



I've had this stupid throat-cold for almost a week now.

The coughing is so bad that I can't get to sleep...

I check the clock, and it says that I've been tossing and turning for three hours.

2 a.m.

I open the window and look out at the empty streets outside my window.

The whole world is sleeping -- except for me.

Pitch black darkness highlighted by the occasional dim light of a street-lamp.

I can see a stray cat stop to stare at me, then run and hide under the nearest parked car.

In a way, I really love this time, when my whole being is enveloped in the soft, warm blanket of night.

If the moon is out, I look up at it...

the sky...

the varying shades of dark gray...

Suddenly, I'm reminded of a time when I was just a little boy, still living in Seoul, Korea.

This was in the early 1980s, a few years before I immigrated to Canada.

You see, in those days in Korea, we still had air-raid drills several times a year.

This was a time when society was rife with wild paranoia about a sudden invasion from North Korea.

So, the South Korean government organized unannounced air-raid drills throughout the year, just to keep its citizens on their toes.

After all, you never knew when the "commies" were gonna come and get you, right?

There were nights when, out of nowhere, a deafening siren would start blaring through the night sky, alerting frightened citizens of the air-raid drill.

Upon hearing that unwelcome racket, everyone throughout the huge city of Seoul had to run indoors and turn off all the lights in their homes.

Public lights such as street lamps and signal-lights suddenly started going off one by one as well.

Cars on the road had to quickly pull over to the curb, and just wait.

The air-raid siren would blare on and on and on.... and on... endlessly...

We -- my mother and I -- had to hold our breath, huddled in our dark apartment, located near the top floor of our building.

(if bombs really did come down, we would have been the first to die)

Seoul, being the capital city and, ironically, located so close to the North Korean border, would have been a prime target in case of a sudden invasion.

And a bright, fully-lit city would have been an easy bombing-target, even for rookie pilots.

These air-raids were a major hassle for everyone in the country, and they usually lasted only minutes, but it felt like hours.

Being a curious young boy, I often crept over to the window to look down at the world outside.

I'd never seen this neon town, this megalopolis, this monster of a city under such a complete cloak of darkness and silence.

It was as if the life had just been sucked out of everything in the world, and me and my mother were the only ones left alive.

It was scary, but exciting at the same time.

An oddly intriguing mix of emotions....

I almost felt like my body was being sucked into the vacuum of that blackness out there.

The siren was so loud and held such a perfectly constant pitch that it almost sounded like a new kind of silence...

Such a deafening and complete silence...

Was I floating in space?

Afraid of that great nothingness out there, I start to reach for my mother's hand...

And, at that moment, the world came back from the dead, returning to its mundane life.

That painfully constant and blaring sound stopped in an instant, and true silence fell upon the world.

Outside, the streetlights, traffic signals and car-headlights started coming back on one by one.

And, I could see the lights in the apartment buildings and houses and offices coming back on again... little dots of light popping up here and there, eventually forming long columns and rows across the dark backdrop of the city.

Eventually, my mother turned all the lights back on in our apartment as well, and life was back to normal.

But was it?

Back to normal?

What was normal?

As relieved as I was that the drill was over, a part of me missed that darkness...

a darkness so utterly complete that it connected me to the whole universe.

Just as it is doing right now.

This darkness outside, at this moment, takes me back to that time... so long ago...

And the breath that I had been holding is suddenly broken by another fit of coughing...

and I return back to my reality here in my little room in Kyoto, Japan.

No air-raid sirens here... not now anyway.

I want to reach out for my mother in the darkness, and I want her to hold me and tell me that everything is going to be okay.

But, nobody's there -- only my stuffed Hiko-nyan doll, bought as a souvenir at Hikone Castle last month.

I smile...

You'll protect me from any invasions in the night, won't you, Hiko-nyan?

The evening grows deeper and deeper, and I'm no closer to sleeping.

But strangely, my heart is at peace... a warm feeling.

So, what is the point of this story, you ask?

There is no point.

I just felt like telling you, that's all.

I felt like telling someone...

I needed to...

tell someone...

Is anyone out there?

Anyone listening?