about the branches of the newly budded maple trees. During the day there are too many other noises to be able to hear nature's music. Then this summer the crickets will chirp their songs. In the fall the owls are hooting, and in winter I enjoy the crisp crunch of walking across the frozen snow."

Amazed, Joel thought, *It wasn't that I didn't hear things, but everything sounded scary to me.*

Grandpa continued, "And there are so many things to see."

"See?" challenged Joel. "In the dark?"

"Certainly," answered Grandpa. "Just watch over there beyond that clump of trees. See that moving shaft of light?"

"What is it?" asked Joel. *Was this some natural phenomenon his science book had neglected to tell him about?*

"You never saw it before? That's the beacon light at the airport," answered Grandpa.

"You mean we can see that here?" questioned Joel.

"Yes," replied Grandpa. "Because tonight is especially dark, we can see it better. When the moon is full, we

can't see it as well. The moon and beacon take turns entertaining me. And now look up."

Joel glanced heavenward.

The vast dome overhead was studded with countless twinkling diamonds. From horizon to horizon, stars danced and flickered. Also on display was a sliver of moon shaped like a slice of cantaloupe.

Were all these night lights shining above me while I was concentrating on the blackness about me? Joel wondered. *I never thought to look.*

Grandpa continued, "Joel, God placed each one of the stars. We see some of them He grouped together in special groups called constellations. Over there," he said as he pointed skyward, "is a group called the Little Dipper. Notice the bright star. It is at the end of the handle. Job made mention of Arcturus, Orion, and Pleiades. Those are constellations too, but I'm not exactly sure which they are."

"The stars are beautiful!" Joel exclaimed. "I never knew the night was so . . . so . . . I don't know what to say . . . pretty . . . fascinating . . . whatever!"

"I understand how you feel," said Grandpa. "Many people miss nature's nighttime beauty. Once in a great while I even get to witness a falling star. That's a real show. Then I think back. As a lad I was afraid of the dark."

His last comment intrigued Joel. "You were?" he questioned.

Grandpa chuckled. "Yes. I lived on a farm and had to give the horses hay in the evening. The farm had many outbuildings and they created dark corners and shadows. Each evening I'd run as fast as my legs could carry me to avoid any dangers." As he reminisced, his laughter echoed in the night.